



**SUPPLY
LINE**

This inflatable lifejacket is like many of those worn by Allied air forces. The compact lifejackets were effective, and newer versions are still used today.

Reproduction

Second World War Discovery Box

Artifact Background

Air Force Lifejacket



Air Force Lifejacket © Canadian War Museum

An Inflatable Lifejacket

Lifejackets like the example in this Discovery Box were used in locations around the world by Canadian aircrew.

Standard lifejackets were large and bulky, making them uncomfortable and awkward for aircrew. Inflatable lifejackets were easier to wear, even when not in use. They could be worn along with a parachute and other equipment.

The inflatable lifejacket often appears in photographs. It came to symbolize aircrew during the Second World War. It represented some of the dangers of aviation, and the efforts that went into saving life at sea.

Aircrew Safety Equipment

Inflatable lifejackets were part of the safety equipment provided to aircrew. In wartime, aircraft could be shot down by the enemy. Airplanes could also be lost because of mechanical problems or bad weather.

Aircrew wore these lifejackets in case their aircraft landed on water – often called “ditching.” Lifejackets were also useful if aircrew had to parachute to safety, and wound up in the water.

What is it made of?

Lifejackets were made of rubberized cotton in different colours. Some aircrew personalized their lifejackets with names, insignia, or even drawings.

A cylinder of compressed gas (not included in the Discovery Box) quickly inflated the vest when a lanyard was pulled. Pads of **kapok** helped provide flotation, even if the vest could not be inflated.

The reproduction in the Discovery Box is of a version introduced in 1941, which replaced an earlier model. Like many kinds of equipment, lifejackets were improved during the war.

This version has grab-handles on the front, making it easier to pull the wearer out of the water and into a life raft or rescue boat. This was especially important if the person wearing the lifejacket was hurt or unconscious.

Did You Know?

The inflatable life jacket was sometimes called a “Mae West.” It got this nickname from a movie star of the time who was well-known for her curvaceous figure.

Vocabulary

Kapok :

A light, fluffy material from the seed pods of a tropical tree stuffed into lifejackets to help them float.