

Swim or Die

Facing life or death, the choice is easy

By J. Scott Olmsted

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Prelude to Disaster

Randy Brooks is president of Barnes Bullets, and besides being a lifelong hunter he's also an experienced pilot. On Feb. 23, 2007, Randy flew his brother, Les, and Rulon Gardner, a two-time Olympic medalist in Greco-Roman wrestling, over southern Utah, where they viewed the canyons and buffalo in the Henry Mountains. Conditions were perfect: a crystal-clear day with winds less than 5 knots. It was the day after Randy's 58th birthday.

Over Lake Powell, the three men decided to fly closer to the water, under the canyon walls, which is a fabulous sightseeing experience. They glided approximately 50 feet off the surface of the lake, and the water exhibited a slight ripple, which provided good depth perception. They broke out into Good Hope Bay and began talking about how beautiful the flight was when suddenly the water turned glassy smooth. Randy failed to pull up to a safer altitude and suddenly lost depth perception. In an instant they hit the water and the airplane came to a violent stop.

The Struggle for Life

"I gave instruction on how to get out of the airplane," Randy said. "Rulon and Les exited the right side into the deep, freezing water. I stood on the left wing deciding which way to swim for shore. It looked like three-quarters of a mile in either direction. I don't think we could have hit the bay any more dead-center.

"I pointed southeast and said, 'We're going in that direction.' The plane was sinking and the water was up to my knees as I struggled to get my wet cowboy boots off, but to no avail. I heard Rulon cry out: 'Help me! I can't swim!' My heart sank and I thought, *You have just killed that man.*

"I jumped into the water and swam around the tail and thought, What are you going to do? Rulon was clinging to a portion of the fuselage sticking out of the water. As he reached out for me and cried, 'Help me,' I thought to myself, *You get next to this guy and you'll both drown.* Rulon had somehow put on his coat and was looking frantic. I had to do something fast. I started screaming and cursing at him to get his coat off and swim to that *\$%# shore. He started to say, 'Help me, I can't swim,' but before he finished I cursed at him again like an old muleskinner. I reminded him that he beat the crap out of the toughest man in the world and something like this wasn't going to whip him. I instructed him to doggie paddle, but he just sank. We tried a sidestroke, and again he couldn't keep his head above water. Lastly, I had him roll over on his back and do a form of backstroke without bringing his arms out of the water. This at least kept his mouth and nose out of the water. Thank goodness the water was calm. What irony—the thing that caused the crash was now actually working in our favor. We headed for shore.

“Les, being a good swimmer, was way ahead of us. I stayed back with Rulon, but approximately halfway to shore I was failing fast and knew I had to swim ahead. Feeling I could do no more for him, I realized he probably wouldn’t make it. I turned back and looked at him every once in a while. He pushed on, but I honestly don’t know how, as he weighs more than 300 pounds.

“Less than 100 yards from shore I became exhausted. I sunk into the water and a calm feeling came over me—everything became crystal-clear. I started thinking about the decision I had to make—to live or die. I thought about my family, friends and business, and made the decision to live. I recalled a previous experience: I was hunting lion in Africa and a lioness charged me with all she had. She was going to kill me. Everything moved in slow motion. As she was bearing down on me I could almost see the vapor coming out of her nostrils. I waited for the perfect shot (as there would be no time for two) and squeezed the trigger, taking her just off center of her left nostril, killing her immediately at a distance of less than 10 yards. I imagined the sounds and tenacity of that lioness, and I clawed my way to the surface of the water. When my head cleared the surface, I roared loudly, like a lion. I put one hand in front of the other, cupping the water; my legs were hanging straight down with boots full of water, I struggled with each stroke. Les was on shore cheering me on, waving his hands, yelling, ‘Way to go! You made it!’

“When I reached shore I immediately asked about Rulon.

“‘Don’t worry,’ said Les. ‘He’s out there resting on a buoy. He’ll be right here.’ I asked Les to point him out, knowing that he was lying. At that point I’d resolved that Rulon didn’t make it, but I cast out that thought, knowing I couldn’t think of any negatives at this point. Les wrestled me to the ground and began rubbing his body all over mine as we tried to get as much heat exchange as possible.

“Maybe 20 minutes later, Les exclaimed, ‘There’s Rulon!’ and to my amazement, this giant of a man appeared over a small rise on the shore. (Later Les told us that he thought it was Rulon’s ghost.)

“Rulon began looking for shelter to overnight, and he found a small depression about 6 inches deep with a few 8- to 10-inch-tall rocks scattered around. Rulon slept on his side while Les and I huddled against him, laying one atop the other, face-to-face. It was about 4 p.m. “We let Rulon sleep because he made enough noise for us to know he was alive. Les and I kept each other awake and switched positions every one to two minutes, as the weight of the other person was excruciating. Rulon saved our lives with his extreme body heat. He was like a furnace, but when he switched sides it felt like momentarily walking into a freezer. Most of the night I was beyond shivering (more like convulsing), as I had extreme hypothermia. At about 2 a.m., I was only shivering, and I knew that I’d made it, thanks to Les and Rulon. At about 6 a.m., Les started convulsing. Rulon and I did all we could to sustain him. It wasn’t until 7:30 that Les stabilized and began only shivering heavily.

“The sun rose and we felt every degree of its heat. We knew we had made it. At 8 a.m., we heard a boat motor. I was the only one wearing shoes, so I ran a half-mile down the beach (I don’t know where I got the strength.) and flagged down two bass fishermen from Grand Junction, Colo., who rescued us. They later explained it was never their plan to fish in that area because it’s not a great spot, but that’s another story. They gathered us up, put their coats and warm clothing on us, and headed downriver, where we met up with park rangers.”

Lessons Learned

Oh, for a survival kit when you need one. Of course even if they had one, it’s entirely possible the men would not have salvaged it in time: planes are made to fly, not float. In the water, Brooks took charge, pointing decidedly toward which shore everyone would try to reach. He was smart to try to remove his boots—filled with water, they became anchors. Gardner should not have weighed himself down by donning his coat. Brooks was wise to keep his distance when Gardner panicked. A drowning victim invariably sees a swimmer as a buoy; stay at arm’s length and speak deliberately to the victim, urging him to listen to your instructions. That was Brooks’ only hope, for there was no way he could tow the 300-pound wrestler ashore like Hasselhoff in “Baywatch.” Weather data indicate the water temperature was 44 degrees that day; the men should have been unconscious within 30 minutes of immersion. Yet Les Brooks was in the water 45 minutes; Randy was in an hour and 15 minutes; Gardner was in there for an hour and 30. On shore, they clearly suffered moderate to severe hypothermia; violent, often convulsive shivering, semi-consciousness and muscle rigidity suggest their body core temperatures hovered between 82 and 90 degree—if it drops to 78 pulmonary edema, cardiac and respiratory failure and death can follow. Gardner had the presence of mind to immediately look for shelter from the winter wind (air temperatures that night dipped as low as 24), and the men huddled together to exchange body heat—the only thing they could do without dry clothing and no means of starting a fire.

Said Randy Brooks: “To me, the greatest part of the story is that we each played a part in the survival effort. Every person was key. Rulon is a world-class athlete and knows how to win. Les practices Brazilian jiu jitsu and is in excellent physical and mental condition. I attribute my survival to the skills I have developed over the years in the field while hunting and practicing positive thinking. Until faced with a life-or-death situation, you really don’t know what you’re made of, but we’re a lot tougher than what we believe or what some chart tells us.”

Everyone in the Brooks family learned one final, valuable lesson: Always tell someone where you’re going. “That night was hell for my mom, sister and I,” said Jessica Brooks, Randy’s daughter, “as it was completely out of character for him to leave and not tell any of us where he was going. My sister and I just happened to go to the hangar to pick up something—otherwise, we wouldn’t have known early on that he even went flying.”

—J. Scott Olmsted, Editor in Chief

Randy Brooks plane was recovered from Lake Powell two months after the crash.





Rulon Gardner must carry a rabbit's foot. In the third grade, he impaled himself with an arrow in a show-and-tell accident. In 2002, just two years after winning gold at the Sydney Olympics, he was stranded in the wilderness of Wyoming during a snowmobile outing; he suffered hypothermia and frostbite, but lost only a toe. In 2004 he dislocated his wrist in a pick-up basketball game, but still took the bronze at the Athens Olympics. The same year, he was riding his motorcycle and slammed into a car, careened over the handlebars and, miraculously, broke nothing.



Hypothermia occurs when our body core temperature decreases to a level that impairs normal muscular and cerebral functions. Any temperature less than 98.6 degrees can induce it. Conduction plays a major role, particularly where wet clothing is involved, because water conducts heat away from the body 25 times faster than air, because it's denser than air.