

# The Eagle

## Plane crash survivor, loved ones reflect, look ahead one year after tragedy

[Megan Rodriguez](#)

On the one-year anniversary of a plane crash that nearly killed him, Luke Armstrong is returning to Texas A&M for his last semester of classes. The Aug. 30 tragedy at Coulter Field in Bryan left Luke's girlfriend, A&M senior Victoria Walker, and her parents, David Walker and Tamara Walker, dead. Luke sustained several severe wounds, including a traumatic brain injury and a broken jaw.

Luke has worked hard throughout the past year to recover, reaching goals that medical professionals thought were highly unlikely, especially in such a short period of time.

But for Luke, moving forward and succeeding is important. It's his way of honoring his late girlfriend and her parents.

"I owe it to them to live the fullest life possible and carry on David, Tammy and Victoria's legacy," Luke said. "It's kind of perfect in my eyes that the first day of class — it'll be my last first day of school — is the anniversary of the crash. The three of them will always be on my heart at major milestones, especially graduation in December.

"Emotionally it's just positivity, really. It's obviously sad. I'd be lying to you if I said it wasn't sad. But it's the way it is and that's OK. Now we're going to make the best of what we can and do it in their memory."

### **'Just flying to fly'**

Luke does not remember the plane crash.



One year after a plane crash at Coulter Field in Bryan killed his girlfriend and her parents, Luke Armstrong is returning to Texas A&M University to continue his construction science degree.

He said he knows that David and Tamara had just flown into town on the plane from Caddo Mills Municipal Airport near Dallas. Luke and Victoria had lunch with the Walkers at Cilantro Mexican Restaurant in Bryan — Victoria's favorite TexMex eatery.

The group hopped into the plane for a quick sightseeing flight. Luke said that David and Tamara were planning to head back to Dallas-Fort Worth after that.

"I don't know how I would describe that flight," Luke said. "We were just flying to fly."

The cause of the crash is still being investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board. A final report, which could take up to another year to complete, will include an analysis and probable cause.

A preliminary report from the NTSB states that the crash of the Piper PA-24-250 airplane happened around 2:30 p.m. It says that security video footage shows the plane taking off on the runway and then crashing, coming to a stop on a flat grass field on the departure end of the runway on the airport property.

The report says that David had purchased the plane about a week before the crash.

### **'I ran with no fear'**

Billie Boyd was driving home from church with her two small children, ages 4 and 6, when she saw the plane wreckage in the distance. It was her first Sunday to have gone to church in person since early on in the COVID-19 pandemic. She normally would have gone home earlier in the day, but she had stayed late for a leadership lunch meeting.

She called her husband, a local firefighter, to ask if there was some sort of training at Coulter that day. There wasn't.

Boyd handed her kids a cookie as she headed toward the wreck on foot. She climbed over a small fence and ran to the plane.

"The wheels were upside down," Boyd recalled. "The plane looked like it had been folded in half. The only way I can explain it is kind of like the old razor flip phone. It kind of looked like that."

As she talked to dispatch, Boyd tried taking pulses of the four victims caught in the crumpled metal.

"I guess if anything was the driving force to how I reacted, not only is it my husband and his service, but I really felt like it was a God thing," Boyd explained. "I felt like I ran with no fear of repercussions. I wasn't afraid that the plane might blow up or catch fire or any of that. I really did feel like I was supposed to be there."

As Luke began to move, Boyd stayed by his side, telling him to be still and praying over him until help arrived.

Boyd's father-in-law picked up her kids, allowing her to stay on the scene praying until Luke was taken by air to St. Joseph Health Regional Hospital and the Walkers' bodies were removed from the rubble.

In the months following the wreck, Boyd has become close to the Armstrong family. The group went to Student Bonfire, an off-campus A&M tradition, in November. Boyd and Luke went out to eat Wednesday night when he returned to town for school. Boyd said she made a commitment to Luke's parents, Bob and Lisa Armstrong, to be there for Luke should he ever need anything.

"Like I tell the Armstrongs all the time, they're stuck with me," Boyd said. "They're family and family is forever."

### **'Sense of hope'**

The Armstrong family members were all in separate cities when they learned that Luke was in a crash.

Lisa was in Colorado. Bob was in Dallas. Luke's sister, Mackenzie Armstrong, was in Houston. They all rushed to be by Luke's side.

On her flight to Texas, Lisa leaned on her Catholic faith, praying the rosary and turning to the Bible for comfort. Luke's birthday is July 10, so she turned to Luke 7:10, which just happens to speak of a person being healed by Jesus Christ. The New International Version reads "Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well."

"That is what gave me a huge sense of hope," Lisa said.

When Mackenzie arrived at St. Joseph Health Regional Hospital she found a large group of Luke's friends standing in the parking lot. Throughout the night she visited and prayed with them. Eventually, Mackenzie said the group was asked to disperse to avoid a crowd outside the hospital in the midst of the pandemic, but many still stayed on site.

The day after the crash, Luke's fraternity, Tau Kappa Epsilon, hosted a vigil for the Walker family and Luke. The fraternity also started a fundraiser for Madeline Walker, who lost her parents and sister in the crash. Fraternity president Justin Bruce said the group raised around \$50,000 for Madeline.

### **Astounding recovery**

The night of the crash, Luke went into surgery. Bob said that a piece of Luke's skull had to be temporarily removed to relieve pressure.

Bob said that when he met the neurosurgeon who worked on Luke, he was told that just 20 more minutes and Luke may not have survived.

“He said ‘your son was in a coma heading toward death when he hit my OR,’” Bob recalled.

During his time at St. Joseph, Luke re-learned how to walk. He was released from St. Joseph about four weeks after the crash. Around 100 people were at the Armstrong’s Coppell home near Dallas-Fort Worth to celebrate Luke’s return.

But work was still needed for Luke to return to everyday life as he experienced it before the crash. He received treatment at TIRR Memorial Hermann in Houston, where he advanced enough to walk without a walker, before moving on to the Centre for Neuro Skills in Irving, Texas.

At CNS, Luke had a rigorous schedule of several types of therapy sessions to rebuild his vision, speech, cognitive and other abilities. He said the Centre’s counseling sessions, in which he met with other young adults each week, were also useful.

“I didn’t know what brain injury was until I had one,” Luke said. “Getting to emotionally commiserate with other people that are going through what you’re also going through — kind of earning your freedoms back little by little as you develop back into a fully functioning adult — was really nice to have.”

Even now that he has left CNS, Luke said he is a part of a long-term outcome study that the Centre is running.

Early on in his recovery, CNS occupational therapist and vision specialist Val Neufeld recalls that Luke didn’t have the ability to bounce a ball. He also had a long list of issues with his vision that she said made it highly unlikely that he would ever drive again. The fact that he has returned to driving and will be back at A&M is astounding, she said.

“The level of improvement, it was so unheard of that it was obvious that doing a case report on this guy was needed for sure,” she said. “I’ve seen improvement in other individuals who have had cerebriic accidents, probably just as bad as Luke’s, but sadly, though they improve significantly, they don’t get to that level where they’re driving, and they work and they’re back to school. It’s almost like if you saw him you would never guess it. It’s just crazy.”

Luke’s commitment to his goals was a major key to his success, Neufeld said, remarking about how he would always do more exercises than he was assigned to work on in an effort to improve. Work still continues, and Luke said he will still be doing at home vision exercises even when he starts the school year.

And some activities, like riding a bike, are still off the table for the time being; his parents said that a fall at this point that would normally give someone a concussion could potentially kill Luke.

Bruce, the fraternity president, said he was glad to have spent some time on a trip with Luke earlier this year as he continued to improve. It's been interesting to watch Luke recover from an outsider's perspective, Bruce said.

"I think anyone involved would tell you that him being at this point now is nothing short of a miracle — the grace of God," he said.

### **Looking ahead**

It's exciting to see Luke get back to Aggieland, but Mackenzie said she misses him already and can't wait for a time when he will maybe move back to the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Lisa and Bob said they're grateful for everything that led up to their son's survival and remarkable recovery.

"We just feel so blessed with the outpouring of support, the Aggie network support and then the series of miracles," Bob said. "It was one miracle after another all the way through his recovery."

Prior to the crash, Luke was on track to graduate in May 2021. He took online classes in the spring so that he can graduate in December. Luke is studying construction science. He said he will start off as an assistant project manager, eventually become a project manager and hopefully someday work his way up to being a vice president of operations.

Luke is looking forward to spending time with his fraternity brothers this year. He is also in the A&M water ski club and while he cannot go back to participating just yet, Luke said he is looking forward to spending time with and encouraging other teammates.

But aside from his personal goals, Luke said he is especially excited to be part of the CNS study. He feels like there are some negative statistics associated with people who have brain injuries that he wants to prove wrong. Through his participation, Luke said he hopes to help others in similar circumstances as his.

"I was super fortunate. ... Everything lined up for me, and I want to in some ways give back to other people," Luke said. "That's one of the reasons I'm excited about doing the study with CNS, so that I can help improve therapies and improve outcomes for the people that are going to follow with brain injuries."

[https://theeagle.com/news/a\\_m/plane-crash-survivor-loved-ones-reflect-look-ahead-one-year-after-tragedy/article\\_0195f9ec-085f-11ec-b91e-c7e4228d2330.html](https://theeagle.com/news/a_m/plane-crash-survivor-loved-ones-reflect-look-ahead-one-year-after-tragedy/article_0195f9ec-085f-11ec-b91e-c7e4228d2330.html)