

NO SIGNAL? DIAL 911 ANYWAY

So you got out of the burning plane with only your cellphone. You turn it on and see no signal. Don't turn it off in despair; try dialing 911 anyway.

The "no service" indicator is provider-specific. It means your cellphone doesn't see a tower owned by your particular provider (be it AT&T, Sprint, Verizon or Mel's Cells). The 911 system works independent of carriers. Even if your phone has no signal, it may still reach 911 on someone else's network of cell towers. Since digital info takes less bandwidth, try texting an emergency contact. To preserve what's left of your battery, turn off the phone, then turn it on periodically rather than leaving it powered up continuously.

Even if you can't make a call out, your power-on cellphone may have reached a tower or two in its attempt to make a digital connection. The digital information sent as it attempts to log into the network may have already triangulated your latitude and longitude coordinates using signal telemetry and/or your phone's GPS chip, and logged that and an error range onto the cellular network computers. Electronic packets require very little energy to send and receive, so just having your cellphone on periodically may be sending a breadcrumb telling the world you are alive and perhaps where you are. If SAR knows you have a cellphone, knows the number and the carrier, they may be looking for and find the faint breadcrumb it leaves logging into the network.

Staying near the crash site will increase chances of rescue, but so will a successful phone call. Cellphones operate by line-of-sight radio waves, so higher ground means better signal. If you are near a hill top or a location where you know you can get better service, consider a short hike but realize you are making a trade off—choose wisely.

The cell tower network is growing and coverage is surprisingly good even in remote areas. I was able to get cell service on top of Gannett Peak in Wyoming, arguably one of the most remote high points in the continental U.S. I have also experienced 3G coverage part way into the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness (allowing me to confirm TFRs on my way out of a wilderness camping weekend with lots of fires). I also had coverage at Utah's Angel Point. Use your judgment; by no means am I recommending that if you crash in the Wind River Range in Wyoming, you should climb Gannett Peak to get cell coverage.

