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# NOSE

# DIVE

BY ANDREA COOPER

WALT AND DONYELLE WILKINS lugged suitcases and snorkeling gear to the far end of the Fort Lauderdale airport, searching for the Air Sunshine counter. It was a humid July 13, 2003, and they were hot, tired and a little cranky the day after their wedding.

The service had gone beautifully. Some 300 guests had celebrated with them at First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. But afterward, as they got into an open horse-drawn carriage for a ride down the city's famed



Battery, it began to rain. Donyelle began to fret—until the largest rainbow she had ever seen arched over the harbor. A good omen, they both believed.

They finally found the airline counter, and the agent asked them their weight—they would soon find out why. Out on the tarmac was a rickety-looking twin-engine Cessna 402C. *This isn't a plane*, Donyelle thought. *It's a flying minivan*. "I'm not getting on," she told Walt.

He rubbed her back. "C'mon," he said. "We've got to get to Abaco. It'll be okay." They'd both been looking forward to staying at a friend's condo on the small Bahamian island. So, reluctantly, Donyelle climbed the steps and ducked into the cramped cabin.

The pilot crawled in through a large window on the left side and strapped himself into a chair tilted back so far Donyelle had to pivot her knees into the aisle. As he taxied for takeoff, she buried her head in her hands.

Seated across from her, Walt saw how anxious she was. So did the passenger in the co-pilot's seat, Con-

stantinos Francisco, who reassured Donyelle that everything was just fine. His wife, Bethany, holding their one-year-old daughter, Zoie, sat behind Walt. Behind them Diane Parker-Diaz, 33, shepherded three little kids, Andre, eight, Elisia, five, and their cousin Diante, four. They were headed to her brother's wedding at her childhood home on Abaco. The kids wiggled excitedly in their seat belts, anticipating seeing their grandma.

The plane soared up over the ocean and climbed to a cruising altitude of 3,500 feet. The passengers settled in as the plane droned on through a tranquil Caribbean sky. Then, 50 minutes into the flight, ten minutes from Abaco, Walt noticed smoke snaking out of the right engine. Oil began flowing into the wing. Seconds later, there was a blast. It tore a jagged hole in the engine cowling. Parts dangled from wires, and debris fell into the sea.

Amazingly, no one screamed. "What's happened?" Donyelle asked, struggling to stay calm. The pilot did not answer. The plane listed left as he fought to regain control. The right engine was silent. The left roared. Donyelle strained to hear the pilot.

"I've done that. I've done that," he said into his radio. "We're losing pressure. I'm trying to hold on. I don't know how long I can hold it."

Donyelle burst into tears. Across the aisle, Bethany Francisco hummed quietly, trying to soothe baby Zoie. Diane Parker-Diaz, overseeing the three children, was also calm. "I've flown this flight a million times," she



told Donyelle. "I can see Abaco. Everything's going to be fine."

Donyelle caught Bethany's eye, and in a moment of empathy, the two women began reciting the Lord's Prayer. Walt reached over for his bride's hand.

Seconds later the plane hit the ocean. The sound was like a cannon shell blasting armor plate. The Cessna tore through waves, finally rocking to a standstill in the rolling seas.

The pilot opened his window, and turned to the passengers, his face badly bruised. Apparently in shock, he sat without speaking.

Shaken, but keeping his cool, Walt unfastened Donyelle's seat belt and struggled to pull life jackets from beneath their seats, but the jackets were stuck. The plane had begun to sink, and Donyelle wasn't moving. Walt picked her up, carried her to the pilot's window and tossed her out. Constan-

**Though Donyelle and Walt survived a nightmare, they still dream about the crash—and they haven't flown since.**

tininos handed him a life jacket and he threw it to Donyelle. Then he jumped into the sea after her.

There was a mad scramble inside the plane. Bethany Francisco managed to escape through the main door with Zoie in her arms. Once in the water, she fought to keep the baby from slipping from her grasp. Spotting Donyelle bobbing near the plane's nose, Bethany kicked through the swells and handed her baby to the other woman for safekeeping. Then she grasped Donyelle's life jacket herself.

Broken pieces of the plane floated everywhere. Walt couldn't tell if everyone had made it out. Nearby, the pilot thrashed and screamed, "I'm going to drown." But Constantinos calmed him, telling him to float on his back.



ILLUSTRATED BY 5W INFOGRAPHIC

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KELLY LADUKE



were floating listlessly now, not kicking or paddling, and therefore, not generating heat. Walt checked their condition—and had a sudden realization. There were three children on the plane. Where was the third? In the chaos and confusion, everyone had lost track of her.

**W**HEN Mike Eagle's jet arrived at the crash site, he saw two groups in the water. One had a baby. They needed flotation, now. His dropmaster let go a raft that could hold eight—it inflated as it fell.

The raft hit the water about 40 yards short of the Francisco family, and the line landed right beside them. But they didn't realize it.

Donyelle saw the raft plummet out of the sky, hundreds of yards up-current. She knew they were too weak to reach it. Andre's head was lolling backward. Walt jostled the boy. "Andre! No time for a nap now." But the little boy could barely open his eyes.

Then the jet dropped a second raft, closer to them. "I'm going for it," Walt said. "No!" Donyelle cried, afraid to let him out of her sight. She'd go with him, she decided. Don't worry, they told the kids. "We're coming back. We're going to put you in that raft."

Walt dog-paddled to it. And found that the raft was only half-inflated. Exhausted, his mind cloudy, he couldn't figure out what to do. He tugged the raft over to the kids, but couldn't get them into it. They were so cold, they

barely moved. Walt's heart sank. *After all this.*

MIKE EAGLE DIRECTED the chopper to the crash site. The Dolphin's fuel was critically low. The crew had to act now. They swooped from 200 to about 20 feet above the sea. Rescue swimmer Ryan White jumped from the aircraft in wet suit, fins, snorkel and mask. With a few powerful strokes, he neared the Franciscos and the pilot. Following procedures, at first he kept his distance. Victims often hysterically cling to a rescue swimmer and bring them both down. He dived under the water to make sure they had arms and legs. He prioritized. The Francisco baby was in deep shock. He had to get her and her mother out first.

His crew mates lowered a rescue basket, and White eased mother and child into it. Then the helicopter hoisted the pair to safety. The pilot and Constantinos Francisco were next.

At least ten minutes had elapsed since the Dolphin began its rescue. White radioed his colleagues. "I know you're low on fuel," he said. "After you get the husband, go. Clearwater can pick me up."

The chopper from Clearwater and a Bahamian fishing boat came on the scene as Walt was struggling with the raft. He frantically motioned toward the children. Get them first!

Rescue swimmer Kurt Peterson jumped in, gathered up Andre and Elisia and placed them in the rescue basket. The little boy told him, "My mommy is dead." Peterson didn't an-

swer. He tried to stay focused, retrieving Donyelle next, then Walt.

The fishing boat picked up the bodies of Diane Parker-Diaz and Diante, the third child. Peterson swam to the boat, and found Diane was clearly beyond help. But knowing the recuperative powers of children, he took the little girl into the copter where he and Ryan White tried to resuscitate her as they flew to the hospital.

*Oh, God,* Walt thought. *She was there all the time and we didn't see her, we couldn't help her.* Overcome with emotion, he shook with sobs. Donyelle, holding Andre and Elisia in her embrace, reached out to Walt too.

The Air Sunshine survivors were rushed to Rand Memorial Hospital in Freeport, Bahamas. Diane Parker-Diaz had died in the ocean, struggling to save the children. Her four-year-old niece, Diante Parker, was pronounced

dead at the hospital. The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the crash of Flight 502, looking at pilot training, maintenance records and other issues at the airline.

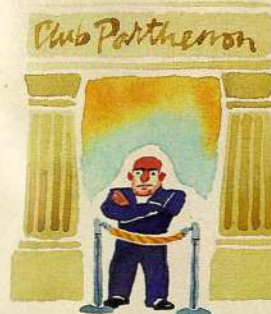
Walt and Donyelle Wilkins didn't notice the deep black and yellow bruises they had sustained from the crash until later that night—neither was seriously hurt. They returned to Florida on a cruise ship the following day and eventually spent a quiet honeymoon in Georgia.

Walt still dreams about the crash, imagining how he might have prevented the deaths of the mother and child. Neither he nor Donyelle has been able to fly since. For Donyelle, amid the horror, there was one unexpected insight. Sometimes people wonder if their spouses would be willing to lay down their lives for them. Donyelle Wilkins knows the answer.

## THEY'RE STARS, JUST NOT THE BRIGHTEST ONES

Britney Spears and her entourage walked out halfway through a screening of Robert Downey Jr.'s new film, *The Singing Detective*. Spears said she found the plot of the film—and most films at the Sundance Film Festival—confusing. "The movies here are weird," she complained. "You actually have to think about them."

Submitted by JANICE DEHAVEN WATKINS



"I think that gay marriage should be between a man and a woman."

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER on "Hannity and Colmes" (FOX News)

When asked if he visited the Parthenon while in Greece, Shaquille O'Neal answered, "I can't really remember the names of the clubs we went to."

Duh! by BOB FENSTER (Andrews McMeel)