



Morning of Miracles

Jamie Buckingham

THE HUGE Strategic Air Command bomber swung into position for take-off. 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." (Psalm 37-23-24.)

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 ques-

tion 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 vibrated 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 flew 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.

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.

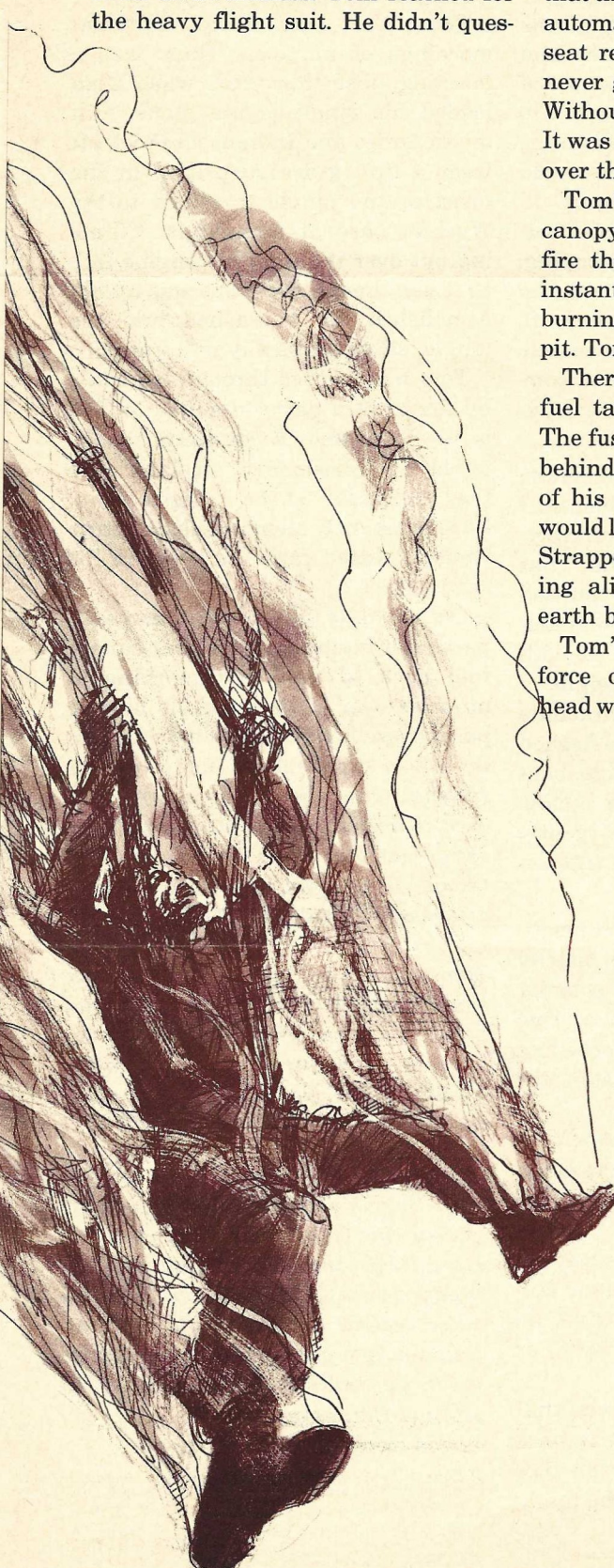
What actually had happened was that the fire which burned Tom so badly also burned away the canvas parachute pack. When Tom loosened his safety belt, it separated him from his seat and allowed the parachute to unravel inside the cockpit. The wind, whistling through the falling wreckage, grabbed the parachute 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 housetops 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. As she watched, out of that



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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 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 backyard, 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, a group called the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS). Now based in Colombia, South America, he flies both the single-engine Helio Courier and the twin-engine Evangel airplanes over endless miles if impenetrable Amazon jungles carrying missionaries and Bible translators to their remote Indian villages.

There have been many additional mornings of miracles. There was a morning, just this year, when Tom loaded his single-engine plane with missionaries and Indians and took off from a tiny grass strip deep in the heart of the jungle to return to the Wycliffe base at Lomalinda. Climbing out over the trees his engine failed. Even though the plane was totally demolished as it crashed into the jungle, all walked away unharmed.

Tom has learned through his trials by fire, that a day committed to God is never wasted. Even today, as he pilots his missionary airplane over the "green hell" of the Amazon basin, he is constantly memorizing Scripture from dog-eared cards he keeps in his shirt pocket.

Occasionally Tom comes across a particular scripture verse that carries him back to that first morning of miracles over Little Rock. He likes to paraphrase it since it 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.'*" (Psalm 91:11-12). ♦♦

Tom and Betsy Smoak and their six small children now live in Colombia, South America. They may be written in care of Instituto Linguistico de Verano, Apdo Nal 5787, Bogota, Colombia. The stateside address of JAARS is Box 248, Waxhaw, N.C. 28173.

Tom Smoak's amazing story first appeared in Guideposts magazine, in April 1968 and started Jamie Buckingham on a writing career. Tom has since become a Wycliffe Bible Translators jungle pilot and was instrumental in persuading Jamie to write the story of that group, soon to be a major Logos book.

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