

'Incredible' survival tale

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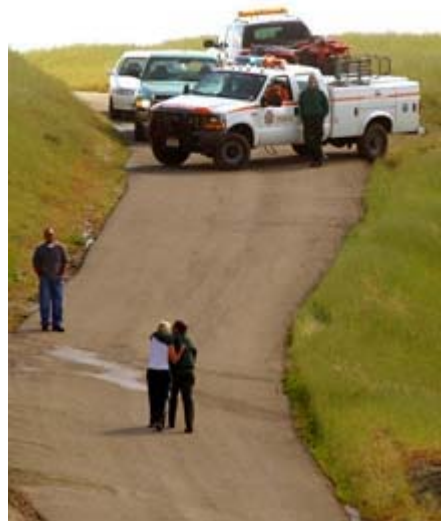
Pair pulled from wreckage more than 24 hours after plane crash

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

At right, the mother of one of the two men injured in the plane crash is comforted on Monday by Sheriff's Lt. Leland Bentley near a command post set up on Figueroa Mountain Road. Below left, a California Highway Patrol helicopter based in Paso Robles lifts off from the command post with two Sheriff's Department search-and-rescue personnel to head to the crash site.

Bruised and broken, 22-year-old Keegan Bailey and his critically injured friend, Clayton Fitzgerald, 18, were plucked Monday out of a remote rock- and brush-covered canyon, where they had huddled for more than 24 hours near the wreckage of their vintage two-seater aircraft.

Mr. Bailey had crashed his father's 1948 silver-colored Cessna 140 about 10 a.m. Sunday 10 miles northeast of Figueroa Mountain. The injured men were not spotted until midday Monday by two family friends who took off in another plane from the Santa Ynez airport when they heard the pair was missing.



It took sheriff's search-and-rescue crews more than two hours to reach the two, deep in a high-walled portion of Wellman Canyon, off the upper reaches of the Sisquoc River.

Although the plane remained intact, it had torn through several trees and smashed into a rock, sending the engine into the cockpit of the craft and into the two men.

Looking at the damage, Ventura County Search and Rescue paramedic Carl Patterson told the pair they were lucky to be alive.

As they waited for rescue in the shadow of 5,000-foot surrounding peaks, Mr. Patterson tried to comfort the two. "You survived the landing," he said. "Now we just have to get you out of here."

The two told him the engine of the plane died and it took all of Mr. Bailey's skill to bring the plane down without worse damage. Although he was an experienced pilot who had flown with his dad, Mr. Bailey had had his license for only two months, friends said.

They submitted no flight plan for their excursion Sunday, but reportedly had enough fuel for four hours and were headed to, or returning from, the Cuyama Valley.

LEN WOOD/NEWS-PRESS

At right, CHP paramedic and Flight Officer Steve Egan, left, confers with Santa Barbara County Search & Rescue incident Commander Nelson Trichle and Operations Officer Jennifer Beyer to help pinpoint the location of the crash site. Below, A Ventura County Sheriff's helicopter airlifts Keegan Bailey out of Wellman Canyon north of the Sisquoc River on Monday evening, just as the sun dips behind the ridgeline, casting the crash site into shadow.



Mr. Fitzgerald, described as the much more seriously injured of the two, was lifted out of the ravine by a hoist into a Ventura County Search and Rescue helicopter just after 4 p.m. He was rushed to the intensive care unit of the Marian Medical Center in Santa Maria. The details of his injuries weren't known.

Mr. Bailey, with a broken ankle and forearm and his face covered in cuts, was hoisted out by the same chopper nearly two hours later, just as sunlight inched its way behind the ridge lines and left the canyon in a deep shadow. He also was taken to Marian, where the families of both young men arrived to be with their injured loved ones.

The two survived the crash, but the elements also took their toll: Both were suffering from hypothermia along with broken bones.



The two weathered a rainstorm, high winds and temperatures near freezing in the rugged mountainous section of the Sierra Madre Mountains in the San Rafael Wilderness.

"It's amazing at this point, after more than 24 hours on the ground, that they have been found alive," said Sgt. Eric Raney, Sheriff's Department spokesman. "The fact that they were able to survive a small-plane crash in this wilderness is really incredible."

Both of the young men live in Solvang and news of the crash traveled fast. When they didn't show up, several local pilots volunteered to search for them.

Pilot Travis Foss, flying with John Peyton, spotted the crash site about 2 p.m. While the downed Cessna had an emergency locating beacon, it was a type that operated by line-of-sight. Deep in a ravine, the signal was lost in the ridges, but Mr. Foss was able to pick it up by flying directly over

the wreckage.

Mr. Bailey's father, a retired commercial pilot, had passed on much of his knowledge about flying to his son, and friends think it helped saved the pair.

"I think because Keegan was such a good pilot is why they survived," said Tom Hruska Sr. of Solvang, whose three sons are close friends with both victims. "I heard he brought it (the plane) down in one piece .Ê.Ê. For as young as he is, he's a good pilot."

Mr. Hruska said Keegan and Clayton both visited almost daily at his house, adding that Mr. Bailey lived with the Hruskas for about six months a couple of years ago. "They grew up with my boys, going to Solvang School and Santa Ynez Valley High School. They are real good kids, born and raised in this valley," Mr. Hruska said.

Mr. Bailey is a student at Santa Barbara City College and worked part time as a fueler at Santa Ynez Airport, he said. Mr. Bailey's parents are former Solvang residents who moved to Tennessee several years ago, he said.

"He would come by here almost daily looking for someone to go flying with him. I believe his intentions are to follow in his father's footsteps and become a commercial pilot."

Mr. Fitzgerald, who graduated last year from Santa Ynez High, is "an avid fisherman," Mr. Hruska said. "He and my youngest boy (17) go fishing all the time, wherever they can," including at Lake Cachuma and the Santa Ynez River.

"It's quite shocking," he said of the crash. "Thank God they're both alive."