



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

June 23, 1963 — We were back in Vero Beach on vacation and this was our last Sunday before returning to South Carolina.

On our way to services at the First Baptist Church we turned the corner on 22nd Street and I saw a man and woman at the end of the block — walking. I remarked to Jackie, "Look at that guy dressed in a long sleeved red shirt in the middle of summer."

After the service at the First Baptist meeting house we walked down front to speak to Jim Oppert, the pastor. After we finished our niceties, I turned to leave. Walking down the aisle to meet me was that same strange looking fellow in the long sleeved red shirt.

I cringed. The closer he got I could see his face and hands were horribly scarred, disfigured. Handicapped people used to give me the jitters and I looked around for some way to escape. There was none.

"You're Jamie Buckingham, aren't you?" he asked.

Even though his voice was cultured and educated, I couldn't get my eyes off his face. All the flesh had been burned away and replaced with scar tissue. He stuck out his hand. It was frightfully disfigured, a mass of scar tissue.

"An old friend of mine is your minister of music," he said. "I recognize you from the picture on the back of the church bulletin he sends me."

A great sense of shame swept over me as I realized how I was judging a man on the basis of his looks. He told me he was a former Air Force pilot whose six engine bomber had exploded, dousing him with burning fuel. He was miraculously saved even after his parachute caught on fire. Now he was finishing his training to become a missionary jungle pilot with the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

The day before, flying his little Luscomb from Miami to Richmond (his home), he had landed in Vero Beach for fuel. Unaccustomed to small planes, he had ground looped on landing and torn up the wing and landing gear. Fortunately neither he nor his wife, Betsy, was hurt. However, they were stranded in a strange town with a wrecked plane, no money and no clothes except what they had on (which happened to be a long sleeved red shirt in Tom's case).

What followed can happen only to those who walk daily in the care of God. My parents, out of town for the summer, gave them a place to live. Others furnished a car, food, money. The mechanics at both airports helped him rebuild his plane. I wrote his story for a national magazine which literally launched me into a career as a professional writer. They stayed the rest of the summer and left only after winning the hearts of half the town.

That was seven years ago. This week Tom and Betsy Smoak returned on furlough from South America where he is a missionary jungle pilot. Coming with them were their six children (including year-old triplets). I met them at midnight in Miami to help them through customs. Tom will probably wind up here for some advanced flight training at the airport.

And why not? What town in the world holds more sweet memories for the Smoaks than Vero Beach?