

Pilot Returns To Fly For

THE STORY OF TOM SMOAK
Missionary Pilot,
Bogota, Colombia
By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

The huge Strategic Air Command bomber swung into position for takoff. The six jet engines whined with power as they lifted the giant aircraft off the runway into the gray light of dawn.

Climbing slowly, since it was fully loaded with fuel (the equivalent of three large tank truckloads), the B-47 turned on a heading that would put it over the heart of nearby Little Rock, Arkansas, in less than five minutes, at an altitude of 18,000 feet. The date was March 31, 1960.

In the co-pilot's seat, 1st Lt. Tom Smoak, a native of Richmond, Virginia, let his thoughts run back to the hours before takeoff. The alarm had gone off at 3:15 a.m. and he had slipped quietly out of bed to keep from waking his wife, Betsy. He followed his usual custom of spending those first few moments reading his Bible, communing with God in a "quiet time."

Tom picked up a card on which he had written a Bible verse he intended to memorize on this particular flight. It read:

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and He delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand."

MORNING OF MIRACLES

Opening the closet he looked at the two flight suits that hung before him. One was the light, comfortable nylon suit which pilots prefer to wear. The other was the heavy, bulky, fire resistant suit which he seldom wore because of its awkwardness.

Tom reached for the heavy



Jamie
Buckingham

and vibrate violently. Tom knew that the airplane was out of control and automatically reached for the ejection seat release in case he needed it.

PLANE EXPLODES

He never got a chance to pull the release. Without warning the airplane exploded. It was 6:07 a.m. and they were directly over the heart of Little Rock.

Tom's only thought was escape. The canopy blew off but before he could fire the seat ejection release he was instantaneously immersed in tons of burning fuel that poured into the cockpit.

Strapped in the wreckage, he was burning alive as he hurtled toward the earth below.

Tom's helmet was ripped off

by the force of the explosions. His whole head was engulfed in flames. His hands were a mass of burning flesh. The fire-resistant suit melted where it stretched tightly across his knees and shoulders.

Tom passed out from the pain.

When he opened his eyes a second time he was swinging from his parachute — free from the wreckage which was plummeting toward the city below. The fire which burned Tom so badly also had burned away the canvas parachute pack. The wind, whistling through the falling wreckage, grabbed the parachute silk and sucked him out of the fuselage, allowing him to float free of the falling plane.

The pain was gone. As he

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dangled from the cords of his parachute he watched the wreckage plummet into the heart of the city below.

Suddenly he realized the parachute was not descending at a normal rate. In fact, the ground was rushing up toward him at incredible speed. He tore his gaze away from the earth and looked upward.

The same fire that had burned off the canvas pack had also burned away one-fourth of the chute itself. He wasn't floating, but hurtling toward the housetops below.

At 6:07 a.m. most of the people in the city were just getting up. Like many others, Mrs. O. B. Holeman heard the ear-shattering explosion and raced into her front yard. What she saw horrified her.

Mrs. Holeman, a nurse, said, "I was standing in my front yard and saw him coming down at a tremendous rate of speed." She screamed realizing that he would smash into her concrete driveway.

The summer before the Holemans had debated cutting down

two identical trees that spanned their driveway. They decided to let them stand.

That morning, when Tom Smoak hurtled out of the heavens, his streaming parachute snagged the tops of both trees. They were the exact height of the combined length of his parachute silk, cords, and his body.

As he flashed by, the tree limbs grabbed his chute, bent inward just enough to let him recline softly on the driveway, and then gently straightened up, pulling him into an upright position.

BURNED, BUT ALIVE

When the Holemans and their neighbors rushed into the back

yard, instead of a broken body they found a badly burned but very much alive Tom Smoak, standing on his good foot—and giving orders how to unfasten the parachute harness.

Two persons died on the ground that morning, and of the four crewmen aboard the plane Tom Smoak was the only survivor.

Tom spent the next two years going through 20 operations for plastic surgery. The doctors marveled that no fire had touched his lungs, eyes, or throat.

Because Tom Smoak believes that God saves to serve, today he is back in the air again. This time he flies for the Lord as a member of the flying team for Wycliffe Bible translators.