

# Water Festival

## Jensen Beach

**1** A television crew, out to document the use of historic steamboats as observation platforms for the air show at the end of the 1993 Stockholm Water Festival, filmed the crash from a boat anchored just south of the island of Långholmen. There is also footage taken from what appears to be roughly the middle of the crowd on the island itself. In both films, the bottoms of the frames are lined with upturned faces and hands blocking the sun. In the second film there is something unusual in the plane's approach. It is halting and unsteady. The nose begins to rise straight up to the clouds at a drastic angle. A small explosion can here be seen as the jet's canopy separates from the fuselage and the small, dark fist of the pilot punches out into the sky.



**2** August 8, 1993 was partly cloudy. There were several thousand people in attendance at the air show when a Saab JAS 39A Gripen crashed into a rocky clearing on the western part of the island of Långholmen. A hundred meters or so to the southeast lies Södermalm and to the west of Södermalm, Reimersholm. A bay, called Riddarfjärden, winds around these islands and was, that day, crowded with sailboats, and motorboats, and a handful of historic steamboats chartered for the purpose of watching the air show from the water. Modern fighter jets, and WWI biplanes, and a fleet of old Saab 21s with their stubby bodies and rear-mounted propellers came in over the city from the south. The roar and whistle of their engines descended upon the crowd, turning faces to the sky.

**3** On his approach from the south, the pilot suspected nothing. The weather was fine, partly cloudy, humidity at 65 percent, gentle south-southeast wind, approximately four knots. Visibility sufficient. The island of Långholmen was densely peopled. A large crowd had gathered on the northwest side. The pilot circled south of the city, waiting for the clear signal from the control tower and visual confirmation from the ground that the planes before him had cleared the airspace. He was to come in from the south, circle Riddarfjärden twice, perform a low-air-speed maneuver, make a second and third pass above the bay, each time executing a complicated set of roles and twists. There was a risk, he was aware, at such low speeds that something would go wrong. At the end of the brief performance, he was to fall into formation with the other jets for the finale. The Gripen was that year the apex of Swedish aeronautical engineering, and the 1993 air show was the jet's public premiere. Already the Hungarian and Thai air forces had placed significant orders. Representatives from several other nations were in the crowd that day as guests of Saab executives on a private yacht anchored to the west of Långholmen in the wake of passing motorboats.

**4** Lars Rådeström was not yet falling from the sky. He felt the plane begin to shake. He received a signal to eject. The plane's computer had determined that reversing the trajectory of the plane was currently not possible. If he did not override the signal, the plane would begin the ejection procedure on its own. Lars once owned a 1967 Alfa Romeo Giulia, which dropped its transmission in roughly the middle of the intersection of Luntmakargatan and Kungstensgatan. He eased out into the intersection and then stopped to avoid a speeding garbage truck. When he put the car in gear after the garbage truck had passed, he felt an unfamiliar resistance in the clutch. He gave it some gas and suddenly there was a terrible scraping noise and the car lurched forward and stalled. Lars opened the door to get out and push the car to the curb and a taxi plowed into the rear passenger side. The Giulia spun through the intersection rapidly and came to stop on the sidewalk in front of a woman holding a small dog. Lars thought of this as he floated to the ground.

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**5** Lars Rådeström ejected from the plane above Riddarfjärden. There were two brief but loud explosions. There was smoke from the canopy separation. An abrupt change of speed as he left the plane. His oxygen mask smelled deeply of rubber. The plane was in front of him, nearly vertical in the air. He drifted silently and slowly away from it. He may have been caught in a draft, or some kind of result—a wake vortex, for example, if such a thing might explain it—of the plane moving rapidly away from him, and he felt as though he were floating in the sky. Soon his parachute deployed, and he rocked toward the earth in a gentle back and forth. He thought he was dead. It disturbed him that what he thought about in his death was his training. He dutifully checked his altimeter and, once his parachute had deployed, looked for a clear space to land. He was aware of the crowd on the island and the boats in the bay, and he knew that all of this was below him, but until he saw the smoke, he did not know that the plane hit the ground and not the water; and he would not know until later that afternoon, when the rescue crew had removed him from the tree, that no one had been seriously hurt.

**6** Thick smoke rose from behind the trees, obscuring the view of Högalidskyrkan from all sites north of the crash. The burning jet fuel produced a column of black smoke. A small fire raged in the dried grass and trees on the island. From this, a thinner, whiter smoke wafted into the air around the crash site. The fire was soon put out and did not reach any buildings, though traffic was stopped on Västerbron, and many of the boats were directed to leave the area. It was not the first time Lars Rådeström had seen smoke this black and this thick. The steeple of Högalidskyrkan rose starkly into the smoky air. Below him the water climbed toward his feet. He had now twice piloted Gripens that crashed. In the first crash, he did not eject. He stayed in the plane, thinking that he would die, and making peace with this as best he could. He did not die. Instead he broke his elbow and cut his face severely below his left eye. In the same way as it happened above Långholmen, the Gripen had in the first crash begun to oscillate uncontrollably. Lars attempted to continue his approach to the Saab landing strip at Linköping airport. He saw the markings on the runway and in the distance the control tower. Two yellow fire engines were already making their way toward him. Just before the plane touched down, it swung hard to the left and drifted upward sharply. Lars felt the jet begin to right itself, unexpectedly—miraculously, he felt at the time—before it struck sidelong into the earth beside the runway and he could no longer see anything at all. There is footage of the crash, but Lars has never seen it. If he ever does, he will see the plane begin to wobble, the wings lifting and falling. And he will see its resolute descent to the earth, dust and grass rising up to meet it.

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**7** On his fiftieth birthday, Lars Rådeström did not once think of the crash. It was the seventh of June 1994 and he and his wife had gone to dinner at Gondolen. He thought instead of the lights of Grönalund, dim across the bay in the dusky night. He thought also of the wine he was drinking. It was an Argentinean Malbec from 1989 and very good. These unusual varietals had only recently been introduced to the Swedish market. He thought of the cost of the elevator ride up the Katarina elevator (ten kronor, which he thought was excessive); and he thought of something he had learned about in his confirmation classes when he was a boy. The fiftieth year is the jubilee year: forgiveness of all debts, rebirth, and so on. It is not inaccurate, exactly, to say that Lars Rådeström felt some guilt after crashing an expensive jet plane into the ground. He was happy no one had been seriously hurt, happy he had not been seriously hurt. He was not pleased with having retired, but knew, after twice crashing a plane, that he had exhausted his luck. Lars felt his right elbow. There was still a small but noticeable lump on his ulna, which in cold weather bothered him. The food was late, but this did not bother him. He and his wife drank their wine and together watched the Stockholm skyline. A Viking Line cruise ship was coming in from the east. Later Lars and his wife agreed to plan a cruise for the fall to St. Petersburg.

**8** When they got home, Lars's wife put on a pot of coffee. He poured himself a glass of brandy to go with it—he rarely drank after a meal, but it was his birthday. He sat in the living room and listened to the coffee maker gurgle and steam. The ten o'clock news came on SVT 1. Tucked at the tail end of a report about a fire in a garbage can in the Hornstull metro station was a brief mention of the crash from the year before. The reason for this was Lars's fiftieth birthday. The newsreader wished him a happy birthday. It was a strange thing to hear his own name on the news not immediately connected to the accident, and Lars briefly thought they were talking about some other Lars, someone well known and loved with the same name, whom he had never heard of. The news report cut to footage of the crash. It was the footage taken from Långholmen. Lars watched, as if from the ground that day, as the plane shook and rocked side to side. He noted how slowly the plane appeared to be moving and the unpredictable, rash movements it was making. Lars's wife came into the room, hands full, and set two mugs of coffee on the table. She arranged the handle of one so that it pointed to him. She patted her front pockets for a book of matches to light the candle, but found none. On her way to the kitchen from the living room, she turned out the overhead lighting and said, Don't watch that. Seconds after he thought he should have, Lars ejected from the plane. He hung unmoving in the pale sky. The curtains were drawn and it was dark in the room. It was late, but outside night walked lightly in over the city. The horizon was orange and pink. Smoke erupted from the crash site. Lars heard his wife in the kitchen, searching the third drawer down to the left of the stove, where they kept the matches. He could picture exactly the curve of her back and the motions of her arms and fingers. On the screen his shape was barely recognizable and obscured by smoke and the sunlight that had broken through the thin clouds. Lars Rådeström watched himself fall to the earth.