

# Sixty Metres Down: SAR Tech Recounts Dive on Swissair Crash Site

19 WING COMOX – It was on his second dive to the crash site of SwissAir 111 that Cpl. Kent Gulliford saw it – a yellow parka, floating near him, face down, arms outstretched. In the gloom sixty metres down, he was sure he'd found an intact body.

Bouncing along the bottom in his weighted boots, like an astronaut walking on the moon, Gulliford reached for the jacket. But the terrible crash of the MD-11 jetliner on September 2, 1998 would leave no bodies beneath the frigid waters off Peggy's Cove. The parka, escaped from some exploded suitcase, held only water.

Gulliford turned back to the twisted pile of metal where 229 people had disappeared. If he could bring no closure to the families, he knew he could at least bring some answers. Passports and wallets still floated among the debris. On his first dive, Gulliford had already made one discovery he would never forget – the aircraft's cockpit voice recorder, one of its two "black boxes".

Five years after the find, Gulliford is diving again, this time into his memories of the crash. The 442 Squadron search and rescue technician was in Victoria Tuesday to take part in a special presentation by the Transportation Safety Board to his former unit, Fleet Diving Unit (Pacific).

Esquimalt's diving unit airlifted 35 divers to Halifax after the Swissair crash. They joined a huge contingent of Canadian and American military and civilian divers toiling at the crash site. For nearly a month they pulled up human remains, aircraft instruments and the hundreds of kilometres of wire believed to be the source of the fire responsible for bringing the plane down.

Gulliford, a former combat engineer and paratrooper with the Canadian Airborne Regiment, had been a Navy clearance diver for three years when he found himself suiting up to dive on the wreckage. Although he had gone deeper in training – down to 100 metres – he had never dived a site so potentially dangerous. Razor-sharp metal waited to snag breathing lines; shifting debris hid holes that could trap a diver before help arrived.

To reduce the danger, the divers worked in pairs, with a third or "stand-by diver", remaining on the surface, ready to descend in an emergency. But on Gulliford's first dive,



New 442 Squadron search and rescue technician Cpl. Kent Gulliford on his graduation in July. The former Navy diver recovered one of two black boxes from SwissAir 111 five years ago. Photo by Warrant Officer Eileen Redding, 19 Wing Imaging.

the safety diver's gear malfunctioned, forcing the second diver to take the safety's place. Gulliford would have to dive alone.

"I was pretty focused, I just wanted to get the job done," Gulliford recalls of the decision to dive solo. "The weather was good, we were steady. A lot of people were relying on me."

With the okay from his diving team, he mounted the "stage", a metal platform that was his ride to the bottom, and waited for the descent to begin. As the seconds ticked by, his team checked and rechecked his lifeline, an intertwined set of four hoses tying him securely to the diving tender.

One of the hoses would feed him a helium-oxygen mixture, needed to breathe safely at that depth. Hot water ran through another, intended to keep him warm in the icy water. Another cable told him his depth; the fourth was his communications line, keeping him in constant contact with the surface.

Water swirled around Gulliford's mask as the stage began to descend. In seconds he was alone, falling slowly at 10 metres a minute to the wreckage below. Sweeping a hand-held sonar side to side, he soon picked up the faint signal from the aircraft's cockpit voice recorder.

When the stage landed on the rocky bottom, Gulliford's sense of isolation deepened. As a mine countermeasures diver, he had been accustomed to diving solo. But while mines presented their own dangers, getting snagged on a portion of torn fuselage was not among them.

"I was comfortable until I got to the bottom," he remembers. "I was worried about dragging my lifeline behind me and getting it caught on something." Gulliford quickly radioed the surface, asking the dive team to pull his lifeline taught. They took up the slack and Gulliford set out for the 30-metre trip to the crash site.

Guided by the steady beeping of his sonar, Gulliford slowly approached the aircraft. The water was clear, and with his light he had about five metres of visibility. Suddenly it lay before him: an impossibly compact mound of debris rising from the ocean floor.

Jagged metal, like torn popcans, lay in a pile. Suitcases were strewn everywhere. Thousands of dollars in cash and countless documents drifted by his feet. He continued into the site, following the sonar's directions. Abruptly he stopped and reached down into the wreckage.

"I lifted what looked like a hatch cover and pushed away a few pieces, and pushed over a few more pieces. And I found it," Gulliford recalls. "I told those on the surface I had it.

"Then I realized I was frozen.

“When they took up the slack in my lifeline it must have popped off the hot water hose,” he says. “I was turning hypothermic. All I needed to do was turn around and walk back to the stage, but I was having trouble thinking. I couldn’t subtract 180 degrees from my bearing.

“ It took forever to walk back. I told the surface I didn’t have any hot water and could use some help, but they couldn’t understand me because my teeth were chattering so badly. I knew I was just going to have to take care of myself.”

Eventually reaching the stage, Gulliford dropped the voice recorder in a laundry bag. Fearful of losing it on the way up, he stood on it during the ascent. Halfway up, despite his cold, he was forced to stop and decompress, clearing his blood of the helium he had been breathing.

When he finally reached the surface, investigators took the box before his dive team had a chance to uncouple him. By the time he had finished further decompression in a special chamber on the tender, the voice recorder was on a plane bound for the TSB lab in Ottawa.

“It was huge at the time,” Gulliford says of the recorder’s recovery. “But in retrospect the only thing they ever discovered from it was that it didn’t work – the last six minutes were blank.”

The investigation into those last six minutes took another five years. Over that time, Gulliford has never been able to forget the underwater grave he visited. But not all the memories are painful. His diving earned him the Meritorious Service Medal and a trip to Quebec City to meet the Governor-General.

He says he’s proud to have been part of the mammoth recovery operation. “It’s embarrassing to say that, though,” he adds. “Professionally it was so rewarding, but it was such a horrible job you almost feel guilty taking pride in it.

“But it’s what we were trained to do, and you just do it.”

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