

**WHEN
CATASTROPHE
STRIKES ON A
PRIVATE PLANE,
A PASSENGER
PLACES A
DESPERATE CALL
TO AIR TRAFFIC
CONTROL:
“I NEED HELP
UP HERE”**

BY KENNETH MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KELLY LADUKE

f ever there was a pilot who made his passengers feel they were in good hands, it was Joe Cabuk. The 67-year-old Air Force colonel had flown F-100s over Vietnam, commanded a fighter wing in England, and served as assistant director of operations for NATO in Italy. After retiring from the military in 1989, he'd returned to his native northeastern Louisiana, where he spent 20 years flying charter planes out of Monroe Regional Airport.

Silver-haired and ramrod-straight, he was the father of two grown sons, a deacon of his Baptist church—and a man who took no chances with his aircraft.

Around 1:30 p.m. last Easter Sunday, Cabuk was at the controls of a six-seat Beechcraft King Air 200, calling out his climb checklist after taking off over Naples, Florida: "Yaw damper on. Climb power set. Propellers 1,900 rpm." Keeping him company in the copilot's seat was the plane's owner, a lanky construction entrepreneur named Doug White. White's wife, Terri, and their two teenage daughters snuggled under blankets in the passenger area, hoping to read and nap during the three-hour flight home.

White, 56, took comfort in Cabuk's careful recitation. It had been a wrenching week. The previous Saturday, the businessman's 53-year-old brother, a resident of Naples, had died of a heart attack. White and his family, who lived in the tiny farming town of Archibald, Louisiana, had flown to Florida for the funeral. Now Cabuk was flying the four of them back west.

"Gonna get a little bumpy as we climb through this cloud layer," Cabuk warned. He began a routine call to air traffic controllers in Miami using the plane's FAA identification number, N559DW: "Miami Center, King Air Five-Five-Niner-Delta-Whiskey ..." But suddenly his voice trailed off, and his chin fell to his chest.

White tapped him on the shoulder and called his name. Raising his head, Cabuk gave a long moan. Then his eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he was still.

White turned around and shouted to his wife, "Come up here, Terri. We've got a problem." When she saw Cabuk slumped in his seat, she grabbed his arm and tried shaking him awake. "Leave him alone," White said after several seconds, grasping the terrible truth. "He's dead."

In the cabin, 18-year-old Maggie, a freshman at Louisiana State University, and her sister, Bailey, 16, a high school sophomore, began to tremble. The plane was a mile above the earth,

ascending at a rate of 2,000 feet per minute. And no one on board knew how to get it safely to the ground.

Doug White was a licensed pilot, but just barely. In 1990, he'd logged enough hours to pass his test in a Cessna 172, a tiny single-engine plane designed for beginners. He'd soloed only once, then abandoned the hobby. White was that kind of guy: restless and driven, prone to taking up a challenge and moving on after he'd mastered it. Eigh-

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teen years later, he bought this used King Air as an investment, leasing it to the Monroe airport for charter flights. Owning the plane got him interested in flying again, and he logged a few more hours in little Cessnas. But they were among the most basic aircraft, with a leisurely cruising speed of 100 knots (about 115 mph).

The King Air, by comparison, was dauntingly complex: a twin-engine turboprop, three times faster and five times heavier than anything White had flown, its instrument panel crowded with dozens of unfamiliar gauges and switches. The only control he was sure he could operate was the radio; he'd asked the pilot how it worked the last time he was aboard.

The plane was currently flying on autopilot, a device White had never used. It was set to 10,000 feet, but because Cabuk hadn't had a chance to push all the necessary buttons, the aircraft kept climbing after reaching that altitude. White knew enough to worry that if the plane rose much beyond 35,000 feet, it would stall in the thin air and go into a spin.

A more urgent fear: that Cabuk might slump onto the controls. "Get him out of here!" White barked at Terri. She hollered for Maggie, but there wasn't room in the cramped cockpit for both of them to get a handhold. Terri struggled to lift Cabuk's body herself, then gave up and tightened his flight harness to keep him in place.

"Y'all go back there and pray hard," White told her.

Terri kissed him on the cheek, telling him, "You can do this." Then she returned to the cabin and wrapped her arms around the girls. After comforting Maggie—who, overcome with terror and nausea, threw up in an airsickness bag—Terri did as her husband had requested. She'd survived a bout with cancer four years earlier. If it's my time to die, Lord, she thought, it's

my time. But my mother-in-law already buried one son this week. Please don't give her anyone else to mourn.

White got on the radio. "Miami," he said, "I've got to declare an emergency. My pilot's unconscious. I need help up here."

Nate Henkels, 30, sitting in front of a radarscope trained on a swath of Florida airspace, took the call at the Miami Air Route Traffic Control Center. "Are you a qualified pilot?" asked Henkels, one of 97 controllers working that day.

"Low-time, single-engine. I need a King Air pilot to talk to."

Henkels was stunned; while passengers had occasionally landed planes when the pilot was incapacitated, few aircraft had been as large and complex as this one. After alerting his supervisors to White's predicament, Henkels instructed him to maintain an altitude of 12,000 feet—but since Henkels had little flying experience, he couldn't tell White how to do so. For six minutes, as Henkels juggled the dozen aircraft in his sector, the King Air kept rising. "I need to stop this climb," White said. "Stay with me."

"I'm here," Henkels replied, fighting his own fear. "Don't worry. I'm trying to find a solution."

Just then, a supervisor arrived with Lisa Grimm, who knelt next to Henkels and plugged her headset into his radar panel. Grimm, 31, had flown Learjets and worked as a flight instructor before becoming a controller; though she'd flown a King Air only once for

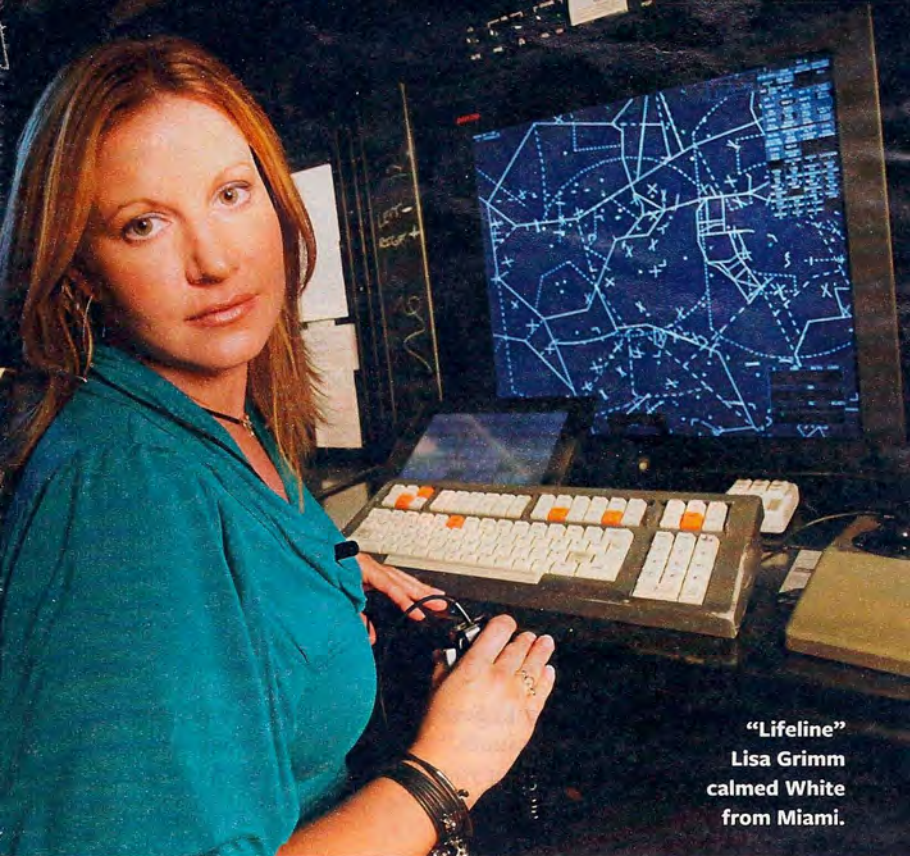


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two hours, she was able to tell White how to disengage the autopilot. The plane had reached 17,500 feet before he could switch it off.

"We're going to start a slow, shallow descent," Grimm said in a soothing tone. "Pull back slowly on the throttle and ease the yoke over gently."

The "gently" part proved challenging. Even under normal conditions, changing a King Air's direction manually takes more force than White was used to. But with the plane's other controls still set to climb, moving the yoke



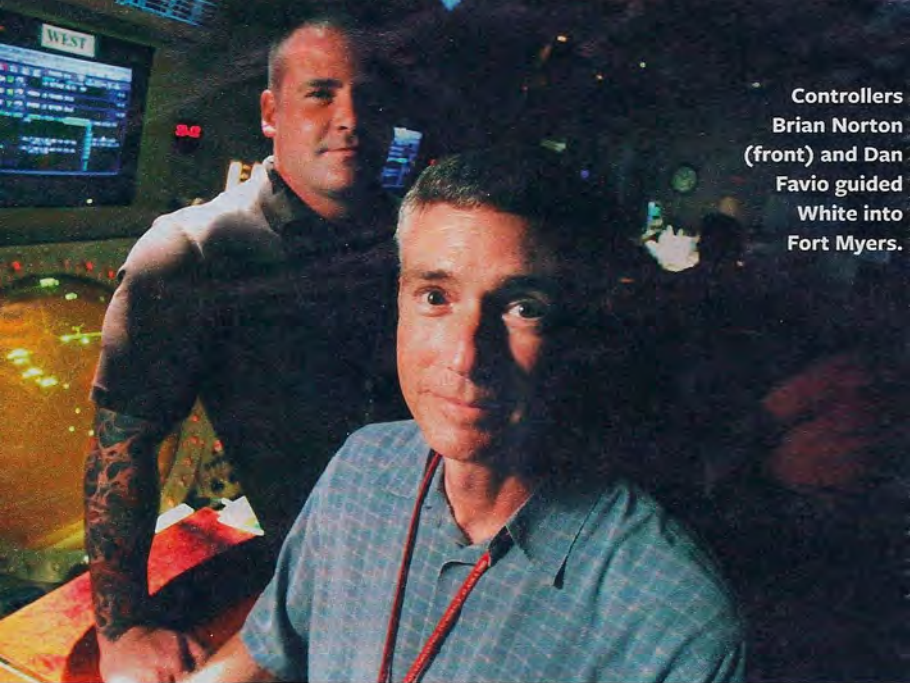
“Lifeline”
Lisa Grimm
calmed White
from Miami.

took all the strength he could muster. He remembered the trim wheel, which adjusts airflow to relieve pressure on the main controls, and reached for it on the left side of the center console. Pushing Cabuk's leg aside, he turned the saucer-sized disk and managed to bring the nose down.

At the Miami center, Grimm continued advising White. “I want to get you down to 11,000,” she said. He tried to keep his descent gradual, but his speed and angle fluctuated wildly. Side by side with Grimm, Henkels and

colleague Jessica Anaya, 26, worked frantically to direct other planes out of the way.

As White's craft reached the proper cruising altitude, Grimm began thinking ahead to the landing. She knew it would be difficult and that making the attempt in Miami was not an option; FAA regulations require a distressed plane to be guided to the closest airport. A supervisor had already contacted controllers at Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers.



**Controllers
Brian Norton
(front) and Dan
Favio guided
White into
Fort Myers**

“You’re going to be talking to Fort Myers approach in just a minute,” Grimm said. “They’re going to get you down safe.” She told White to turn left, over the Gulf of Mexico, beginning a circular maneuver that would set him on the proper course. As the horizon vanished into a blur of blue, he could stay oriented only by consulting the artificial horizon display on the instrument panel. It was hard to maintain a steady altitude while keeping a close watch on the display, so White set the autopilot to 11,000 feet and turned it back on, not anticipating that the plane would be sent careening to the right. He hastily turned it off.

“You’re doing well,” said Grimm. Then she told him how to switch the radio to Fort Myers’s frequency. White

hated to cut off contact with Grimm; her calm voice had become his lifeline. She promised to stand by in case he wanted to talk to her again.

Brian Norton was leaving work at the Fort Myers control center when his boss chased him down. “We’ve got an emergency,” the supervisor said. Norton, 48, was one of two controllers with piloting experience on duty that afternoon, along with newcomer Dan Favio, 29, who’d been at Fort Myers for two months. Neither one of them had flown a King Air 200, but Favio knew someone who had: his old pal Kari Sorenson, 43, a corporate pilot he’d met while working at the airport in Danbury, Connecticut.

Sorenson, as it happened, had air

tragedy in his background. As a teenager, he'd lost his father, also a corporate pilot, in a plane crash; his stepfather, a demonstration pilot for private jets, was killed when TWA Flight 800 exploded off Long Island in 1996. Sorenson, who became a pilot in part to honor his dad, is devoted to preventing other disasters. "I want to make the world a little safer," he says.

As Norton plugged into a radar panel, Favio sat beside him and pulled out his cell phone to call Sorenson. His friend told him he hadn't flown a King Air since 1995 but still had the manual and cockpit layout. With those in hand, and the serial number of White's plane, he sat down at his home

computer to look up which model of the aircraft White was flying.

Norton radioed to White: "We're getting some help from another pilot who's familiar with the airplane. Are you using the autopilot or hand-flying the plane?"

"Me and the good Lord are hand-flying this Five-Five-Niner-Delta-Whiskey," White replied, relieved at the promise of additional backup. In the cabin behind him, Terri and the girls were still huddled, holding hands.

"Okay," said Norton. "We'll start working you toward the airport." He instructed White to head 90 degrees to the left. White didn't think he could make the turn, given how fast he was descending. He asked for control set-



"The King Air is one of the most complex planes to fly," says pilot Kari Sorenson.



“My dad is my hero,” says Bailey White (second from left), with Doug, Terri, and Maggie.

tings that would get him to the proper speed. Sorenson’s suggestion—relayed by Favio to Norton, and by Norton to White—involved adjusting a device called a heading bug. But White didn’t know how to use it, and there was no time to learn. His airspeed was wavering from 230 knots down to 110, posing the danger of a stall.

Finally, Sorenson hit on a solution: “Tell him to fly the King Air like it’s a single-engine plane. An airplane is an airplane.” The advice freed White to rely on his instincts as a pilot; meanwhile, the three men on the ground

limited their instructions to the plane’s most basic controls. Soon White was flying more smoothly.

When the King Air was down to 2,000 feet, White spied a gray stripe in the distance. “I think I see the runway at twelve o’clock,” he said. The plane was 15 miles from the airport, lined up for the final approach. Sorenson sent word that White should slow the plane to 160 knots, then drop the landing gear and flaps.

“When I touch down—if I touch down—do I just kill the throttle?” asked White.

"That's correct," Norton said. "Kill the throttle and maximum braking."

The altimeter read 1,800 feet, then 1,000, then 500. An armada of ambulances and fire trucks was lined up along the landing strip. Terri and the girls prayed harder. "It looks good from here," Norton told White. "The runway is all yours."

In Miami, a supervisor called out to Lisa Grimm: "He's down!"

"What does *that* mean?" she yelled. "The plane is down safely or on fire?"

In Fort Myers, Favio rushed out of the building to see what had happened. The King Air was sitting on the runway, gleaming in the Florida sun after a perfect landing. Inside the tower and the Miami control center, the cheers and backslaps had already begun.

After White received instructions from a ground controller on how to shut off his engines, he and his family staggered from the plane. Paramedics, meanwhile, carried Joe Cabuk from the cockpit and tried to revive

him, but they were unsuccessful. The autopsy later determined he had died of a heart attack.

Back home in Louisiana, White sent gift certificates for steak dinners to Grimm, Norton, Favio, and Sorenson. They, in turn, give him most of the credit for getting the King Air out of the sky in one piece.

"There's a sense of fulfillment for all of us," says Sorenson. "But Doug is really the guy who made it happen. We just gave him the tools for the job."

For a month after the incident, White was awakened every night around 3 a.m. by vivid dreams: Once again he was at the controls of a plane he didn't know how to fly. He soon returned to his flight lessons, determined to be prepared in case of another emergency. Whatever other resources he drew from that Sunday, he believes a higher power was involved in saving his family. "God spared us for something," he says.

Adds Terri, "I just hope we have enough sense to recognize the reason when it comes."

IT'S "JAWS"OME!

After a spate of shark attacks in Australia, the Week asked its readers to create that country's next tourism slogan. Here's what they came up with:

"What happens off the coast of Australia, stays off the coast of Australia"

"We'll throw another limb on the barbie"

"Australia: Disarmingly beautiful"

"Our visitors: The other white meat"

"Not quite heaven, but you can get there from here"