

# Mayday! One Man's Story of Surviving a Plane Crash

Reynolds Trapp with a friend's plane, the same type of Cessna he lost when its carburetor iced over.

Michael Trapp was doing just fine, thank you very much, as he guided his 1966 Cessna 150 out over the waters of Lake Huron. It was midafternoon on July 26, 2011. He was cruising along at an easy 3,000 feet, on his way to a family reunion in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, from his home in Gouverneur, New York, in the northern part of the state. His wife, Julie, had voiced her disapproval — even asked him to make out a will if he insisted on going — but he had brushed her off. True, it was his longest trip to date, and yes, the plane was older than he was, and sure, he had never before had to cross “big water,” and OK, he had only 130 hours of flying under his belt — but, really, what could go wrong? He had made hundreds of takeoffs and landings, had mapped out his route carefully, and had even left a day ahead of schedule to avoid bad weather.

He was saving hundreds of dollars by not flying commercial. There was a word for people who shelled out nearly a thousand bucks for the privilege of getting groped by security agents and being packed in like sardines: suckers.

And then the engine noise changed. Distinctly. Was he running out of gas? Shouldn't be. He flicked the selector switch to change fuel tanks. The engine continued to lose power, and his altitude was slipping. He turned on his carburetor heater. No change. He opened up the throttle. The plane continued to descend. He peered forward through the windshield; he could see land up ahead, the shoreline that, on a map, looks like the thumb of Michigan's mitten.

He radioed Lansing and gave his position and heading. “I'm over the water, and my engine is having trouble,” he said. “Could you just keep an eye on me, please? Just make sure I get to shore?”

Trapp was told to switch to an emergency radio frequency so rescuers would have his location and identification. The water was coming up fast, 100 feet. He switched back over to Lansing.

“I'm going into the drink,” he shouted.

He had slowed to 49 miles per hour, knowing that at 48, his plane would no longer stay in the air. His stall horn began blaring. He opened his door and tickled the yoke to ease the nose up. Just to taunt him, the engine suddenly roared back to life. Too late. The tail hit first. The plane somersaulted, the windshield blew in, and lake water exploded into the cockpit. Lansing's reply to Trapp's Mayday was drowned out in the furious rush of water. It was 4:12 in the afternoon.

**At 42,** Trapp was not what you'd call physically fit. The auto mechanic and self-described motor-head weighed himself regularly — every time he competed in the local stock-car racing circuit. His five-foot-nine, 204-pound frame reflected his laid-back approach to life. He didn't worry about much; he liked to laugh and to make others laugh; he surrounded himself with friends and family. On paper, he may have looked like a thrill seeker, but the real attraction of racing was the camaraderie. He enjoyed working on cars with his buddies as much as he liked racing them.

He hadn't always dreamed of flying. By chance, just three years earlier, he had ended up aloft in a friend's plane, and the friend had said, "Take the yoke for a minute, Mike. I want to take some pictures." Trapp was instantly hooked. Months later, he had his license and had financed most of the \$13,900 he paid for the Cessna. His sons and stepson — Jeffrey, 19, Nicholas, 17, and Drake, 11 — were thrilled and fought over who would get to fly with him out over the Adirondacks and the St. Lawrence River, looking down on the lakes and forests and small towns of upstate New York. But Julie was less than enthusiastic. The plane scared her. She flew with him a grand total of two times. If he wanted to risk his life, that was one thing, but he could leave her out of it.

**Now Trapp held his breath** and unbuckled his safety harness. He swam underwater and out the open door and surfaced clinging to the tail. The plane was still sinking. He let go and watched the Cessna drifting down below his sneakers — 30, 40, 50 feet, until it disappeared. "Bye, girl," he said. It had taken less than a minute to sink.

***Well, you're alive, he thought.*** *And the water's not too cold,* though it was in the mid-60s to low-70s. Without the plane to hold on to, and with no flotation device, he would have to tread water. The problem was the waves — over six feet high — which kept plunging him underwater.

He'd come up sputtering, flailing, and kicking and would just get his breath when the next one would pummel him. *You've got to come up with a plan*, he said to himself.

In the Navy, he was trained to turn a pair of pants into a life jacket. He kicked off his sneakers, peeled off his jeans, tied the pant legs, filled them with air, and wrapped the rig around his neck. When the next big wave came, the pants twisted around his throat, nearly strangling him. *Well, that was stupid*, he thought. Furious, he threw the pants away and went back to treading water.

He rolled over onto his back to catch his breath, but the waves were relentless. Water rushed down his throat, into his lungs. He threw up into the lake. *You just survived a plane crash*, he said to himself. *And now you're going to drown*.

His jeans were still floating a few feet away, so he paddled over to them, pulled out his wallet, and tucked it into his underwear. So that they could identify the body.

Julie got the call a little after 6 p.m. The details were slim: Michael had made a Mayday call. He was missing. The Coast Guard would be searching. They would be in touch. She hung up, dazed and even angry. "Told you so," she whispered. There was nothing to do but wait.

The Coast Guard dispatched three aircraft and three boats, but the authorities hadn't gotten a good fix on Trapp's position before the crash, so the search area was spread over 1,840 square miles — roughly the size of Grand Canyon National Park. And in six-foot waves, a human head sticking out of the water is a tiny thing indeed.

**Well, I'm not ready to die just yet**, Trapp was thinking. The waves were rough, yes, but he remembered seeing something on TV about a 12-year-old girl who had swum the English Channel. *If a 12-year-old girl can do that, I can hang out here and float for a while*, he thought. It was hard, though, not to fixate on all the things he'd left in the plane — his waterproof cell phone, for one, and two packs of Little Debbie's Swiss Rolls, but also a cooler and a water jug, either of which would have helped him stay afloat. He rolled over into a dog paddle and something caught his eye. A channel marker buoy? He began swimming toward it, elated. *Well, hell*, he thought, *I'll just swim to that and hang on to it until*

*they come get me, and I'll be good.* He swam hard for two hours, occasionally rolling onto his back to rest. Once while he was resting, with his ears underwater, he heard a motor coming. He popped his head out of the water and scanned the horizon. There, not 50 yards away, floated a huge freighter. He waved and screamed, but the ship slogged past, nearly drowning him in its massive wake.

The sun was setting in front of him when he realized that the channel marker he'd been swimming toward was not a channel marker at all: It was the top of a factory smokestack on shore. *All right, he thought. Even better. I'll swim to shore.*

He was within two miles of the twinkling lights of the shoreline when he encountered a stiff current that utterly stymied him. He would swim for all he was worth, until he could barely breathe and his muscles were burned-out and useless, then roll over onto his back to rest. By the time he'd recover, he'd have actually lost ground. The first star came out. He made a wish.

**Back in Gouverneur**, distraught family and friends crowded into the house. Naturally reserved, Julie said little, just waited by the phone. She appreciated the show of support but wanted more than anything to be left alone. At last, the place cleared out, and she lay down, but her mind raced with possibilities she would rather not consider. When she finally drifted off to sleep, it was on Michael's side of the bed.

Throughout the night, two helicopters, a C-130 airplane from North Carolina, a local sheriff's department plane, and a Canadian Air Force plane scoured the search area. Trapp never saw them. What he did see was the green light of a channel buoy down the shore a ways. Back to plan A, then — cling to a buoy until rescued. But still the current thwarted him. For hours he kept it up, maddened by how tantalizingly close the buoy was, swimming until his limbs all went to jelly, then resting on his back in the starlight, only to find himself further away than when he'd started.

*Nobody's coming tonight, he realized. You need to just relax and wait for the sun to come up. And then in the morning somebody will see you and come get you.* He lay back and floated, mesmerized by the stars, watching the satellites scrape across the sky, amazed at the number of meteors you could spot when you had nothing else to look at. The waves

had subsided, and he swam only to keep within the warm spots in the water. When he caught himself shivering, he willed himself to stop, rubbing at his goose bumps until he could float calmly again.

He thought of his loved ones. So many people depended on him: Julie, their sons, his employees at the garage, his friends. He found he could take mini-vacations from his ordeal by visualizing himself at home with the people he cared about — laughing with his buddies, curled in bed beside Julie. Then a frigid wave would land in his face, and he would cough out the water and start over again.

**He was on one of his mini-vacations** when something bumped hard into his side. *What the — ?* He felt around for a log or debris. It was neither. It was a fish. An awfully big fish. His mind began racing, picturing the massive jaws hurtling up from the depths to make a meal of him. *Whoa! You got to get that out of your mind. No time for that now.*

He lay back and relaxed again. And a mosquito began drilling into his forehead. *Are you kidding me? Two miles from shore? Have you no mercy?* He swore and slapped around in the air, and the mosquito flew off.

Later in the night, he had rolled into his dog paddle position to get his bearings when a shadow fluttered between him and the lights of shore. He peered hard through the gloom and saw what it was — a seabird, a cormorant. It circled him several times, then lighted on the black water and began swimming toward him. *Holy crap. This thing's gonna peck my eyes out.* “Get outta here!” he hollered, and the startled bird did just that.

As he waited for the sun to come up, he thought about his whole life. The stupid things he'd done. The pointless arguments with Julie. He began to pray. *Let me hug my wife just one more time. Let me hug my kids just one more time. Please. Let something good come.*

**More boats passed**, but Trapp bobbed there as invisible and insignificant as a chunk of wood. When the sun rose, its warmth was welcome, but it brought with it choppy waves. He was very cold now, and his depleted muscles were cramping severely. *You don't have a lot of choices*, he said to himself. *You either swim or die. Those are the only choices you get.*

He decided to try to swim at an angle through the current and reach shore that way. He was paddling hard when a fishing boat came by, close, close, so close, it felt like he could touch it. Three guys were walking around on deck. He screamed and waved for all he was worth, until there was nothing left inside him and he had no choice but to roll over onto his back and recuperate. By the time he was rested, the current had dragged him 500 yards from the boat. “Gosh darn it,” he cursed. He could no longer feel his hands, and there was a strange tingling in his arms. *You’ve got to relax*, he told himself again. But it was getting harder to do. He looked up and saw a sailboat approaching. He pulled a credit card out of his wallet and began reflecting the sun’s rays at the boat. He alternated between that and waving one of his socks. No luck.

Over the next couple of hours, two more sailboats came by, and he tried in vain to hail them. He could feel himself reaching his physical limit. He’d been in the water for nearly 18 hours now.

Another boat approached, between him and the open water. Cramped and crippled, Trapp paddled toward the vessel in an awkward sidestroke, then stopped and began waving the sock and flashing the credit card. The boat kept going. *Please, please, please. Come on. I may not get another chance at this. Please!*

**Dean and Diane Petitpren** and their guests were three hours into their vacation aboard their 58-foot Viking pleasure boat when Diane glanced toward shore and saw something floating in the water. She kept her eye on the spot as their hired captain, Erik Krueger, brought the vessel around.

It was 10:30 when Julie Trapp’s phone rang. “Hello?” she said cautiously.

“Is your husband’s name Michael?” Marita Grobbel, the Petitprens’ boat guest, was asking as they sped toward the nearest harbor.

Julie couldn’t bring herself to answer.

“We’ve found him, in Lake Huron.”

“Marita! Tell her he’s alive!” Dean Petitpren shouted.

Mike Trapp was taken to Covenant Healthcare hospital in Saginaw, Michigan, and treated for exhaustion and hypothermia. That evening, he was lying in his hospital bed marveling at his good fortune when he looked up to see Julie standing in the doorway.

“I don’t want to hurt you, so I won’t hug you too tight,” she said.

“Don’t worry about that,” Trapp said, his eyes brimming with tears.

So she hugged him as hard as she wanted to.

**According to the U.S. Search and Rescue Task Force**, a person in 60-to-70-degree water can expect to reach exhaustion or unconsciousness in two to seven hours. Trapp’s ordeal lasted 18. He lost seven pounds and spent three days in the hospital recuperating from dangerously high levels of a protein — released by his overworked muscles — that can overwhelm the kidneys. Then he went home, to a hero’s welcome.

Back on the boat, after his rescuers had dragged him out of the water, Trapp was wrapped in a thick, black blanket and given a banana. It was bliss. “This was like the best banana you’ve ever had in your life,” he says. “And I could feel the sun radiating on the blanket and warming my body. I was ... there were ...” he collects his thoughts. “There are very few moments in your life that are as precious as that. I enjoy my life. I have fun. I’m just not ready to give it all up yet.”

“I’m a survivor”