

This month marks the anniversary of one of the most remarkable survival stories ever recorded—a 13-day ordeal in the snow-covered Alaskan mountains. Only God could get Bengt Junvik out. And He did. BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

MIRACLE ON THE MOUNTAIN



The plane, driven down into the snow-swept boulders, nosed over, then wedged in a pile of jagged stones.

There is, in the life of every Christian, a place which writers call “the dark pit.” It is the time when all the lights go out, when all the supports are snatched away, when the earth seems to open up and he falls headlong into the darkness of nothingness. It is in this dark pit that some men go mad. It is there, also, that some—for the first time—look up.

I want to tell you about a man who fell into such a pit, and what became of him and his family while he was there.

Bengt Junvik is a blond Scandinavian with a ruddy face crinkled by laugh lines. In his early 50s, he lives in a beautiful home in a quiet Los Angeles suburb, flies his own airplane, and has a lovely wife and two fine children. A member of an evangelical church, he serves on several interdenominational mission boards and is an articulate lay speaker. He is, in short, a model Christian businessman.

But, suddenly and without warning, Junvik tumbled headlong into the dark pit. All he had left was his life—and he was about to lose that.

For several years Junvik had been on the board of directors of a small missionary group known as MARC (Missionary Aviation and Repair Center). In May 1972, he made plans to attend the annual board meeting on the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. When a friend, an airplane salesman in Los Angeles, learned Junvik was going to Alaska, he asked him to fly one of their planes to Galena and deliver it to a buyer. Even though Junvik had never flown in Alaska, he jumped at the chance.

The trip from Los Angeles to Kenai, south of Anchorage, was uneventful. Following the board meeting, Junvik plotted the last leg of his journey to Galena, 400 miles away on the other side of the mountains, in the very heartland of the Alaskan wilderness. He estimated the flight would

take about three and one half hours—also uneventful.

It was overcast that morning, May 3, when Junvik took off from the snow-packed runway at Kenai and pointed the nose of the little Cessna 172 out over the ice-caked waters of Cook Inlet. He had a choice of flying north around Mt. McKinley or cutting through the Alaskan range at Rainy Pass. Although it was spring, he knew the weather could change in minutes, so he chose the pass rather than risk the hazardous winds that swirl around the highest mountain in North America.

Before he left the ground he had picked up a few emergency rations, grabbed a sleeping bag, filed a flight plan with the FAA, and asked his missionary friends to pray for him. He expected the trip to be routine. He would arrive in Galena about noon and leave the plane with the buyer. Then he would catch the airliner back to Anchorage and be home with his wife and children two days later.

He never dreamed he was on the brink of a 13-day nightmare which would involve hundreds of people and bring tremendous changes to his life and the life of his son Bruce, a high school senior back in California.

Leveling off at 2,500 feet above the rugged terrain, Junvik checked his map. Although he had been flying more than 20 years, the trackless wastes of the snow-covered mountains of Alaska looked much different from the highways and roads of California. Besides that, as he entered the mountains he lost all radio contact with the outside world. And the needle on his compass began to swing wildly in all directions.

Following the map the best he could, he crossed his last checkpoint—a tiny cabin—and began to look for the pass through the mountain peaks. The weather, which moments before had been fair, now was deteriorating rapidly. The craggy tops of the mountains on either side were obscured by swirling, gray clouds. His little yellow and white plane seemed to be flying through a narrowing tunnel. He knew if he didn't find the pass in a few minutes he would have to turn around and head back.

Suddenly Junvik saw an opening in the mountains to his left. Banking the little plane steeply around the jagged edge of a rocky cliff, he headed into the valley. It was a bad decision. He had flown into a box canyon. The ground seemed to rise up to meet him, and the angry clouds were getting lower and lower.

Instinctively, he put the plane in another steep bank, trying to turn around. As he did, it felt as though some giant hand was forcing his plane toward the ground. He knew what it was: "mountain wave depression." Air, blowing over the mountain ridge, was descending into the valley like a waterfall of wind. Anything caught under this gigantic downdraft would be forced toward the ground.

He was in trouble.

Giving the plane full throttle Junvik made a turn into the wind. It was too late. Like a butterfly caught in a drenching rain, the plane was driven down into the snow-swept boulders, and he heard the crunch of the propeller hitting rocks. With a sickening lurch, the plane nosed over on its back, wedged in a pile of jagged stones. Then there was silence. Deathly silence.

Hanging upside down from his seat belt, Junvik reacted in seconds. He pulled the seat belt release and dropped to the ceiling of the plane. Reaching up he cut the master switch in case of fire. Unbelievably, every window in the cockpit was in place. Not even a crack.

Suddenly the plane was rocked by a swirling, hurricane-force wind. Unknown to him, he had been riding before a fierce blizzard which had followed him down the pass. The

wind got worse, shaking the Cessna so violently that had it not been wedged in the rocks it would have tumbled end-over-end into the yawning chasm at the end of the canyon. But miraculously, inside, Junvik was safe.

It was a complete whiteout. He couldn't even see the end of the wings.

"Lord, give me strength and peace," Junvik prayed, kneeling on the ceiling of the plane. For the first time in many years, this self-reliant man was scared.

After spreading his sleeping bag on the ceiling of the cabin, Junvik checked his emergency rations. He felt like kicking himself for not having brought a portable radio direction finder. He knew the search and rescue teams from the Air Force and Civil Air Patrol would be out as soon as the storm let up. The direction finder would have steered them right to his plane.

Even so, they will find me soon since I am not that far off my planned course, Junvik reassured himself.

He counted his supplies. A few sticks of beef jerky, some fruit bars, some crackers, a few candies, three cans of water and a couple of packages of a chewy nutrient called pemican. He had expected to be back in Anchorage that afternoon and hadn't even included a change of

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clothing. All he had were his low cut shoes, double-knit trousers, sport shirt, sweater and heavy jacket.

The storm lasted from Wednesday until Saturday. As the long hours dragged by, Junvik, trapped in the tiny cockpit of the upside-down plane, tried to sleep. His biggest worry was his family back in Los Angeles.

Betty Junvik was waiting at their house Thursday afternoon when Bruce came in from his classes.

"The FAA called," she said, her voice calm. "Dad's plane is down somewhere in Alaska."

"Dad can take care of himself," Bruce replied confidently. "He's probably waiting out a storm in some little Eskimo village."

But that night the family gathered in concerned prayer, then decided to "just wait for additional word from the FAA."

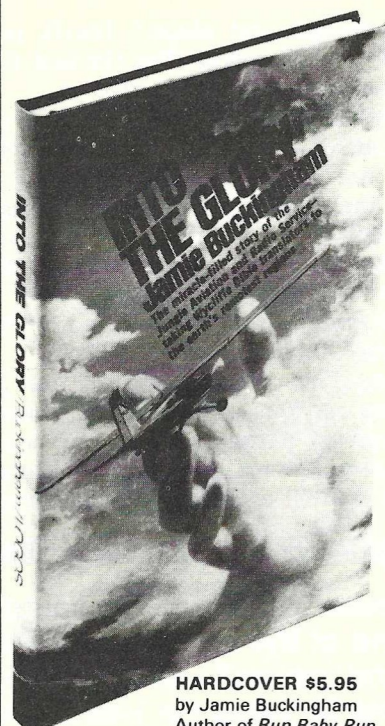
Saturday morning, after three days of fruitless waiting, Henry Hanson, a business friend of the family, stopped at the house.

"God told me to take Bruce and fly to Alaska," Hanson said matter-of-factly.

Bruce was reluctant to leave his mother and Cathy, his 12-year-old sister. He disliked small planes and neither he, nor Hanson, knew anyone in Alaska. However, he went to his room and prayed. That evening Bruce and Hanson were on a commercial jet for Anchorage.

They awoke Sunday morning to bright, blue skies. The Air Force was ready with their search planes. Search and rescue is common in Alaska. In any given year, the Air Force and CAP might fly more than 400 missions. The Air Force uses big C-130 planes, often taking along a dozen or so observers who take turns looking out the windows as the planes fly their zig-zag patterns (*continued on page 34*)

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all things," Henry said. "I believe God is going to take us through this trouble and give us the victory."

At the end of the week Bruce called his mother, asking her and Cathy to fly up. He was confident that even if his father had survived the crash, he could not survive the exposure. He wanted his mother near when the final word was spoken.

Hanson, however, redoubled his efforts. He called various airports and hired planes and helicopters along with their pilots. The operations officer for the Air Force search mission approved, but gave him some advice.

"Don't hire any helicopter pilots that don't have gray hair," he said. "Young pilots just don't have enough experience. We don't want to have to rescue them also."

Monday, after his keen disappointment on Sunday, Junvik couldn't shake the feeling that he had acted foolishly. He nibbled on a fruit bar, then climbed out of the cockpit and walked part way to the base of the mountain where he found an outcropping rock. Kneeling beside it he began to pray, talking out loud.

Gradually Junvik began to see himself from a new perspective. He realized he had made some pretty big mistakes. He had never confided in his wife about their family business. He was concerned about Cathy, and especially about Bruce. Young and headstrong at 18, who would guide him if his father was not around? His mask of self-reliance broke, and he fell across the rock, weeping. It was the first time in years he had cried, for he had always prided himself on being a controlled person. Now with more than a week's growth of beard; face gaunt; eyes sunken; ears, lips and hands chapped from the snow; he saw himself as he really was—helpless before God.

The days dragged on. Daylight began about 3 a.m. and lasted until almost midnight. Junvik slept and prayed, making several trips a day up to his altar rock—as he now called it—to spend those special times with God. He wished he had brought something to read. He wished he had something to do with his hands. But there was nothing. Only ice and snow, Junvik and God.

The thought of giving thanks in all things kept coming back.

"Even when things don't go my way, Lord?" he questioned.

"Especially when things don't go your way," God answered. They were becoming good friends.

Gradually as the days slipped by, things he once thought were important faded away. Time, that precious commodity which he had always held so sacred, meant less and less. Even though he kept track of the days on his calendar watch, all those important business engagements now meant nothing. Eating became unimportant as he realized that even though he had a small food supply, he was not hungry. All that seemed important was waiting on the Lord. Only his family, and the thought of their grief, continued to bother him.

over the trackless mountains.

This time, they were joined by pilots from the Civil Air Patrol, plus several missionary planes. All were confident they would spot the wreckage and soon know whether Junvik was alive or dead.

Junvik had spent most of those long hours from Wednesday until Sunday agonizing over the thing that always agonizes him—wasted time. No amount of impatience, however, could change the fact he was trapped on an Alaskan mountain.

By the end of the second day, curled up in his sleeping bag and protected from the raging wind by the snug-fitting windows of the plane, Junvik began to realize that God undoubtedly had a purpose in allowing him to fall into such a dark pit. With nothing else to do but pray, he spent most of Friday and Saturday simply talking with God. It was as though they were getting reacquainted.

The bright blue sky on Sunday morning was one of the most beautiful sights Junvik had ever seen. After four days in the cramped cockpit, unable to open the door against the force of the storm, he was ready to crawl out and stretch his legs by standing on the underside of the wing.

Because the snow was too soft to allow much walking, he stayed close to the Cessna. About noon he heard the growing roar of an Air Force plane in a nearby valley.

Great, Junvik thought. My ordeal is over.

I've learned my lesson about prayer and now I'm going to be rescued!

Suddenly the plane appeared over the edge of the mountain, flying high to clear the peaks. Junvik jumped up and down, waving his sweater—but seconds later the plane disappeared over the next ridge.

They had missed him.

Junvik's feeling of depression was indescribable. He knew they would not be back, having crossed the area once. He looked at the white belly of the little plane. It blended perfectly with the snow. From the air he was only a white speck on a white blanket.

What a fool he had been! His situation was hopeless. Only a miracle could save him from death by starvation or freezing. It was too late now, but—just in case—he set out across the snow, tramping out the word **HELP** in big, block letters.

A week passed. Back in Anchorage, Bruce's hopes grew dim. He met the search planes every evening only to hear the gloomy reports of "no sighting."

On the other hand, Henry Hanson remained confident.

"Praise God," he would say when the planes returned from a futile day of searching. "Now we know where he isn't. Let's find where he is."

Bruce questioned Henry about this strange enthusiasm.

"The Bible says we should praise God in

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voice—praising God for His greatness. He was free. Free from every bondage. From every restraint. Even the thoughts of rescue faded into insignificance. He was just as content to stay in the valley beside his altar rock and die, praising God, as he was to return home.

Approaching the second weekend, Junvik's family and Henry Hanson maintained their vigil in Anchorage. Although Bruce was at the end of his spiritual rope, Hanson's faith never wavered. One morning, after they sent out the search planes, Hanson laid his hand on Bruce's shoulder and prayed for him—asking God to fill him with His Spirit. It was a simple, quiet prayer, but as soon as it was over Bruce stumbled away from the airport and back to the motel. Tears streaming down his face, he closed the door and fell to his knees. He knew what God was asking him to do. He was asking him to relinquish his dad into His hands.

“Okay, Lord,” he stammered. “I am putting this in Your hands. Even if Dad is dead . . .” He could hardly continue, but he knew he must . . . “even if Dad is dead I want to thank You.”

Suddenly, without warning, he felt power surge through his inner being. Although he had never been demonstrative in spiritual matters, he found himself flinging his hands upward and running around the room, praising God. As he did he was aware that his language had changed. He had heard of people who “spoke in tongues,” but always had figured this particular gift was not for him. Now here it was, without him even asking for it.

His prayer continued for about ten minutes. Then he left the motel room and ran back down the street to the Civil Air Patrol office where Hanson was lining up more searchers. Bursting through the door he threw his arms around Hanson in a crushing embrace and, once more, began crying and praising God. Hanson struggled to put the phone down, then returned the embrace. Both knew that whatever else happened, Bruce's spiritual victory had been won.

The next two days were days of magnificent praise and joy. Sunday evening Bruce watched while Hanson sat in the seat of a helicopter, spread an aerial map across his knees, took out a pencil and drew five small circles on the map.

“The Lord is telling me your dad is in one of these circles,” Hanson said positively. Then he wrote the number “1” in a circle and tore out the small section of the map. “That's where we'll look tomorrow.”

The next morning, the 13th day, Hanson called an airport and asked if they had a spare helicopter that could fly in the day's search. They sent out a machine piloted by two young men, fresh from Vietnam. Hanson remembered the earlier warning about inexperienced pilots, but something prompted him to put it aside. He handed the pilots the piece of map with the little circle drawn on it.

“Search every wrinkle,” he said. “God

However, by the end of the tenth day, when it seemed obvious he was never going to emerge from the icy canyon alive, Junvik finally realized that God was not going to be satisfied until he relinquished even his family into His hands. It was the hardest prayer of all. He found it easy to turn over his business. That was God's anyway. Even his time, the hours and minutes, had been given to God. But to give his wife and children pulled at the deepest roots in his life. Yet the gentle urging of God remained: “I want them, also.”

In surrender, Junvik made his way to the altar rock. Clearing away the snow with his rough, chapped hands, he flung himself to his knees. Through tears, he said,

“They are Yours, Lord. I thank You that You are able to care for them even if it means without me.”

For long minutes he remained, his face buried in his arms. He felt the warmth of the sun on his back and, gradually, the warming of his inner being. Then they came as a flood: Joy! Peace!

That evening as he walked back up to the altar, the sun was just setting over the mountains. The sky was ablaze with color. High daytime temperature had melted the snow from some of the rocks and they sparkled like diamonds set in cream. Standing on the side of the mountain his heart was suddenly filled with praise. He began shouting and singing at the top of his

has told me Junvik is in this area." They took off about noon.

It was down to 14 degrees that Monday morning. Junvik checked his rations. He had a tiny piece of beef jerky, along with a small pinch of the chocolate and fruit bar. He ate the beef jerky.

That afternoon he walked up to his altar rock, prayed, then headed back down to the plane. The chill wind was stinging his nose and ears, but he didn't notice it as he talked with God.

"Lord, there's so much more I need to learn. I thank You for bringing me to this place, and I ask You to keep me here as long as You have things to teach me. I know it will take a miracle to get me out of here, but miracles are Your business, not mine. I'll just leave it all up to You."

He crawled back into the cockpit, recalling all the miracles already experienced. Crashing without injury. All the windows intact which kept him from freezing. Even the crash itself which had prevented him from flying back into a blizzard and perhaps being smashed against the side of a mountain. Then the greatest miracle of all—the inner change.

As he was thanking God for all this, he heard the chop-chop of a helicopter blade biting the air. Clambering out of the cockpit he looked up just in time to see the helicopter appear over the mountain ridge and chug directly over the upturned plane. Junvik stood motionless as the chopper swung on down the valley, then slowly turned back. They had seen him!

Moments later the noisy helicopter, its rotary blade blowing the dusty snow in all directions, settled beside the overturned plane. Inside were two young men, their faces wreathed in grins. One was holding a tiny piece of torn map with a penciled circle. God's directions were sure. His timing was perfect.

Junvik's family, Hanson, and a host of others who had received the radio message from the helicopter, were waiting at the Anchorage airport. After 13 days of suspense, it was a joyful reunion.

Hanson hosted a banquet the night after Junvik's rescue. Held at Captain Cook's Restaurant in Anchorage, more than 250 invited guests attended. About half were Air Force personnel who had flown the rescue missions, the rest were members of the Civil Air Patrol, some of the mission pilots, volunteer searchers and the hired pilots. Hanson, Bruce and Junvik used the time to thank the searchers and to talk about the greatness of God. Later one of the Civil Air Patrol officials confessed it was the first time in history anyone had ever, in such a grand manner, said "thank you" for their services.

Recently, Junvik and his wife took another trip to Alaska. At the controls of a plane, Junvik flew over the spot where he had spent those 13 days alone with God. The snow was gone and green grass and flowers dotted the canyon walls. Junvik didn't stop, though. He didn't have to. He had been that way before. 