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WOP

magazine

18 HOURS

Ted Stevens's plane crashed. Five people died. Four survived. Then came the wait for rescue in the wilds of Alaska.

BY ASHLEY HALSEY III AND
LONNAE O'NEAL PARKER | PAGE 10

The Apollo Kid Rockville teen Nathan Foley had won Amateur Night a record seven times. The next contest would top them all. BY DAVID MONTGOMERY | 18

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The Waiting



Storm clouds near
Dillingham, Alaska.



**Horribly injured,
the four survivors were
fighting to stay alive.
Would help ever come?**

**BY ASHLEY HALSEY III
AND LONNAE O'NEAL PARKER**

DILLINGHAM, ALASKA

THE MOUNTAIN SNAPPED the five-foot aluminum strut like a hard-bent twig. The metal sliced through the plane's thin skin, shrieked into the cabin for a split second and mowed through everything in its way.

And then there was silence.

The complete and profound quiet of a spot on Earth never once touched by mankind and never likely to be touched again. Now a tiny red plane hung on the mountainside like a slapped mosquito, one wing askew, its engine buried in the mud.

The low-hanging scud that shrouds Alaska in summertime began to lay down its blanket. The rain that had for days made mud soup of the mountain slope turned its insistent sting against the plane's twisted hull.

Emerging from his haze, Sean O'Keefe felt a bizarre sensation in his mouth. Like chewing on gravel without taking a bite. He explored that mystery with his tongue until it registered: His mouth was awash with his own broken teeth.

We crashed.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BOOMER

The plane, full mostly of men and boys, fathers and sons, poker buddies on a fishing trip into the exotic and remote wilderness, had crashed without hint of warning, everything ripped from its rightful place and hurled forward into a single mangled heap of living and dead.

O'Keefe was still buckled in an uprooted seat, facing forward and down, as though kneeling over a church communion rail. His head was gashed, and his legs were pinned in the grip of coolers, bags of clothing and who knew what else. He felt the weight of a body heavy on him. After a moment, perhaps two, the body stirred. It was Jim Morhard.

"What's hurting on you?" Morhard asked.

"I think I've got broken ribs and what all else?" O'Keefe said.

Morhard slid off him, and O'Keefe glanced to his right at Bill Phillips, whose seat had catapulted forward from the rear. No question he was dead. O'Keefe reached for a pulse, and found none.

He saw someone to his left, reached down.

"It's Senator Stevens. I checked his pulse. There is none."

Taking inventory: so far, two dead, two alive, five unaccounted for.

One was Kevin O'Keefe, his 19-year-old son, who had been strapped into the co-pilot seat. Even from the pile of seats, bodies and gear, Sean could see the cockpit had been blown apart.

Then he saw Kevin, hanging limp from a shoulder harness still riveted to the plane's ceiling. He called out to him again and again, with building desperation.

"Kevin?"

"Kevin?"

"Kevin!"

Nothing but silence.

AS PAIN STABBED through O'Keefe's broken body, a long-ago memory floated up.

Spread across the wall was a map of Alaska, a state so vast it equals one-quarter the size of the Lower 48, a state with more miles of river than highway, a state populated by more caribou than humans.

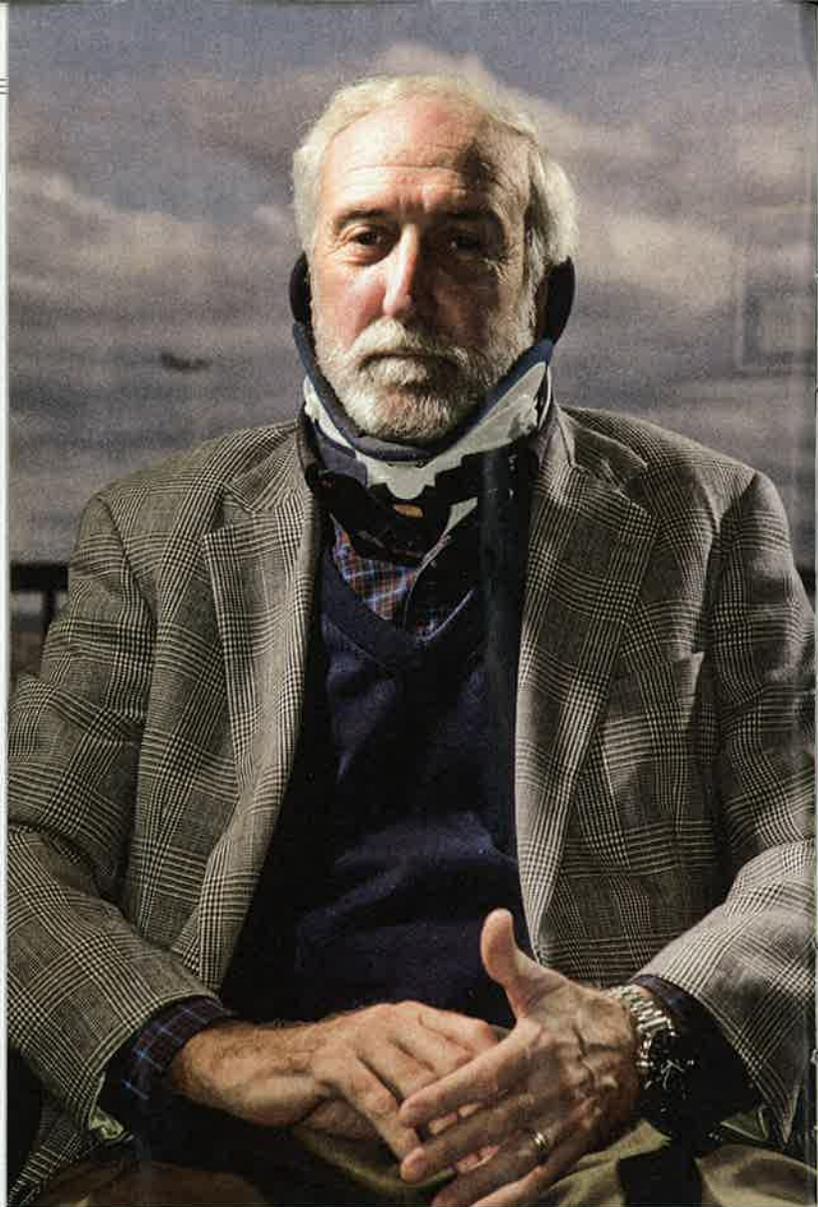
This map was covered with hundreds of colored pins, and Sean O'Keefe, then a young aide to the state's iconic U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, paused almost 30 years ago to ask his Air National Guard escort why.

"What does this represent to us?" he said.

Every pin, he was told, was a plane crash.

And the different colors?

"Well, the green one says we found them and we were able to locate survivors. The red ones, you can kinda use your own imagination as to what that means."



Sean O'Keefe was one of four survivors of the August plane crash that killed former U.S. senator Ted Stevens and four others in Alaska. O'Keefe, chief executive of EADS North America, is shown at his office in Arlington in November.

➔ See a timeline of the crash at washingtonpost.com/magazine.

But it was the memory of the pins that were neither red nor green that returned to haunt O'Keefe, as he lay trapped in the wreckage on the isolated mountainside in the rain.

Those other pins, and there were lots, were crashes that never had been found. Each pin marked a rough guess of where the plane went down. Despite what are likely the most sophisticated and experienced search-and-rescue teams on the planet, the vast Alaskan wilderness swallows planes whole. Mountains are covered with thick forests of alder and brush. Lakes, rivers and tributaries give rise to superlatives — the most salmon, the best game. It is home to places so rugged and unspoiled they draw outdoorsmen from all over the world. But that beauty comes with conflict. It's always man vs. nature.

There are a dozen ways Alaska can kill you, say those who fly or fish or hunt the land. There are driving rains, frigid cold, and extreme cycles of day and night. Clouds roll in and drop so low it's as though they're sitting on top of the rivers.



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PHOTOGRAPH BY BENJAMIN C. TANKERSLEY

In a place inaccessible by roads, plane travel is a routine part of life, and the crashes are always personal. They are about somebody you know, somebody you know of, or you yourself. It forgives a kind of promise in the community; a tacit add-on to the social contract that says if you go missing, I will look for you, because one day you may have to do the same for me.

The Aug. 9 “Stevens crash,” as it would come to be known, was the 53rd time a plane had gone down this year. Twelve days later, a plane with four people went down in the same region. The search went on for 15 days and covered 60,100 air miles without finding anybody.

Thirty-eight years earlier, a plane carrying House Majority Leader Hale Boggs and U.S. Rep. Nicholas J. Begich disappeared on a flight from Anchorage to Juneau. The fruitless search lasted 39 days. In the decades since, tens of thousands of flights have followed that same route without ever catching sight of the missing airplane.

The red pins, the green pins, the pins of the never-found — and then there was one last type: the pins of those who were found days or weeks or months too late, with death coming slowly to those who survived the crash but not the unforgiving elements.

As the shock wore off and his breathing grew labored, O’Keefe lay in the wreckage with his dead and badly injured friends, thinking the odds were against them.

Will we live long enough to be found?

He kept that thought to himself.

What he could not know was this: The lodge they had flown from thought they were out fishing; the camp where they were headed to fish assumed bad weather had turned them back. As the clouds and chill rain closed in, no one in the world even knew they were missing.

THEN CAME WHAT might have been a whisper, or might have been a bellow, but for a man of abiding Catholic faith, it was the sure sound of a miracle.

“What’s going on here? When are we going to fish?”

O’Keefe had refused to allow the thought that his son was hanging dead in a harness five feet away. Now Kevin had come to.

“When are we going to get to the fishing?”

“We’re not,” his dad told him. “We crashed.”

Wow, Kevin thought through a muddled haze.

Why are we not fishing? His teeth felt wrong, and he thought he must have lost one. Actually, his jaw was broken.

The cockpit radio had been crushed, so the only hope of reaching help was to find another radio or satellite phone somewhere in the mass of stuff.

THE SURVIVORS



JIM MORHARD



KEVIN O’KEEFE



WILLIAM “WILLY” PHILLIPS JR.

The pilot, Terry Smith, didn’t respond when they called his name. One glance told Kevin he was dead. It all felt surreal.

Somebody asked from the back: “Could you go through his pockets? See if he has a cellphone so we can call out.”

But even though the dead man was chillingly close, he was just too far to reach. “I couldn’t move my leg, and my hip was all out of place,” Kevin said.

Still strapped in his seat belt, Morhard had slipped head first into the rear of the plane, very badly hurt and unable to move. O’Keefe was still trapped by debris.

The job of searching the plane fell to 13-year-old Willy Phillips, who had a battered and broken ankle but was the only one able to move.

“Where’s my dad?” he asked.

“He’s right here with me,” O’Keefe responded, leaving it at that.

WILLY WAS A tough kid, the youngest from a big-time football family. His dad, Bill, played college football at the University of Evansville in the 1970s, and three older brothers currently played at Stanford, Virginia and Indiana.

Nor was Willy a stranger to Alaska. He’d been to the log-cabin GCI Lodge on Lake Nerka, in the southwestern bush, so often he knew where the fly rods were tucked away and he had confidently led Kevin on a winding hike through the forested hills. Willy’s dad had given them all a tour of the closest town, Dillingham, population 2,500, a place so removed that driving to the outskirts is on the top 10 list of things to do there.

The whole bunch of them — the O’Keefes, the Phillipses and Morhard — had been coming to Alaska for years on business and pleasure because of Stevens. All three of the men had worked for the senator on Capitol Hill, bonding in the trenches of partisan politics and raising their families in suburban Washington. They revered the 86-year-old Stevens as a mentor and friend; he treated them like sons and their children as family. O’Keefe went on to head NASA and now headed the aerospace firm EADS North America. Phillips and Morhard were lobbyists.

Sometimes the old man would dispense the wisdom of the ages, and other times he resorted to the tough love of someone who had been weathered by brutal missions flying the China-Burma route during World War II. “You gotta get over it, chief,” he’d say.

And that was the challenge facing the youngest among them on the afternoon of the senator’s death. Just how much could he handle? They needed him to search the big pile of junk for a radio, but somewhere in there, O’Keefe knew,

were the bodies of Dana Tindall, an executive with the communications company that owned the plane and lodge, and her teenage daughter, Corey, who had sat with them at the lunch table just an hour ago.

"Be strong now so that we can get out of this mess," the others told him.

Willy made the search.

Nothing. No phone, no radio, no medical kit.

Willy, dragging his leg, crawled outside to see whether something might be thrown free of the plane. Other than the overwhelming smell of jet fuel, there was nothing out there but rain and the thickening clouds.

"Is my dad alive?" he asked.

Willy was back in the plane, staring at O'Keefe in the pale light from the porthole.

"No. He's in a much better place."

Most kids, O'Keefe thought, would withdraw to a corner after hearing that and not be heard from again. As Willy struggled to hold it together, O'Keefe realized this kid wasn't one of them. He had his dad's guts.

"HAIL MARY, FULL of grace. Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Four voices, as strong as this moment of pain would allow, worked in unison through the prayers of the Rosary.

Fifty-four years old, 53 years old, 19 years old, 13 years old. Two generations of Catholic altar boys praying for deliverance from the wilderness.

"I can do it in the Latin if you want to hear it," Morhard said from the back of the plane.

"Well, if you can conjure it up, why not?" O'Keefe said.

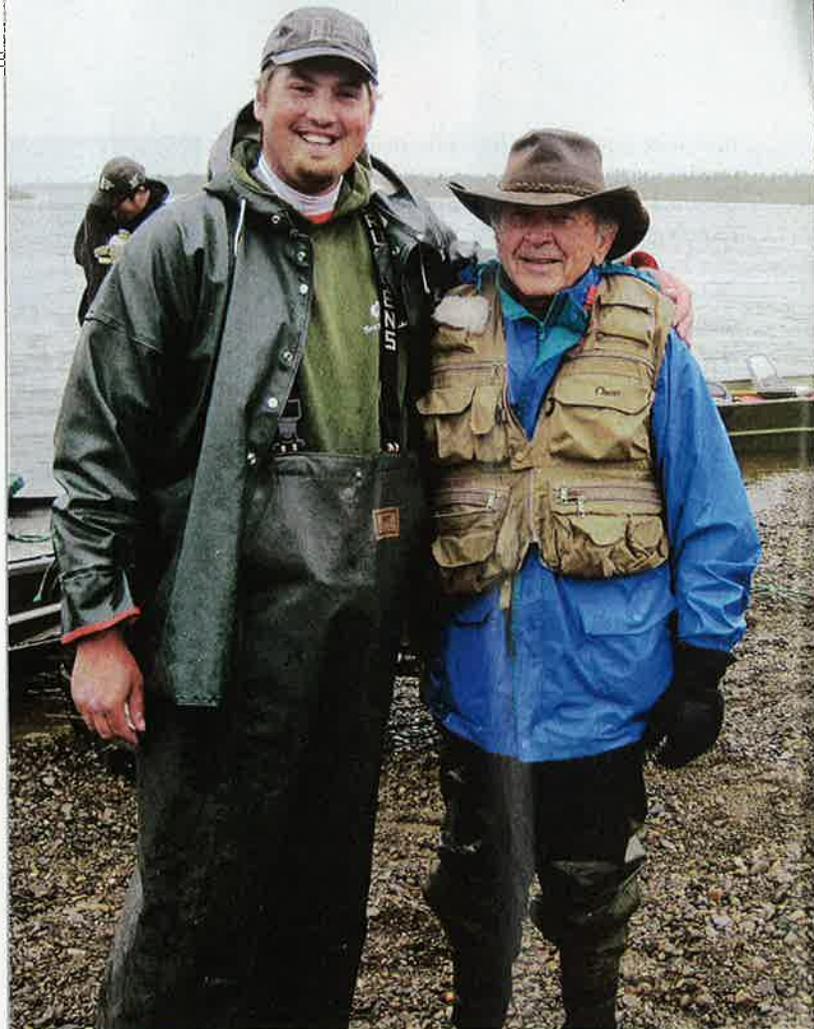
The fight to stay alive was merging with the fight to stay awake, to battle off the shock and unconsciousness that could kill them.

O'Keefe wondered about what he could not see: On every mountain slope, the tree line thins as the altitude climbs. He'd heard lots of wood splintering as the plane crunched to a halt, so they weren't in the clear. But were they deep in the woods, hidden beneath the underbrush?

And what color was the plane? They'd flown in it for three days, but in the haze of semi-consciousness, he couldn't recall.

"Listen for planes, listen for helicopters," he said as spirits ebbed. "Listen for them to come overhead, go distant and then return. That's when you know they've spotted us. The first flight overhead won't tell you a lot. When it returns, it does."

All the while, he thought: *We may be on this mountain forever.* The temperature was drop-



In a photo taken on the day before the Aug. 9 plane crash, former senator Ted Stevens, right, poses with Byron Orth of Beaverton, Ore., at a fishing camp along the Nushagak River in Alaska.

ping into the 40s, the rain wouldn't let up, clouds were wrapping around the top of the mountain.

A dozen ways to kill you.

Pick your poison, he thought.

THE FIRST CALL to Dillingham Flight Service Station came from the GCI Lodge shortly after 6:30 p.m., about four hours after the de Havilland Otter had taken off for its 52-mile trip. The plane was overdue, and no one had heard from the pilot. The station alerted the bush pilots to be on the lookout. Within a half-hour, the lodge called the station again, now requesting an official search.

"The controller asked if I saw the Big Red Otter," John Bouker said. He had been operating an air taxi service since 1994. His brother had been killed in a plane crash in 1985.

Bouker was flying back from the village of Manokotak and raised the alarm to two other local pilots in the air. "I think the GCI Otter might be in trouble. Why don't you go toward the lodge and start there, and I'll fly out toward the river," Bouker told Newt Ball. Ball's brother had been killed in a plane crash in 1977. Not two weeks ago, the son-in-law of the Otter's pilot was killed in a crash.

Dinnertime was approaching when the alarm was sounded that a plane carrying former sena-



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tor Ted Stevens was missing.

Ron Duncan, the president of GCI, and his pediatrician wife, Dani Bowman, headed out from the lodge to search in their plane along the Nushagak River.

"Hey, Ron," Bouker radioed, "I've already flown that route. Why don't you sidestep south, I'll sidestep north?"

Meanwhile, on the mountainside, things went silent in the downed plane at the first thrum of a single engine overhead.

"Oh, yeah, come on back," someone begged.

The sound faded. The hum of a second plane came through the gray mass above. Then silence.

A shout suddenly came through Duncan's radio: "I've got it!" Bouker said, confirming the worst. Then: "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Bouker wheeled quickly for a second pass to catch the precise coordinates before the fleeting window in the cloud bank slammed shut. A hand waved from the wreckage.

Somebody's alive down there, he reported just after 8 p.m.

As the cries of thanksgiving subsided within the Otter, O'Keefe spoke up. He figured it would take the fat end of an hour to reach them.

"Don't expect to see anybody, like, now. It's going to take a bit of time for anybody to set down, forge their way through whatever terrain is out there."

"It's pretty thick," Willy said.

Pretty thick, Bob Himschoot thought almost a quarter-mile away up the mountainside as he stared into the dense underbrush. The plane he'd seen from the helicopter that dropped him here was invisible from the ground.

Why the hell am I here? he wondered as rain soaked through his jeans, T-shirt and hoodie. He was the wrong man for the job — trained to fix satellite phone systems, not broken bodies — and he was scared out of his wits.

I'm not the right person to get here first, he thought. *It's getting dark.*

But that's the way of life in Alaska. They joke in small towns that the volunteer fire company is everybody. Like a lot of jokes, it's not far off the mark. When the call came that a plane was missing, Himschoot hopped into Tom Tucker's helicopter, and they set out to search. Now, as Tucker doubled back to get help, Himschoot was alone on the mountain.

The forest of alders, gnarly trees with trunks thick as rail posts, had been bent to grotesque submission by the wind that beats down in summer and snow that piles on in winter. The big brown bears that live among them can sprint through the maze, navigating over sliding rocks and sloshing mud. It is a very different proposi-

Amo

tion for a man in rubber boots. The bears, which grow to 1,500 pounds and 10 feet tall, don't go looking for trouble, but crash-scene investigators carry guns against the chance encounter.

Hand over hand, from one tree to the next, Himschoot plunged blindly down the slick hillside, calling out.

"Hello? Anybody out there?"

"Where are you?"

"Are you there?"

The four survivors heard him stumbling toward them.

"Yes, we're here!" they hollered back.

About six hours had passed since the crash when Himschoot broke through to find Willy standing by the plane's open left door. Five dead, four alive, the boy reported.

With nothing to offer, and fearful that his weight might cause the plane to slide down the mountain, Himschoot stood beside the hull. He couldn't see much from outside, but what he saw was a big jumbled mess. He asked Willy who had survived so he could address the three men trapped in the plane by name.

"Get us out of here," they pleaded.

"Not quite yet," Himschoot said.

He could hear the pain in O'Keefe's and Morhard's voices, but they couldn't detail their injuries. Himschoot dialed 911 to find out when help would arrive.

"A doctor is on the way," he told the survivors. "Half an hour."

He held back this much of the truth: The fast-moving cloud banks were eating up the mountain. Even if the chopper with the doctor could get in, he figured the chances they would get out tonight were slim to none.

HIMSCHOOT CRAWLED BACK up the mountain, as Tucker — now carrying Bowman, the pediatrician — was struggling through the fog to find a clearing to land again.

Discovered but not yet saved, O'Keefe worked to keep everyone from drifting into a fatal sleep. Singing, joking, praying and, whenever all that ran dry, taking the injury roll call once again.

"How's everybody doing?"

"What's hurting you?"

"Where does it hurt?"

The responses were the same, but over time the moans grew less frequent.

"My leg really hurts."

"I think I broke a bunch of ribs."

"I think I busted my arm."

Kevin looked down and reported: "It looks like someone took a spoonful of my knee out."

Morhard was floating in and out of consciousness, moaning when the pain got worse



WILLIAM PHILLIPS SR.



TERRY SMITH



COREY TINDALL



DANA TINDALL

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH OF PHILLIPS COURTESY OF THE (MONTGOMERY COUNTY) GAZETTE; SMITH, BY DON SCOTT/THE (CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND) PRESS VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS; THE TINDALLS, FROM ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BYRON ORTH VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

and sometimes not responding until the third or fourth time his name was called.

"We've got to soldier through this," O'Keefe said.

"Tough it out," he told himself, even as he struggled to breathe. "Tough it out."

It would take almost 60 stitches to close the gash where his forehead slammed down; his ankle was broken and his left hip was dislocated.

But at that moment, he was oblivious to the injuries most likely to kill him.

One kidney had been nicked. He was bleeding from within. And C1 — the half-dollar-sized vertebra at the base of his skull — was cracked in four places. If it busted, his spinal cord would, too.

THE DOCTOR WHO would keep them alive had shared their lunch table.

Bowman practices medicine in Anchorage. When the weather was improved, she and her husband had opted for a fun flight in their own plane and sent the fishing crew on their way.

Now, as they flew over the wreckage and saw the flutter of arms waving from below, she said: "I've got to be on the ground."

So Tom Tucker, who had just dropped Bob Himschoot on the mountain, spun his helicopter around to meet Bowman and Duncan on a tiny airstrip. They transferred everything useful to the chopper, and minutes later she was plunging through the woods toward the crash.

"Where ya been? Why'd it take so long to get here?" O'Keefe teased, his humor intact despite trouble breathing.

When she reached Morhard's side, he asked whether he was going to die.

"Not on my shift," she said.

Bowman made the rounds quickly: "Where do you hurt?" "What's ailing you?" "What are you feeling?"

The answer from everyone was: pain.

"We're trying to get you drugs," she said. "But we can't find any."

At 9:32 p.m. she called rescue headquarters in Dillingham: Send medical supplies ASAP.

Two patients were critical, two stable. Rule of thumb among Alaska rescue veterans: "Critical" means if they don't come out immediately, they'll probably die.

Tucker landed for a third harrowing time, bringing two EMTs from Dillingham. Three others had been dropped off by another helicopter and were lost. Tucker and Himschoot set off up the mountain to find them. One eventually made it to the crash site. Himschoot and Tucker found the two others, but exhausted, near hypothermic and now enveloped in darkness, they decided they wouldn't be able to find the crash site again and



EMTs John Dunson, Tammi Clark, Sonny Gardiner and Susan Dunson photographed near Dillingham, Alaska, in October with gear used to help the four crash survivors. The Dunsuns were able to reach the crash site; Clark and Gardiner helped with logistics from the town.

lifted off the mountain a final time at midnight.

The EMTs had first-aid kits, but no one had serious drugs to dull the pain. Bowman was bitterly disappointed. But EMTs aren't authorized to carry narcotics, and morphine was the drug she needed most. Then she discovered a ornate pillbox in her backpack: her late mother's migraine medicine.

"Oh, hallelujah!"

She spread those pills — Demerol and Valium — as far as they would go.

THE ONLY WAY out was going to be up.

The doctor and EMTs knew that four broken bodies couldn't make it back through those tangled woods. And the choppers that dropped them had no equipment to hoist people out.

The big rescue choppers had to come from near Anchorage, almost 400 miles away. An Alaska Air Guard HH-60 took off at 8:50 p.m. for the flight to Dillingham, 17 miles southeast of the downed plane. The Lake Clark Pass through the mountains west of Anchorage was weathered in, so the chopper flew north to Merrill Pass. Just as bad there. They were flying blind. Doubling

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BOOMER



back, with the help of night-vision goggles and guidance from a C-130 plane flying overhead, the pilot took another shot at Lake Clark Pass, barely skimming through.

Conditions were even worse in Dillingham: Everything was soaked in, including the crash site.

Rescue command called the Coast Guard to ask for a second chopper with a hoist, though it would take most of the night to arrive on the scene. With the weather opaque, was it possible to reach the crash before dawn?

"It is not an option," came the reluctant decision after midnight. "We are waiting for both weather to improve and first light."

It had been nearly eight hours since the crash.

"The cavalry is coming. They'll be here in the morning."

Trying to spin it with a hopeful preface, John Dunson, an EMT from Dillingham, broke the bad news to Morhard.

Dunson's wife, Susan, an EMT and nurse, told O'Keefe.

"What do you mean in the morning? Why not sooner?"

"Well, minimums have dropped," Susan replied. "It took a lot for us to get in here. We almost weren't able to land."

With temperatures in the 40s by now, it was time to hunker down for the night. The third EMT, Joshua Flint, came laden with blankets and prayers.

This isn't looking good, John Dunson thought. "It's going to be a long time. What can we do?"

A blue plastic tarp was arranged over the cockpit to protect Kevin from the soaking rain, leaving him in a cocoon from which he could hear everything and see nothing, save for the dead man sitting to his left.

Bowman helped Willy from his soaked clothes, wrapping him in blankets before they curled up outside under the protection of a wing.

Dunson and Flint gently moved Morhard, whose head had been pointing downhill since he slid off O'Keefe and into the rear cargo area.

"This is going to hurt," Dunson said as they inched Morhard around. Then they took up position beside him as he floated in and out through the long night.

Susan moved the body of Bill Phillips just enough to liberate O'Keefe's foot, then settled in across from him.

"I'm worried about losing consciousness," O'Keefe confided. "I don't think I'll make it if I do."

"Don't worry, I'm here," she said.

Reassured, his voice rose above a whisper to call to Kevin.



**THE
RESCUERS**

**JOHN
BOUKER**



**DANI
BOWMAN**



**TOM
TUCKER**

"Hang in there! Don't go to sleep, because you might go into complete shock."

Kevin fought to stay awake, losing all track of time, his thoughts drifting between reality and twilight.

"We're still going fishing. ... That's stupid, what am I thinking? ... I don't think that's going to happen today, maybe tomorrow ... Wait, this is a life-threatening situation, I shouldn't be thinking that."

Once he was jerked into focus by a shout. "Where are the danged Coasties?"

THE FIRST BIG rescue chopper took off from Dillingham just as the hint of morning wrestled through the near-blinding fog. The pilot crawled the mountain and closed the final distance with help of lights flashed from the people on the ground.

As he hovered in the cloud bank 80 feet overhead, a pair of Air National Guard paramedics roped down, struggling the last hundred yards through the brush, laden with gear.

Bowman grasped the hand of medic Kristofer Abel and held on for a long while. She was drained — exhausted after a night without the tools of her trade and eager for the morphine that would give her patients relief. The team leader, Sgt. Jonathan Davis, said a prayer and went to work with an electric saw to cut away the fuselage.

As they prepared to move the survivors, O'Keefe looked out and saw the basket that would lift them away. It looked as though it was suspended from a cloud.

Almost 18 hours after the plane collided with the mountain, rescuers strapped him into that basket. Three of the four survivors could be moved only on litters. Willy insisted on walking to the basket, leaning on the arms of rescuers. He was the last survivor to leave the mountain.

As the hoist lifted, O'Keefe passed out. "I knew I was safe." 

► **Willy Phillips** has returned to school in North Bethesda. **Jim Morhard**, who had multiple fractures and internal injuries, is recovering slowly with the help of physical therapy. **Kevin O'Keefe** began his sophomore year on time at Syracuse University and is almost completely recovered.

Sean O'Keefe returned to work in October and is continuing his recovery from neck and leg injuries.

Washington Post researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report. Post writer Lonnae O'Neal Parker reported from Alaska; she can be reached at oneall@washpost.com. Ashley Halsey III reported from Washington; he can be reached at halseya@washpost.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF BOUKER AND TUCKER BY JENNIFER BOOMER; DANI BOWMAN COURTESY DATELINE NBC

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BOOMER