

Father, son recall tragic plane crash

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Young Kevin Geiger was clinging to the pontoon of a small airplane as it slowly sunk into the frigid waters of a lake in northern Saskatchewan and wondering whether his father and close family friend would escape the crash alive.

The plane, its engine having failed, hit the water at an angle and cartwheeled just minutes earlier the evening of Aug. 2.

Nine-year-old Kevin and his 45-year-old father Brian, along with their friend Dr. Harvey Christiansen, had just taken off from Pelican Narrows Air Service where they had refueled the de Havilland Beaver single-engine float plane, owned and piloted by Christiansen. Brian was co-pilot.

What started as a quick jaunt from their cabins at Jan Lake, about 450 kilometres northeast of Saskatoon, turned into a harrowing experience for Brian, who lost his best friend but came to appreciate the resilience of his son.

The men, cabin owners on the pristine northern lake, became fishing buddies about five years earlier when Christiansen, a 73-year-old retired medical doctor from Nipawin, came to Brian's rescue after he broke his leg fixing up his cabin.

"He sort of took me under his wing and we started flying together and fishing, of course. After my first flight with him, I knew I wanted to be a pilot. As soon as I got my cast off, I went and got my licence and we've been flying together ever since. Winter and summer, we spent every weekend fishing, flying somewhere.

"Harvey was a great pilot. He'd been flying up there for 40 years. He was a pioneer up there. There's nowhere that we flew to that he hadn't been to twice."

Only recently did Brian, the father of four boys ranging in age from five to 23, start including Kevin when flying in the North, knowing the potential dangers.

"If anything ever happens you have to be big enough to look after yourself."

Around supper time Aug. 2, the two men decided to take the 12-minute trip to Pelican Narrows and had asked a few people to join them for the ride because there was room for one more. Everyone was busy preparing supper.

"Thank God. Usually even supper wouldn't stop someone from coming."

Christiansen was life-long friends with the owners of the air service, having delivered them as babies. So as usual, he stopped for a visit.

"As part of Harvey's goodbyes, he'd take you by the hand and say: 'Is there anything I can do for you, anything at all? Do you need any money? Nothing I can do for you? OK. Be safe until next time.' "

But for Christiansen there would be no next time.

The plane's takeoff went fine but as soon as it hit cruising altitude, the trouble started. Too far from Pelican Narrows to turn back, the men searched for a lake in which to land.

"We were very heavy because of the fuel. When we did start having trouble, we were losing altitude the whole time, trying to figure out what the problem is. When the engine finally quit, we had about three minutes. We were looking for water. We saw a little puddle out there and we were trying to make it. The bottom line is it wasn't possible to make it.



Brian Geiger and his son, Kevin

"Although we made it to the water, the wings stalled. The plane quit flying when we made it to the lake. It's not an engine stall but the wings stopped flying. In the airplane, you can hear this, 'beep, beep, beep, beep.' That's a very scary sound. It means we're not flying anymore," said Brian.

"We just about hit the trees and there was a beeping noise and smoke was coming out," added Kevin.

"I knew we were going to go down hard," said Brian. "I turned around and said: 'Kev, hunker down. Hold on tight. We're going to hit hard.' and I went back to flying."

Kevin remembers hitting his head on the back of the seat but he wasn't seriously injured. His cheek was swollen and he bit his lip. He still had his wits about him to unbuckle his seat-belt and escape the sinking plane.

"The water was coming in. It was about at my shoes. That's when I opened the door. I was thinking, 'I've got to get out of here,' " said Kevin.

He held on to the pontoon still attached to the plane and waited as the plane continued to sink, not knowing if the men had survived.

"I was thinking if it would be Harvey or dad who's going to come up."

Meanwhile, Brian was unconscious for at least eight minutes, long enough for the plane to fill with water. "When I came to, I was drowning. I wasn't looking for a spot to get air. There wasn't any."

He turned to his mentor, grabbed his shoulders and turned him around. Christiansen had a huge hole above his left eyebrow where he had been impaled. The autopsy has shown he died instantly from the blow.

Brian torpedoed out of the submerged plane, which had only its tail above water. Disoriented and suffering from a head injury, Brian forgot that Kevin had been in the plane with him. He was confused when he saw his son floating on the pontoon.

"I'm thinking I was in a time-warp. I'm trying to remember how he got there. If Kevin hadn't got out on his own, I would have never even known. I have to quit doing that because it's killing me. What if, what if, what if."

It took Brian time to come to terms with the situation and put into practice his first-aid training.

Bleeding profusely from a gash above his right eyebrow, Brian took off his shirt and used it as a compress. He later required several stitches to close the wound. Due to the impact of the crash, Brian also broke his right arm and two vertebrae in his neck. He has a basal skull fracture and a concussion.

Once outside the plane, Brian realized they had a long night ahead of them. Bush pilots, including those involved in search and rescue, aren't rated to fly in the dark because "lakes don't have runway lights.

"If you don't make it home at night, nobody's looking for you until at least the following day."

Brian had to determine if he, with his injuries, and his young son could swim the 60 metres to shore of an island in the unnamed lake into which they crashed.

"I'm going, 'I know I need help and there's no way that I can spend the night holding on to that pontoon.' The sun was down and it was already cold. I was in shock and I'm sure Kevin was too. Kevin was throwing up every 20 minutes all night."

Suddenly, an insulated, soft-sided cooler bag with a couple of pop bottles shot out from inside the plane and almost into Brian's arms. He knew that was the answer.

"It was the only thing that came out of that plane basically. I didn't even know those damn things floated, let alone do what it did. It was floating like a cushion. I told Kevin to jump on it and use it as a bag that he could kick his feet and swim to shore with.

"We're both good swimmers. I didn't know if I was going to make it and I definitely didn't want to be pulling him down."

As they swam, Brian worried about how they would get onto the shore, as many lakes in the North have steep banks of rock. He couldn't believe what he found.

"There was a clearing and it was almost like it was made for us, a big flat rock, and we just walked up onto that rock."

Once on land, Brian realized they had work to do. All of their survival gear was trapped inside the plane. So with the multi-tool he always has strapped to his belt, he tried, unsuccessfully, to strike a spark to start a fire. Then he turned to cutting spruce boughs to use for a bed and to cover themselves. They needed protection from the cold and the relentless mosquitoes and blackflies.

"I kept one big spruce bough and tucked Kevin's head under my shoulder. All night long I was sweeping for flies. You can't imagine. I kept praying, 'Please let there be a breeze for just one minute.' I could feel them chewing on my forehead. My face was just covered in blood."

In an effort to stay alive, they talked throughout the night about what they would do when they got home. Sleeping in a comfortable bed, escaping the flies and mosquitoes and taking a hot bath were top of mind. For Kevin, watching TV was something he looked forward to. But they didn't talk about Christiansen.

"Every time I looked at the plane, I thought about Harvey," said Kevin.

"How come you didn't talk to me about it?" asked Brian during the interview.

"Because you told me not to," replied Kevin.

"Did I?" said Brian, still uncertain about many of the details.

"You told me we'd talk about Harvey when we got home."

It wasn't until Sunday morning around 10 that a friend realized Brian, Kevin and Christiansen were missing. One of the owners of Pelican Narrows Air Service struck out immediately in search of them.

"I could hear the plane going up and down, up and down. And I said to Kevin, 'There they are Kev. They're coming.'"

Just retelling the story brought goosebumps to Brian's arms.

Within minutes of searching, the plane located them and the pilot risked landing in a lake that Brian says is really too small for a plane landing.

"When our eyes met, he knew Harvey was dead and it was really hard. Harvey delivered him."

But there was no time to recover Christiansen's body. The RCMP underwater recovery team flew to the site the next day for that. Brian desperately needed medical care for his injuries.

Now at home in Saskatoon, Brian said he survived that cold night on the desolate island because of his son, who remained strong throughout their ordeal.

"I have a whole new appreciation for my son. There hasn't been one night that I haven't made sure that we hugged and kissed before we went to bed. I'm damn glad not to be on a rock."

Brian, who drives a front-loading garbage truck for Canadian Waste, will be off work for at least 14 weeks recovering from his injuries.

Investigators from the transportation safety board have determined the plane crashed because of a crack on one of the engine cylinders.

"It's pretty tough to tell after the fact how long a crack has been there," said Peter Hildebrand, regional manager of the transportation safety board, in an interview from Winnipeg.

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