

Flying Falling Fighting

A Pilot's Memoir

“A witness located near the intersection of the Seward and Sterling Highways stated that he was outside shortly after 4 pm when he heard an airplane flyover. He said it sounded like the airplane was flying west to east and as if it was ‘maneuvering under power.’ He stated that this lasted for about 15 seconds before all sound ceased. An Air National Guard Pavehawk crew discovered the accident site, and the sole survivor was subsequently evacuated.”

– National Transportation Safety Board Preliminary Report

Every alarm and warning imaginable rang in my ears as our plane tossed through the air. The copilot door flew open at the sudden jerk. The air that was already tense and filled with smoke blurred over, as the pilot struggled to gain control. The plane leveled for a few seconds before it jerked straight up and fell into what lay below.

I woke up thinking we were back at Allen and Kelly's house in Anchorage. My ears were ringing, and my head was spinning. The air smelled strangely fresh, like tilled soil and trees. All I could see was shrubs, dirt, and glass shards. For a moment, I was convinced I was sitting on the floor, watching an old war movie. The dirt, trees, broken glass, and twisted metal somehow reminded me of the jungles of Vietnam in *We Were Soldiers*. The whirling of the plane's instruments caught my attention as they spun to a stop. My eyes looked around as my head stayed completely still, as if I was frozen in place.

A high-pitched beep pulled me out of my dazed imagination. I realized that we were not back at the house. Our floatplane had fallen from the sky and crashed into the side of a mountain. For now, I was still alive. I blinked, trying to focus. My immediate fear was that the plane would burst into flames. The smell of earth and clean air helped to ease that fear just a little bit. I knew I shouldn't move, in case my neck or something drastic was broken, but I had to know what happened and try to get help.

I turned my head gingerly and began to take in everything. My shoulder harness had unclipped and swayed eerily with every movement I made. I turned to see that the pilot, Allen, was alive but severely injured and unconscious. I strained to see Kelly and Claire in the back. I yelled their names in the deafening silence, yet they didn't stir or respond. I saw Claire's head of beautiful, brown curls slumped against the back of Allen's seat, and I knew she was gone. I couldn't see Kelly, who was sitting right behind me, but assumed she was also gone. Considering the amount of pain they could have experienced, the rational part of me was relieved they didn't even know what happened.

Turning to face the shattered windshield in front of me, I lifted my arm to push my door open and get help from below. My upper arm rose to my command, but my forearm swung free like a pendulum. *Well*, I thought, *There's my first injury*. The skin was completely split and every bone in my elbow was shattered. Large drops of

blood fell on my brand-new pants, as I begged my arm to help me escape.

I decided to take advantage of my few minutes of pain-free shock to get out and slide down the mountain to find help. The pool of blood gathering on my shirt told me it was now or never. Since my elbow was as useful as a spaghetti noodle, I fixated on my fingers and willed them climb up the dashboard of buttons and instruments. My forearm advanced as instructed, until I had pulled my upper arm around the windshield's frame. I let out a guttural cry and pulled with all my might as a sharp pain tore through my chest and back. When I let go, I sank back the short distance I gained. Four times I walked my fingers up, over, around, and pulled, breathing through the pain, hoping I would break free. I leaned against the seat, exhausted, hopeless. There was no way to get out of the plane.

We had crashed somewhere in the Alaskan wilderness. It would take hours for even the most experienced rescue team to arrive. I found a popped-out instrument, slumped over, using it as a pillow, and took a nap. Deep down, I knew I'd need every ounce of energy and determination to survive what came next.

Before the Fall

Claire and I had flown out to Alaska four days before to visit her Uncle Allen and Aunt Kelly. They were excited to show us Alaska in the summer, and we had been looking forward to flying, hiking, and taking in the peaceful, bold wilderness. I was looking forward to flying Allen's floatplane, if he'd let me. We spent three days at their lake property boating, hiking, seal watching, and four-wheeling.

The morning before we left to fly back to Anchorage, Claire, Allen, and I had finished a hike to the waterfall on the other side of the lake, absorbing the last beautiful day of peace, quiet, and no cell signal. Kelly had spent the morning bird watching by the cabins,

and Allen made one last call on the satellite phone to verify the weather along our route. Satisfied, we loaded the floatplane and climbed in.

I slid into the co-pilot seat, and Kelly tapped me on the shoulder, “Put your shoulder harness on.” I always forgot those. The day couldn’t have been more perfect. We took off over the bay, into a cloudless sky. I was able to fly after takeoff until Allen exclaimed, “Hey, look! Orcas!” He took the controls and flew us low over the water. We circled over the small pod of whales a few times. Two adults and a little calf swam close to the surface. After a few turns, we leveled out and climbed back toward the mainland.

As we flew inland, a thin layer of smoke had settled over the end of Kenai Lake. A large wildfire to the west of the area had been burning for weeks and frequently covered the area with a light haze. When we left Anchorage three days before, it was a little smoky, so we weren’t worried about it becoming any worse. However, the further inland we flew, the thicker the smoke became; until, in what felt like seconds, we couldn’t see anything outside the plane. We had just entered a mountain pass and had no way of turning around without risking smashing into the trees.

Allen kicked into action, cross-checking the instruments, and directing the rest of us to look out the windows for trees and terrain.

Persistent alarms began going off, “Terrain, Terrain, Pull up, Pull up.”

Allen wasn’t fazed by the alerts. He knew the mountains were close to us and was intentionally flying near them to be able to turn around. I had no idea where we were in relation to anything. I knew about the dangers of flying into poor visibility conditions but never experienced them. Statistically, we had 90 seconds to break free.

Allen kept a hawk-eye gaze on his iPad ADS-B map and the rest of his instruments as he frantically tried to turn us around, out of the mountain pass. Just before we broke free of the smoke, to every-

one's horror, the plane violently pitched up and to the left. My door flew open. I instinctively reached out to close the door as the plane continued to be tossed like a salad. The plane then pitched up again, followed by a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The floating, weightless feeling followed by a high-pitched, monotone stall warning confirmed the worst. I said a silent prayer, hoping beyond hope that we would make it through. I heard the reassuring voice of God telling me, "You're going to be okay," and I relaxed.

Rescue!

The sound of a helicopter flying low overhead woke me up. My head was resting on the GPS that had popped out from the dashboard. *Thank you, Lord! They finally located the plane and can get us out of here!* The sound passed over and away, and I wanted to shout, *Wait, no! Over here! You're so close!* Instead, I leaned myself against the seat and prayed that they would come back. Allen stirred at my movement, but his breathing was slow and shallow. The Pavehawk circled two more times before steadily hovering a little bit away. I waited until I heard footsteps in the brush and pleaded, "Help! There are still people alive!"

I don't know about you, but I'm always happy to see a man in uniform. When Bryan walked around the front of the plane, I don't think I've ever been more relieved. I heard someone else behind me, opening the back door. I propped myself up with my newly discovered broken left wrist and shattered but operable right arm. Blood covered almost everything. I looked at Bryan and tried to give the most thorough, quick briefing of what I knew.

"My name is Joy. The two in the back are dead. He is still alive but barely holding on. I think he broke his neck and has a bad gash in his head. My right arm is broken, and my legs are trapped."

Bryan nodded, "Okay, don't worry. We're here with the National Guard, and we're going to get you out."

That's pretty cliché, I thought, but I didn't care one bit! Allen was holding on like a true captain, giving it all he had. Unfortunately, he passed away shortly after the guys arrived.

The para-rescue-man behind me, Jimmie, spoke calmly. "She's right. They are both gone back here. The only way we can get her out is to cut off the top, get to the bolts on her seat, and pull her out that way."

I heard a small saw start up and knew there would be sparks from cutting the metal. My brother was a firefighter and did vehicle evacuation demonstrations for safety events, so I knew the drill.

"Sorry, I don't have anything to cover you with. There's going to be some sparks, but it won't be for long." Jimmie warned.

"That's okay," I replied as I turned my head away. "I know what you have to do. Don't worry about me." I muttered to myself, *I don't care how many metal burns or scratches I get. Just get me OUT OF THIS PLANE!*

I turned my head away and closed my eyes. I thought I was just resting, but the guys immediately realized that I was in a much worse condition. I had lost a lot of blood and only had a small window of time left. They knew it had already been over three hours since the plane crashed, and the closest hospital was a 30-minute flight away. As they put it later, I was "circling the drain" with only their expertise and speed to keep me from being sucked under.

Fighting to Stay Alive

Bright lights shone overhead, as shadows danced over me. Distant voices hit my ears as the emergency techs were quickly discovering I wasn't much more than a pile of broken bones.

"Here," someone with authority called out. "Head laceration. I need some staples."

Three clicks to the head later, I was unconscious again. When I woke, I struggled to breathe, gagging on something stuck in my throat. A nurse rushed over as I tried to pull the tube out. She tied my arm down, as I inwardly protested, *haven't I already been through enough?* An increase of medication quickly put me back to sleep.

I hadn't even begun to grasp how narrowly I escaped death or how badly broken my body was. I hadn't only broken my wrist and elbow. No, I had shattered every extremity. A broken rib punctured my lung, and my L1 vertebra was completely crushed. I was paralyzed from the waist down from four spinal cord tears. My ankles were so badly crushed and torn that the blood loss and muscle damage almost caused me to lose my left foot. Through fervent prayer, God restored the muscle, and I kept both feet.

The next five days were filled with multiple surgeries, delirium, and agonizing pain. I've been told I was keeping up with everything, carrying on conversations, and whisper-yelling at people to not touch my bed. I remember very little.

A week after the accident, the thick veil over my mind cleared. The pain wasn't completely blinding anymore. I could remember more than the past five minutes. My condition changed from critical to stable, and I moved up to acute neurosurgical care.

I still couldn't move. I had external metal rods screwed into what bones I didn't break to keep me together, making movement even more impossible. My mom and sister had flown up to Alaska as soon as they heard about the accident and were there with me around the clock.

The surgeon allowed me a week and a half free of surgeries before removing the Frankenstein-esque external fixators and screwing me back together. Three surgeries later, my right arm and ankle were in a cast, and my left ankle was in a large, metal apparatus meant to get bone fragments to grow back together. Even with my right side free, I found I couldn't even sit up by myself. My once

strong core muscles were non-existent. I couldn't feel my hips or legs to provide any balance. I joked with the nurses that I would be moving my toes by the end of the day, but it was more than a joke. I knew someday it would happen no matter what anyone said.

Journey to Recovery

Before the accident, being active was a way of life for me. I was independent and motivated to climb the corporate ladder as an airline operations manager. Aviation was in my blood. I earned my private pilot's license before I graduated from college and had just started my master's degree in aerospace operations.

Outside of work, dancing was my favorite way to de-stress. I took ballroom dance classes for two years and participated in show-cases and freestyles. A magical waltz would sweep away all my stress. My dance group became my community. They were my fun, peaceful outlet of emotion. Everything was going as planned. I was on track to reach my social and corporate goal of becoming a director at a major airline, but God had other plans.

As I laid in that hospital bed, all I could think about was dancing on Tuesday nights. I obsessed over it. I even suggested to my surgeon that he amputate the troublesome ankle and give me a prosthetic, because if he fixed my ankle and it couldn't move, I wouldn't be able to dance again. As expected, he was a little concerned about my sanity! I always believed I would dance again, that I would get back to some form of normal and this would just be another story to tell. Thankfully, my surgeons in Alaska, my family, and support group also believed I would walk and dance again and posted their encouragement with the hashtags #tinydancer and #shewilldanceagain. Six weeks after the accident, I was able to move my right toe.

The mind is a powerful thing. I never thought that I could control an arm that was completely shattered and dangling or that hope and

prayer could heal four spinal cord tears and refute the diagnosis of many professionals. I am here to tell you that they can! I had to push harder and more creatively than my therapists could make me. I had to dig deep into what I knew was true to prove to myself and others that I would overcome any limitation.

When I was finally discharged from the hospital, four months later, it still wasn't a pretty picture. My mom's main goal was to fatten me up with good home cooking. I weighed ninety pounds and had to use a wheelchair. Nevertheless, I could hop. I could hobble on my one good foot while the rest of me continued to heal.

Seven months after the accident, I flew back home to Virginia. Life could finally get back to "normal." I was so excited to be able to see my coworkers and show off how far I'd come. March 2020, I was cleared to return to work, but then COVID happened. When I finally returned to work, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face! My coworkers had been my cheering squad during recovery and some had taken the accident almost as hard as my family. It was a moment we had all been looking forward to.

Dancing was harder to accomplish. My left ankle doesn't move, and my right ankle likes to flop around like a fish. That hasn't killed my passion though. Two and a half years later, I went out on a Tuesday night and danced again.

Accepting My Condition

I never thought I'd have to face being the only survivor of a plane crash or wonder whether I'd ever walk again. The last few moments of that fateful flight, I remember feeling a peace that everything would be okay. During my recovery, I often asked myself, *What part of any of this is okay?!* Then I realized I am okay. No, I won't be able to backpack mountains any time soon or gracefully waltz a dance floor, but I am alive and can encourage and inspire others to also overcome their 'impossibles'.

I first wrote this story to contribute to the book “*Overcoming Mediocrity - Limitless Women.*” My limits have obviously changed, but my perspective on life has grown. My trauma doesn’t define me. My response determines my outcome. I’ve learned a few tips that I’d love to share.

1. Remember What You Love.

I love dancing, music, and adventure. I listen to music practically every free moment. My poor car has heard some terrible karaoke! Somehow during recovery, I forgot how much I loved and needed music. On a particularly bad day, my brother sent me a song. Immediately, I felt a cloud lift away. How could I have forgotten my routine before the crash?! I had fallen into a routine of medication, therapy, and adjusting. After I remembered my love of music, I also began watching old dance videos and purposefully connecting with friends. Those actions pulled me out of my routine, reminded me of what I was capable of, and connected me with the world outside of my pain.

2. Make Flexible Goals.

I am a very Type A person, so I don’t say this lightly. While goals may be a lead brick to others, goals are a fun challenge for me. Two weeks after my crash, I told my boss I’d be back to work in two months. He got a good chuckle from that. When September rolled around, I was still in the hospital with at least two surgeries to go and could barely move my right leg. Before the accident, not being able to meet my goal would have broken my spirit. Thankfully, I learned early in the recovery process to make flexible goals. I had to change my mindset to use goal-setting as a way to encourage myself with something to work toward. Some days, my goal was to wake up and wash my face. Other days, it was to defy everyone’s expectations and stand on my own. When my deadline approached, I didn’t look at my failures. I looked at how far I’d come and set another goal.

3. Don't Forget Those Who Helped You Along the Way.

Just two years after the crash, I went back to Alaska. I returned to the same mountains that changed my life forever and to the same people who poured into my family and me. God had told me I would be okay, and I never doubted that for one second. Others did not have that reassurance and were doubtful of my recovery. I wanted to show them that all their prayers and hard work paid off: I can walk and dance! I toured the National Guard base that dispatched Bryan, Jimmie, and the others to our crash site. The guys often visited while I was in critical care and were a constant source of encouragement and smoked salmon. I was able to walk around their base and see the behind-the-scenes of their missions. I could share with them my appreciation, and they could see the result of their hard work. Being able to walk and talk with those who had such a great impact on my life reminded me of what I had overcome and how truly limitless this life can be.

The names of those involved in the crash were changed to protect their privacy.

About Joy Cooper



Adventure, focus, and dedication changed the course of Joy's life when she was the sole survivor of a fatal plane crash. Joy Cooper was born and raised in Paris, TX and currently lives in Sterling, VA. She works for United Airlines as an airport operations manager and has been involved in aviation since she was young. She firmly believes that her Christian faith and life experiences prepared her for this very moment.

A year after the crash, Joy graduated with a M.S. in Aeronautics at Embry Riddle University, specializing in aerospace operations and space systems.

She also holds a B.S. in air traffic management from LeTourneau University, has her private pilot license, and holds an aircraft dispatch certificate. If you couldn't tell, she loves aviation and travel!

Since working in airline operations for nine years, Joy has intimate knowledge of the safety protocols, training, and different facets of maintaining safe operations. Only a week after her life-changing crash, a well-meaning counselor mentioned that she may be afraid to fly again, to which she replied, "that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard." She believes that when you love something, you don't let anything get in your way. Today Joy gives safety talks to aviation classes, and speaks on leadership, resilience, and overcoming adversity for organizations across the country.

She is currently working on a full book of her story.

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition