



# STEAMBOAT PILOT & TODAY

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## Buffalo Pass plane crash survivors, rescuer share stories

Frances Hohl  
Steamboat Pilot & Today

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Forty years after a small commuter plane crashed on Buffalo Pass during a snowstorm, rescuer Jerry Alsum can still be brought to tears talking about what he calls “The Miracle on Buffalo Pass.”

He and a few crash survivors shared their stories with a standing-room-only crowd at the Tread of Pioneers Museum during the museum’s Brown Bag Storytelling Series.

Rocky Mountain Airways Flight 217 left Steamboat Springs airport Dec. 5, 1978, with 22 people on board, including the pilot and co-pilot. The plane would crash an hour later as its pilots tried to return because of snowstorms.

A freak “mountain wave,” or heavy downdraft, would send the plane in a dip, causing it to clip a power line on Buffalo Pass. All but one person survived the actual crash, including a baby who was torn from his mother’s arms and hurdled across the plane. The pilot would die in a hospital three days later.

Alsum was in Denver when he and his father, brother and other Civil Air Patrol rescuers got the call about the crash. Rescuers from Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins would fight through a blizzard as they headed toward the Walden area to meet up with search and rescue crews from Routt County.

Alsum, an EMT who led the ground search, said the first miracle was running into Steamboat resident Dave Lindow, who had a snowcat and was searching for the plane as well.

“When the plane hit, the power in Walden goes off. Lots of people knew that these power lines went over the pass (Buffalo), and Dave Lindow thought the same

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ELEANOR C. HASENBECK/STAFF

Smartwool’s corporate headquarters on Airport Circle sits under an overcast sky Monday. VF Corporation, the company that owns Smartwool, announced Monday that the brand’s headquarters will be moved to Denver within two years.

## Smartwool to relocate

*Steamboat company  
announces headquarters  
will move to Denver*

Eleanor C. Hasenbeck  
Steamboat Pilot & Today

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Smartwool employees are still processing news of the company’s planned move from Steamboat Springs to Denver.

“It’s a very sad day to have to move out of this amazing community that we have here in Steamboat,” Smartwool President Jen McLaren said.

Over the weekend, Smartwool’s parent company, VF Corporation, told company leadership that the brand’s headquarters

would be relocating to the Denver metro area within the next two years. Employees and city and county officials learned of the move Monday morning.

“This was really a VF decision, first and foremost, and it is a strategic decision that was made by the senior leadership team,” McLaren said.

VF Corporation owns the outdoor brands The North Face, Alta, Eagle Creek and JanSport. These companies will relocate with Smartwool to a yet-to-be-identified location in the Denver area. This decision is intended to increase collaboration and connectivity between brands, McLaren said.

About 70 employees work at Smartwool’s Steamboat headquarters. They will all be offered jobs in Denver with relocation support, McLaren said. She added

that the company will support them if they choose not to relocate, too.

The company is working through the details of the move, and it is not clear what kind of benefits would be offered to employees who choose not to relocate. Director of Global Communications Molly Cuffe said both VF and Smartwool are “people-centric” organizations, and Smartwool will be offering trips for employees to explore Denver.

“I think it is a very positive move, a very strong move, from that sense, and it comes from a really well-intended place,” McLaren said. “Unfortunately, we’re obviously very saddened about the decision to leave Steamboat.”

McLaren said Smartwool looks to move

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### POLICE RECORD



Stay up to date by reading the most recent entries in the Routt County police record

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### STEAMBOAT SNAPS



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### SPORTS & OUTDOORS



Steamboat adventurer Kim Hess adjusts to life after climbing Seven Summits

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## CRASH

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thing,” Alsum said.

Alsum choked up as he told the crowd about criss-crossing the area with the snowcat for hours, listening for a radio signal with their direction finder.

“It’s dark, and the snow is blowing sideways,” Alsum said. “And we hear screams coming out of the darkness.”

“We had been on a lot of airplane searches in our career and hadn’t picked up a survivor yet,” Alsum said. “You just don’t hear people surviving like this and to hear those voices coming out of the forest ...”

Alsum said the plane didn’t hit any big trees and landed with the exit door facing up. Incredibly, several people were walking around the crash including 20-year-old Jon Pratt.

Pratt, who now lives in Grand Lake, shared his remarkable story with the Tread of Pioneers audience. He told how he panicked when he finally got the exit door open and ran for his life, thinking the plane would blow up.

“I was selfish,” Pratt told the audience.

In fact, Pratt went on to administer what first aid he could to anyone who was screaming. He gathered

ROD HANNA/COURTESY

Rescue workers prepare to evacuate injured survivors through the passenger entrance door.

clothes, blankets and anything he could find from baggage to cover victims. Then he saw a hand sticking out of the snow near the cockpit. He and another passenger thought the co-pilot was dead.

About two hours later, after Pratt had settled down surviving passengers, he went to check on radio equipment and saw that frozen hand moving.

“I started digging him out. I was just savage,” Pratt said. “I kept digging down, and I was clawing, and I got to his face, and I heard him taking a huge breath.”

The co-pilot lived and continued piloting airplanes.

The news photographer who joined one of the snowcat rescue crews was also at the museum on Friday. Tom Baer now lives in Steamboat

and at the time worked for Channel 9 in Denver. His incredible on-the-scene film was broadcast across the nation, with victims screaming in pain while rescuers and medical personnel treated the wounded at the snowy site.

For a full account from many survivors and rescuers, the book, “Miracle on Buffalo Pass: Rocky Mountain Airways Flight 217,” is now being sold at Tread of Pioneers.

Alsum, rescuers and survivors also will be signing books during an upcoming reunion Sept. 21 at The Steamboat Grand.

The passenger who died, Steamboat resident Mary Kay Hardin, was one of three U.S. Forest Service employees on the plane that night.

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