

ORM Corner



SURVIVAL *at Sea*

*A 15-Minute Flight Becomes an Incredible
Survival Story.*

CRA Corner

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Are You Prepared for a Seven-Hour Swim in 59-Degree Water?

By PR2 Ronald Beermünder

The Coast Guard puts the life expectancy for swimming in 59-degree-Fahrenheit water at less than two hours. It's called hypothermia: Abnormally low body temperature, with slowing of physiologic activity.

Recently, I was asked to create a PowerPoint presentation for a guest speaker to use in sharing her water-survival story. I had heard bits and pieces of her story, which happened over 20 years ago, but I did not know enough about the incident to do a presentation. All I knew was "some 22-year-old woman had crashed her plane into the water and lived to tell about it." Now she was coming to NAS Pensacola to share her inspirational story with our new flight students.

I needed to do some journalistic investigation, or my PowerPoint efforts would suffer miserably. I called the guest speaker, whom I never had met, and asked her some questions. After several telephone conversations and seemingly endless e-mails, I knew more about the story. As I heard her story unfold, I couldn't help but think what I would have done in the same situation. Listening to her gentle voice telling horrific details of the crash, in her matter-of-fact tone, left me feeling inadequate and cowardly. Here is the story of Cathy Maready's survival at sea.

It was November 1981, a pitch-black, moon-

less night off the coast of South Carolina with an air temperature barely 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Cathy had spent the last three hours on Lady Island completing her final scuba class for certification. Instead of driving the 45 minutes home, she opted for a 15-minute Cessna flight. To save time, Maready decided neither to file a flight plan nor to use her radio. She took off from the small, uncontrolled airport on Lady Island and headed home.

She described the shine of the stars and the silence of the night to be one of the most beautiful experiences she could recall. Three miles from shore, the night grew more silent. The engine of her Cessna 152 had stopped hard and fast; the blade refused to turn. With more than 942 flight hours under her belt, a restart was routine to Maready. However, several attempts to turn over the engine failed; it had seized. She quickly prioritized procedures: aviate, navigate and communicate. She began her stalled descent and flawlessly landed the plane on the Atlantic Ocean. The communication would have to wait until sunrise.

"It was like landing on a pee-wee football field. It was short, and there were no lights. In order for me to land and take off, a local sheriff, who was in my scuba class, lit up the air strip with the spotlights from his patrol car.

“My first and immediate concern was landing the plane without cartwheeling into oblivion. I lucked out with a smooth stall above the water, and I was able to keep the plane level and the nose slightly up, as I plowed into the water.”

She landed so smoothly the plane’s emergency-locator transmitter (ELT) was not activated. Manual activation of the ELT would have required a journey to the rear storage compartment of the plane. With the cabin slowly filling with water and aviation fuel, that just wasn’t going to happen. Maready tried several times to retrieve her dive gear, but the bag was lodged in the tight storage space behind her seat. Less than 30 seconds later, Maready was treading water as she watched the red beacon light of her tail rudder spiral deeper into the dark abyss.

Without a flight plan, without radio contact, and without a flotation device, Maready started swimming west, using Orion’s Belt to guide her toward shore. The weight of her wet clothes felt as if they were pulling her under. Deciding to swim to shore rather than drown, Maready removed her shoes, her clothes, and even her wristwatch, which she could feel creating drag against the 59-degree-Atlantic current. It was 2200, and the tide was not in her favor. Her two-mile swim to land now had tripled against the outgoing tide. In the darkness, she barely saw her hands in front of her face. Thoughts of South Carolina’s coast being second in the number of shark attacks only to Florida did not comfort her, and hypothermia was beginning to attack her body.

“Gradually, my body began to shiver. As the shivers worsened, I noticed my hands were becoming gnarled and stiff. I made myself keep moving, forced myself to keep up the swimming movements, but, even as I continued, I could feel my toes crossing, my feet arching and cramping into grotesque, fixed positions. It was my body, and what was happening to it terrified me.”



Cathy Maready shared her survival story with the Pensacola audience.

Cathy Maready couldn’t stop the thoughts of death from entering her mind, but she refused to give up the will-to-live.

“I thought it might be nice if I spent a little bit of the time I had left to say goodbye to my family and loved ones. I believe most people in survival situations would tend to cherish these times. For me, it was time well spent. As I was saying my good-byes, the water around me began to warm. My whole world began to seem warmer. It was invigorating just to think about my loved ones. I gained new energy, and my arms began to move again, very slowly, but still moving.”

As Maready kept swimming, hallucinations of search boats, rescue helicopters, and sea monsters started to replace the darkness and silence of the night. She was exhausted but continued swimming, with the hallucinations beckoning her to stop. She wanted to stop and yell for help, but the mere thought of stopping made Maready feel as if she would sink like a stone.

She decided the next time she would stop swimming was when someone pulled her out of the water or when her feet touched the sand.

With what she describes as angels pulling her arms forward through the water and a renewed faith in her heart, Maready eventually reached shore, a grueling seven and a half hours after the crash.

“Finally, even as I mentally was preparing myself for death, I felt it. My knees were hitting a sand bar. I knew what it was, but I was too numb to stand. Almost ready to cry, knowing how close the shore was, I was forced to swim around the sand bar, out into deeper water, to reach dry land. Agonizingly, I kept going. My faith was pushing me; it was pulling me, carrying me to shore. It was daybreak before I made the beach. I still can hear the oyster shells cracking under my weight. I still can see the blood flowing from my cuts, but, at the time, I was too numb to feel a thing.”

Maready was found staggering along the beach, suffering from shock and severe hypothermia. She spent the next three days in intensive care. When she recovered, specialists were called to review, in amazement, her medical charts. Chemicals in her body had built up so high from exertion they literally were off the scale. Three days later, she was released from the hospital.

Cathy Maready is now a successful interior designer in North Carolina. This past August, she shared her survival experience with flight students, flight surgeons, and survival-training instructors at the Naval Survival Training Institute (NSTI) and Naval Aerospace Medical Institute (NAMI) in Pensacola, Fla. Her survival story captivated the audience. She described the sequence of events before and after the crash, and she showed photos of her plane wreckage as recovered by a fishing trawler two years to the day after the crash.

Every aviator who hears her survival story will remember it as one of strong character, deep faith, and an incredible will to live. The lessons

learned never will be forgotten. NSTI has offered Cathy an open invitation to come back to Pensacola and share her story again. NSTI has displayed a framed storyboard in its main-lobby exhibition area dedicated to her story and to her honor, courage, and commitment.

Cathy Maready has graced the Navy with her story. Perhaps the Navy could lure her back to speak again by fulfilling her lifelong dream: an FA-18 flight with the Blue Angels.

NSTI postscript: Cathy Maready’s story, while certainly amazing, also has some valuable survival lessons learned for all aircrew. Here are a few of those lessons:

- Be prepared. Don’t rely totally on your will to live; rely on your training.
- Attitude. Remember, it can happen to you, and when all else fails, your will to live just might be your best asset.
- Knowledge. Know your survival procedures cold. You should be prepared to react, and you want your reactions to be good ones—based on proven survival procedures you’ve practiced.
- Wear proper clothing and equipment. Bring an exposure suit and a life preserver when the situation dictates.
- Have proper survival equipment. Include a life raft, an emergency-position-indicator radio (EPIR), and signaling equipment.
- File a flight plan. If nobody knows where you’re going, you won’t be missed. It’s going to be very difficult to find you, when and if they finally realize you’re gone. 🦅

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