

Nfld. & Labrador

Coming back to Labrador is like 'a pilgrimage' for pilot who crashed there last month



Sam Rutherford survived a crash outside Makkovik during a blizzard; fellow co-pilot Alan Simpson died

[Stephanie Tobin, Jacob Barker](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 19, 2019 8:00 AM NT | Last Updated: June 19



Sam Rutherford has been a pilot for years, and previously flew in the Belgian army. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

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Sam Rutherford walks around Happy Valley-Goose Bay on an overcast day in early June,

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He settles on cans of Canadian, Labatt, and some Belgian Moon — "not Belgian, but it'll work" — to bring on a trip to Makkovik.

"Nine guys rescued me. We'll get one more slab," he says, grabbing another pack of Canadian.

This visit is a stark contrast to the last time Rutherford was in Labrador.

“We were really enjoying the trip — until it all went wrong.”

- Sam Rutherford

On May 1, Rutherford was co-piloting a small plane that crashed in an isolated area near Makkovik in blizzard-like conditions.

Rutherford, a seasoned pilot, knows he was lucky to survive. Sadly, his fellow aviation enthusiast Alan Simpson, the new owner of the plane they were ferrying to the U.K., died in the crash.

A month ago, Rutherford, 47, and Simpson, 73, landed in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, where they had stopped to get the newly purchased plane from the U.S., before heading across the Atlantic to the U.K.



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Sam Rutherford grabs a few cans of beer to bring to Makkovik, as part of a gift for the search and rescue team that saved him. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

"The weather wasn't as nice as this — it wasn't awful, but it wasn't as nice as this — and we were all ready to go with an early morning start, we had a long way to go, hoping to get to Iceland in one hit, in one day," Rutherford says.

"We set off looking forward to a great day of flying."

Things didn't go according to plan.

Strong head winds from above prompted them to fly at a low altitude, Rutherford said, and a map that would have alerted them to the rising terrain ahead of them had failed to download to their software.

"I was programming the GPS at the time, so I don't know why it happened, I just know what happened," he says.

"I just remember, at one stage we were flying, and the next moment we weren't."



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State of shock

The landscape below the plane was full of trees, Rutherford says, and then a barren, icy, snow-covered space that in the "strange visibility," looked like a body of frozen water.

"It looked like a big, white, featureless thing, which looked like a lake which was flat — as opposed to the hill that it actually was."

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The plane was travelling at about 300 km/h when it hit the snow-covered earth.

"We hit hard, we hit fast," Rutherford says.

"Everything hurt. There was blood everywhere."



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Rutherford took this picture of himself as he waited several hours for search and rescue to arrive.
(Submitted by Sam Rutherford)

"It's cold, you can probably see," Rutherford said in a video he took on his cellphone in the cockpit of the plane.

As a former military pilot, Rutherford says he went into "automatic mode" and checked on his fellow pilot.

"Alan was unconscious immediately, so all I could do was try and keep him warm," he says.

"For me, I did very definitely sink into just professional mode. I remember analyzing in the beginning, that I knew that, while I couldn't analyze the symptoms, that I must be in shock."

When he looked outside the cockpit window, there was a blizzard raging. After checking on his co-pilot, his next step was to activate his emergency locator.

“They did a herculean job.”

- Sam Rutherford

"What had happened was, we had gone into the side of a hill at about 45 degrees. Now that's one of the reasons, probably, why I'm still here — and also there was two or three feet of snow," Rutherford says.

"There were no features, there were no trees, so that double effect cushioned our impact."

The satellite tracker Rutherford had enabled him to get a message out to his wife, who immediately contacted emergency response teams in Halifax to her husband's situation.

Rutherford says the plane was equipped with automatic sensors, and he had a secondary

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This is the satellite tracker Rutherford used to keep in contact with his wife, who would give him updates on the search and rescue efforts. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

His wife was able to update him on the exact goings on and status of the search teams.

"From a morale point of view that was a total game-changer."

The storm outside meant fly-over crews weren't able to deploy anyone to airlift them out; they made it to the scene, but Rutherford says he told them it was way too dangerous for anyone to drop a line and try to get to the ground.

He didn't want anyone risking their lives trying to save them.

'Very, very worried'

But all that waiting wasn't without tense moments; given the crash landing happened on a hill, Rutherford said there were some particularly scary moments.

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Makkovik's ground search and rescue team work to get the pilots out of the plane's wreckage. (Submitted by Sam Rutherford)

"But there was also a slight bit of me that was a little bit sort of, Monty Python. At that time, we had both survived a crash, only to fall backwards off a cliff — that's not playing by the rules. So there was a dark sort of humour in there as well somewhere," Rutherford adds with a laugh.

About seven hours into the wait for rescue, Rutherford got word the storm likely meant they wouldn't make it out to his location that night.

"I knew that there was no way Alan was gonna last through the night, and I wasn't entirely sure that I was either. In any case, I knew it was going to be miserable," he says.

"When I got that message I was disappointed, worried. My morale took a dip."



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At the clinic in Makkovik following the rescue. (From left to right) Andy Edmunds, Robert Gear, Perry Voisey, Henry Broomfield, Sam Rutherford, Errol Andersen, Marvin Clarke, Roy Martin, and Perry Dyson (Submitted by Sam Rutherford)

But a short time later, the weather lifted enough so the team from Makkovik was able to make its way on snowmobile to their location.

The first he heard of them was the sound of their panting.

"The last hundred metres was up a really steep, very, very deep snow hillside, so they were exhausted when they got up to the aircraft. But they did a herculean job."

'Wasn't getting out of there by myself'

Rutherford says it was so snowy out, the search team at times said they couldn't see the snowmobiler directly ahead of them; they credited his GPS trackers with leading them right to his location.

An unconscious Simpson was loaded onto a stretcher, but since Rutherford was awake he said he'd just climb on the back of one of the machines.

Rutherford didn't realize it at the time, but he had six broken ribs and a shattered and compressed sternum — not to mention the lacerations on his face and chest.

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Rutherford visited Makkovik last week to thank the team that got him out of the wreck alive. (Submitted by Sam Rutherford)

"Those were three painful hours. But it was much quicker that way," he says. "They did a really good job."

Rutherford knows he owes the team who rescued him an awful lot.

"I could have hung on longer, but I wasn't getting out of there by myself."

It's been a month and a half since the crash, and Rutherford is still not in top form.



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Alan Simpson, 73, died after the plane crashed. (Submitted by Simpson family)

The cuts to his face and chest are still healing, and he does his best not to sneeze, lest he startle his tender ribs.

But he's back in the cockpit, piloting a similar plane to the one that crashed, to visit the search crews and offer his thanks, as well as pass along gratitude from Simpson's family.

"The idea is to come by and say thank you. I've got some Belgian chocolates from my wife and I've bought some beers," he says.

"Just to say thank you from myself — and also from Alan's family, because they really did an amazing job. Conditions were hell."

Since the crash, Rutherford has been in touch with Simpson's family — whose children are about his own age.

He and Simpson had been corresponding for more than a year over email, but only met in person the day before the crash happened.

"A really, really nice guy. Actually a lovely guy. Both a pleasure to fly with, but also on the

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'An important part of the process'

Rutherford says they were kindred spirits with, it turns out, a lot in common.

"They say as well that he lived life to the fullest, was always good to crack a joke or whatever else, and certainly for me he was a lot of fun. We were really enjoying the trip — until it all went wrong."

“I'm looking forward to catching up with the guys.”

- Sam Rutherford

While the trip is no doubt going to be emotional at times, as he flies over the scene where he and Simpson crashed, Rutherford says it's still the right thing to do.

"Maybe it's a pilgrimage, or a salute. I'm not sure," he says.

And certainly, he was looking forward to spending time with the guys who saved him — and this time, sitting somewhere warm, without injuries.

"I'm looking forward to catching up with the guys, sitting down and watching the sun set, and having a beer," Rutherford says.

"That's an important part of the process for me, at least."



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Rutherford says he loves flying and, even after a harrowing crash, can't imagine a life with no flight. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

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