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Girl, 14, Survives N. Ga. Plane Crash "Teen Waited 15 Hours on Mountain Near Bodies of Family, Wreckage"

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A 14-year old McDonough girl was found huddled under a blanket of leaves in a dense patch of woods early Sunday morning, nearly 15 hours after she was left the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed her immediate family on a desolate mountaintop near Dahlonega.

The girl suffered a broken shoulder in the crash of the single-engine Beechcraft, about 9 a.m. Saturday.

Despite her injury, she managed to crawl more than 200 yards from the plane's wreckage and then waited there alone, not far from the bodies of her mother, stepfather, older sister, and a younger male relative -- all of whom were killed in the crash, the authorities said.

The girl waited through the entire day Saturday and much of the night, until she was finally found shortly after midnight Sunday.

She was listed in stable condition in St. Joseph's Hospital in Dahlonega early today.

The names of the surviving teenager and the crash victims, who are from McDonough, were not released Sunday, pending notification of other relatives.

Their plane was en route from Griffin to Dahlonega when crashed in foggy weather near the top of Gooch Mountain in central Lumpkin County, according to Sheriff Randy Pruitt. "I do not see how she got out the plane alive, said Donald Seebolt, the emergency management director for Lumpkin County and leader of the search team. "The plane was totaled. The whole body of the plane from the back seat forward is just twisted up and turned upside down ... I think there was somebody looking after her."

"Teen Is Sole Survivor of N. Georgia Plane Crash"

Other rescue workers said she likely wouldn't have survived a whole night, on the mountain.

One of the first rescue workers on the scene, First Lieutenant David White of the Civil Air Patrol in Atlanta, said the girl told him that her stepfather lost control of the plane, which crashed and burned.

Despite being cold hungry and complaining of a hurt arm, the girl was remarkably coherent, he said.

Rescue workers found the wreckage about a mile north of the Lumpkin County airport, about 12:30 am. and did not know immediately that there were any survivors.

They found her after hearing her soft cries.

"She was calling out for help and it was real faint in the background," said Lieutenant White. "We heard it off in the distance. We all stopped to listen. We almost didn't think we were hearing anything at all."

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When they finally reached her they found "she had cover herself with leaves in keep herself dry and warm. Only her head was showing. When we get her clear, we saw that all she had on was a T-shirt and some shorts.

Lieutenant White said the girl, overcome by the loss of her family, told him "I should have died with them."

"She was real quiet," he said. "Like you would expect a child to be."

The girl told her rescuers that she may have been the only member of her family wearing a seat belt.

"She said she unhooked herself [from her seat belt], and went out the door of the plane. But there were no doors on the plane anymore. There's just no doors left," said First Lieutenant David L. Reed, the ground operations officer on the mission.

"She told me that she had crawled down to the plane after of crash, and that she had seen all as bodies. And then she crawled away again." Lieutenant White said.

Near the middle of her ordeal, around 3 p.m., the girl tried to signal a Plane passing overhead.

But the plane spotted neither the girl nor the wreckage in the thick woods below, and she was left alone again to maintain her vigil by her dead family for nearly 10 hours more, the authorities said.

The search for on plane took hours, Sheriff Pruitt said, because the woods are so thick and the area so mountainous.

"The signal could have been bounced off from anywhere up there. The mountaintops were high, and the valleys are very steep, too." The sheriff said the wreckage finally was found only about 250 yards from a small mountain road running between Union and Lumpkin Counties.

"The plane clipped the top of the trees. We feel like the fog caused accident. The pilot just didn't realize how low he was. I guess." Sheriff Pruitt said.

The Combined Ground Team (April 30th, 1989)

1Lt David Reed (Ground Ops Director, SSCS)
1Lt Carter Jones (DCCS, Ground Team Leader)
1Lt David White (DCCS)
2 Lt JohnMike Tierney (SSCS)
Capt Dan Fisher (SSCS)
2Lt Sandy Fisher (SSCS)
Cadet Jason Andrise (SSCS)
Cadet Jimmy Duguay (SSCS)
Cadet Chris Melcher (SSCS)
Cadet Justin Campbell (SSCS)
(Several Other SSCS Cadets)
(Several other DCCS Cadets)

Ground team member Interview (Capt Dan Fisher):

It was a Saturday and we were dutifully attending the Wing Conference at Robins AFB. Sometime in the afternoon, we heard rumors of an "ELT" mission in the Dahlonega area but nobody was taking it very seriously, Wing Conference "stuff" taking a higher priority. [David Reed adds: Something about the combination of an ELT in cloudy weather in the mountains told him that this would not be a

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routine non-distress ELT mission, so he left the conference early. Mike Crowe should have more memories about the early alerting process, since he was heavy into Wing Operations staff at the time.]

Driving home that evening, we heard that the ELT was still going off and SSCS and DCCS decided to launch ground teams to investigate. We converged on Wimpey field sometime well after dark and found another CAP SM there; I believe it was the MC, but my recollection is unclear on this point.

SSCS was there with JohnMike Tierney, Sandy and Dan Fisher, and several cadets. David Reed was there in a dual role of SSCS GTM and Wing Ground Ops Officer. We quickly determined that the ELT was not on the field. [David Reed adds: Carter Jones was the DCCS Ground Team Leader. The CAP aircraft confirmed that the ELT wasn't at Wimpy].

SSCS was already trying to DF on the signal from the field so David took DCCS to run the ridgeline just North of the field with SSCS. [JohnMike Tierney adds: I remember that the signal seemed so strong that I wanted to start walking to it right then from the field; luckily that did not happen because it would have been one heck of a climb.]

The Mission Coordinator [who was from Toccoa] didn't want any teams out in the woods at night so David assured him that they would just be driving on the road DF'ing. [David Reed adds: The plan was for Dekalb to drive up 'Black Mountain Road' and make a loop past Cooper's Gap and the Ranger camp. David felt that the signal would be on the south side of the ridge, and that the DF 'loop' would confirm that. Despite assuring the MC that they wouldn't leave the road, everyone on the ground teams understood that if they still had a strong signal that pointed into the woods, they'd 'prosecute it'.]

[David Reed continues that they took multiple bearings along the way, and they were all seeming to converge nicely. At one point they stopped to take readings, and the bearings made a smooth, large change as he walked along the road. He told Carter Jones 'I bet you'll find it about 100 yards up this hill'. Carter took his team and sure enough, after about 100 yards, one of his cadets turned on his flashlight and spotted the wreckage.]

[David Reed continues: As soon as Dekalb found the crash, they started performing their crash site procedures. They searched downhill first, then uphill.]

[JohnMike Tierney notes: As I remember it David's first call was that they had discovered the crash site and that there were no survivors, then a minute or two later he called back to say that they had found someone; I don't think they requested the ambulance on the first call.] A short time later, David called on the radio requesting an ambulance and giving us vectors to the crash site.

We found a pay phone and called the police and then proceeded to the location where the DCCS truck was stopped. Sandy stayed in the SSCS ambulance to perform comm relay and coordinate with the local authorities when they arrived, JT and I went up the steep slope to the crash site.

David White [from Dekalb] was administering treatment to the survivor, from his EMT bag. We had our cadets set up ropes to mark the route from the road to the crash site as it was steep, brushy terrain and very dark.

Although team DCCS had investigated the site, we repeated the search for completeness and training. There were four bodies in the wreckage, two adults in the front and an adult and an infant in the rear.

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[The survivor] told us that her step-father had recently gotten his license and was taking the family up to the mountains that morning. It was relatively early (8am as I recall) and there was some light fog and he couldn't locate Wimpey field so he circled around to look again. Apparently he wasn't aware that there was a significant ridgeline so close to the field.

[The girl] told us that she was the only one in the plane wearing a seat belt and she was dazed when the plane crashed, but remained conscious. The cabin broke apart and she quickly exited and crawled away. After a short time, when she didn't see anyone else getting out of the plane, she crawled back to see what was going on but as she got close, the wreckage caught fire. Her injuries were limited to a broken collar bone from the crash and flash burns from the fire.

After the fire died down, she was cold as she was wearing only short-shorts and a halter top, so she crawled away, up hill about 200m as I recall, and covered herself in leaves. She laid there from early Saturday morning until she heard the DCCS team doing their expanding square search, and answered when they called out (reportedly scaring a DCCS member severely).

Sandy coordinated with the EMTs when they arrived and called SSCS down to "escort" them to the crash. The EMTs were in standard uniform for the era, dress type trousers and shirt with low quarter shoes, making it difficult for them to get up the mountain. What really made it hard for them was their expansive girth so JT, myself, and 2 cadets (names forgotten) had to push and pull them up to the crash site.

By this time, [the survivor] had been injured for more than 14 hours and was showing signs of exposure and shock. As the EMTs caught their breath and discussed the situation, David White continued to monitor [the victim's] vital signs. Her signs started dropping while the EMTs continued their debate so SSCS blazed a path down to the road on a less steep slope and the CAP folks told the EMTs it was time to go. [JohnMike Tierney adds: This is why I try to emphasize that understanding how to treat for shock is so important in our first aid classes] They followed while we carried her out to the road.

She was treated at the hospital in Dahlonega and released a day or so later. [She] returned to South Atlanta and later joined [the Atlanta 2 Squadron of] CAP.

After we had evacuated the survivor, the task remained of securing the crash site and removing the bodies. The local EMA folks weren't up to the task [of moving the other victims] so they asked CAP to help. In a display of interservice cooperation and poor judgment, we agreed. [Dan and JohnMike added some more detail about the problems that resulted, but we'll save you the graphic details.]

Sandy always felt bad that she was not able to get up to the site and try to help comfort [the survivor], but without her running comm from the road, we couldn't have gotten anything done.

Ground Team Member Interview (Cadet Jason Andrise):

It was about 7:30 on a Saturday night when the call came through that Lt. Tierney needed people to go on an ELT search that evening. Arriving at the church by "most expeditious means", the team of Chris Melcher, Jason Andrise, Jimmy Duguay, Lt. J. Tierney, and Capt. & Lt. Fisher threw their gear in the back of the crew cab and headed toward Dahlonega with Capt. Fisher's car in the lead.

Arriving at the mission base, a small strip outside of the city, the team was informed that they were tracking an ELT but had little other information. The rescue workers were divided up into teams of about 5 or 6 members with a DF.

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Various bearings were taken on the signal to no avail ... at least not until the SSCS team was heading back to mission base for new orders. The radio crackled with a distorted signal but the message was perfectly clear; an aircraft had been found on Gooch Mountain. Follow-up transmissions stated that there were no survivors.

Then a single glimpse of hope shone that there might be a survivor. Upon reaching the scene, it was confirmed that there was. The members of the SSCS team joined up with the team on the scene, Dekalb. Ropes were tied as guides up the slopes and others were used to cordon off the crash site.

The victim, [redacted], 14, was in critical condition and suffering badly from exposure. The medical teams headed by Lt. Reed and Lt. White worked quickly to bring the girl, whose vital signs were falling fast, out of shock and get her down the mountain.

Another hour later, the coroners arrived to take down the official records of the deaths; a white adult male, two adult women, and an infant. What was to follow was the grueling four hour task of moving the bodies down the mountain to the coroners' vehicles. After going up and down the mountain at least a million times, all of the bodies were recovered.

The SSCS team moved out of the area at about 5:00 AM the next morning to head back to Atlanta. Arriving at the church around 6:45, the worn-out members took to their separate ways.

Later reports confirmed that [the victim] and her family were flying around earlier that morning looking for the airfield in bad weather, when their plane ran right into a mountain. Somehow, she was thrown from the wreck and climbed to the peak of the mountain when the plane caught fire. After the fire went out, she climbed back down to the crash to look for survivors. To her dismay, there were none, so she reclimbed the slope again to the top of Gooch Mountain.

It was past 10:00 PM when rescuers discovered the wreck. Upon forming a line search, one member of Dekalb squadron heard a faint cry in the night and called the line to a halt. The broken body of [the victim] was found that night and the rest is history.

It was later found out that she had climbed the mountain twice with her back broken in many places, yet she was in such a state of shock, she couldn't feel it.

A month later, the members of the team were presented with Wing Commander's Commendations for outstanding mission performance.