

EXPLOSION OVER LITTLE ROCK

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The remarkable story of 1st Lieutenant Tom Smoak and his morning of miracles.

The huge Strategic Air Command bomber swung into position for takeoff. 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 highly volatile 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.**

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 flight suit. He didn't question the decision, simply having a deep feeling that God intended it to be that way. The morning of miracles had begun.

The radio crackled to life in the cockpit of the B-47. Tom wrote a message on his clipboard as the plane climbed up to 18,000 feet. Suddenly it began to lurch 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. 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. Tom knew he was going to die.

There were more explosions as the fuel tanks under the cockpit ignited. The fuselage broke in two immediately behind him. Tom screamed at the top of his lungs. He prayed. Not that he would live, but that he would die quickly. Strapped in the wreckage, he was burning alive as he hurtled towards 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 moments later his head was bent grotesquely forward and the only thing his eyes could focus on was his safety belt.

All his training warned him against loosening that belt. To loosen the belt would disengage the automatic ejection seat, his only hope of escape. Yet in that fleeting moment of consciousness, going against all training, he reached forward with a burning hand and released the safety belt. Again, he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When he opened his eyes a second time he was swinging from his parachute-free from the wreckage which was plummeting towards the city below. He assumed his ejection seat had fired anyway, or that he had released his parachute manually.

What actually had happened was that the fire which burned Tom so badly also burned away the canvas parachute pack. When Tom loosened his safety belt it separated him from his seat and allowed the parachute to unravel inside the cockpit.

Tom's chute was fire-riddled. The ground rushed toward him at an incredible speed.

*Psalm 37:23-24

The wind, whistling through the falling wreckage, grabbed the parachute silk and literally sucked him out of the fuselage, allowing him to float free of the falling plane.

The pain was gone. As he dangled from the cords of his parachute he watched the wreckage plummet into the heart of the city below. Fires were breaking out in a dozen different places as the burning fuel splashed onto the innocent roofs.

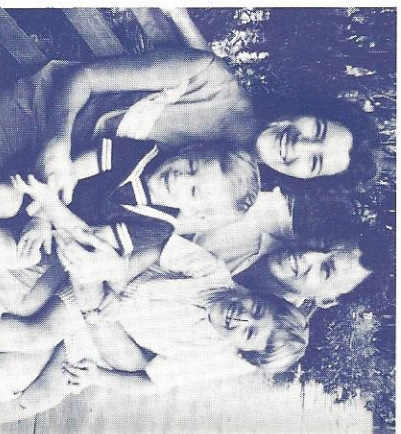
Suddenly he realized the parachute was not descending at a normal rate. In fact, the ground was rushing up toward him at incredible speed. He tore his gaze away from the earth and looked upwards. The same fire that had burned off the canvas pack had also burned away one-fourth of the chute itself. He wasn't floating, but hurtling towards the rooftops below. He began to pray again.

Others were praying also.

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. Three and a half miles above the city was a tremendous fireball. Seven minutes later, out of that fireball, appeared a rapidly falling parachute. She began to pray for that lone, dangling survivor.

Her husband tried to calm her, but she became almost hysterical beseeching the Lord to save that helpless man. As she prayed, Tom Smoak's streaming parachute slipped him away from the heart of the city—directly towards the Holeman's backyard.

Mrs. Holeman, a nurse, said, "I



Tom Smoak, shown with two of the natives, is a flying missionary for IAARS (Jungle Aviation and Radio Service) in Colombia, South America (Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, Apdo. Nal 5787, Bogotá, Colombia). His wife, Betsy, and their two children travel with him.

was standing in my front yard and saw him coming down at a tremendous rate of speed, going over my rooftop, and into my back yard." She screamed as he disappeared, realizing that he would smash into her concrete driveway.

Even though Tom had led his class in basic training in parachute jumping, he knew that this time the end had come. One boot had been burned off. The horribly burned flesh was exposed. He breathed a

final prayer of commitment as he saw the concrete driveway rush up to meet him.

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 them they 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.

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. He knows that a day committed to God is never wasted. And occasionally as he pilots missionaries and Bible translators into the steaming jungles of South America, Tom remembers that morning of miracles and he likes to paraphrase a verse that explains for him the whole experience of that day. *For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against "a concrete driveway."* *

A READER'S PRAYER

Lord, make me respect my mind so much that I dare not read what has neither meaning nor moral. Help me choose with equal care my friends and my books, because they are both for life. Show me that as in a river, so in reading, the depths hold more of strength and beauty than the shallows. Keep me from caring more for much reading than for careful reading, for books than the Book. Give me an ideal that will let me read only the best, and when that is done, stop me. Repay me with power to teach others, and then help me to say from a disciplined mind, a grateful Amen.

In 1905, H. H. Barstow wrote the following prayer. Guideposts reprints it in commemoration of National Library Week, April 21-27.