Air Education and Training Command's
TORCH
January/February 2011

CLICHÉS IN SPADES
T-6 pilot finds himself on wrong side of stereotype
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Sixteen years ago, an Air Force officer and his 10-year-old son vanished in a blizzard on the mountains of Turkey. Discover how they survived nine days of freezing temperatures in the rugged wilderness with no food or fire

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SEVEN SUMMITS

A team of Airmen set out to conquer the highest peaks on each of the seven continents

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EMERGENCY IN THE TALON!

Flying in a downpour with his aircraft malfunctioning and low on fuel, a pilot must find a runway to land … fast!

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F-16 FIGHTING FALCON

"If it's tactically smart, it's inherently safe."

— Col. Creig A. Rice
Air Education and Training Command director of safety

TORCH
www.torch.aetc.af.mil

'JUST FEELS WRONG'

I usually enjoy reading Torch magazine stories, but something about the article "Big Daddy Is Watching" (November/December 2010 issue, page 14) made me very uncomfortable. I understand wanting to protect and educate your children, but something just feels wrong to go so far as to attach a GPS unit to your daughter's car. It's kind of like the feeling I get when I see the parents who put their little kids on leashes. I get it — they don't want to lose them. But again, it just seems overboard.

Samantha Woller
Rochester, N.Y.

DOESN'T ADD UP

Entertaining and informative articles in the November/December 2010 issue of Torch. I especially liked the cover story ("A Slippery Slope," page 8), the article on the kid who had the fork go through his nose ("That's Gotta Hurt!" page 6) and the story on the plane that landed itself ("Plane Lands Itself after Pilot Ejects, page 16). I did have a question though. The caption on page 20 of the plane article says that the aircraft is number 58-0787. But in the picture the tail flash reads 0-80787. Why the difference?

Retired Gunnery Sgt. "Hank" Haase
Via e-mail

Great question! Air Education and Training Command's flight safety experts did a little research and found out that in the 1950s, many airplanes left over from the World War II era were still in service, exceeding their expected service lives of less than 10 years. To avoid potential confusion with later aircraft given the same tail number, these older aircraft had the number zero and a dash added in front of the tail number to indicate that they were more than 10 years old. It was hoped that this would avoid confusion caused by duplication of tail numbers between two aircraft built over 10 years apart. However, this was not always done, and it was not always possible uniquely to identify an aircraft by a knowledge of its tail number. This practice was eventually discontinued when people started referring to the number "0" as being a letter "O," standing for obsolete. The requirement for the 0 prefix was officially dropped April 24, 1972.

LETTERS TO TORCH

Have a comment or complaint? Letters to Torch may be sent via e-mail to: torch.magazine@randolph.af.mil. Or mail to Torch Editor, HQ AETC/SEM, 244 F Street East, Suite 1, Randolph AFB TX, 78150-4328, or fax to DSN 487-6982 or commercially to (210) 652-6982. For customer service, call DSN 487-5818, or commercially at (210) 652-5818. Please include your name, address and phone number.

DOIN' FINE ON-LINE

I really enjoy Torch magazine, which I read on-line and from time to time use articles for my weekly safety tip at the end of our staff meetings. The article on what to do if attacked by a dog ("How to Avoid a Dog Attack," March/April 2009 issue, page 12) was a big hit because we have public works employees who encounter animals from time to time, and they need to know what to do. Another good tip I used was the non-safety slogans article ("Famous Last Words: Watch Out for Anti-safety Slogans," July/August 2010 issue, page 7). Thanks for the support and the great articles.

John H. Forslund
Leavenworth, Kan.

CLASSY AND FUN

I was reviewing a couple of your Torch magazines. I think you can be very proud of them. They are very classy and fun to read.

Retired Col. Bob Holliker
Whitehouse, Ohio

2011 TORCH CALENDAR

We have more than 75 people working in our section at the Air Force Personnel Center. The Torch calendars come in very handy because of the Julian dates printed on them. The Julian date is used in many of the correspondences dealing with the documents and the systems we use. It makes our jobs quite a bit easier to have a calendar hung up with the dates available right there in front of you with the calendar next to it. Thanks for the great product that you provide.

Robert Rivera
Randolph Air Force Base, Texas

We love your magazine and awesome calendar and so do our library patrons. Keep up the great work!

Rene' Stevens
Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.

Thanks for adding the Medical Education Training Campus to the Torch distribution list. We received the September/October issue and gave some copies to our leadership. We were also excited to receive the world famous Torch calendars. Thanks again for the great work your team does.

Paul E. Gomez
Fort Sam Houston, Texas

We (at the 59th Clinical Support Group) enjoy your magazine and love the calendar.

Kenneth Brunson
Lackland Air Force Base, Texas

My son is an F-15 instructor pilot stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., and the first time I ever got a Torch calendar was about six years ago when he was going through pilot training at Vance AFB, Okla. Every year it has been a highlight of mine to receive the next year's calendar and proudly display it on my office wall. And of course, his dad and grandparents get upset if they don't get their hands on one too.

Debbie Anderson
Lancaster, Calif.

We (at the 12th Operational Support Squadron aircrew bookstore) love your calendars and enjoy the aircraft pictures and information.

Debbie Fluhrer
Randolph Air Force Base, Texas

The Torch calendars are a hot item when they arrive, and we distribute a good number of them in the 306th Training Group.

Jeff Rogers
Air Force Academy, Colo.

I received your calendar today and love it. I know our Bateman Library customers, who are active duty and retirees, will love to have one too. Last year they were gone in about three days. Thanks so much for putting out a great calendar!

Brenda Griffin
Langley Air Force Base, Va.

My husband and I are both Air Force and love the Torch calendar.

Tech. Sgt. Leah Price
Fresno Air National Guard Base, Calif.

I work in the Training Simulators Product Group, and we support a number of Air Force platforms. Once I hang your outstanding calendar, everyone wants one!

Karen Shelley
Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio

NEW FITNESS REQUIREMENTS
FOR JOINT EXPEDITIONARY TASKING AIRMEN

RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — Airmen preparing to attend Army-taught combat skills training prior to deploying to a joint expeditionary tasking in direct support of combatant commander or joint task force ground component missions are required to possess a current and passing fitness assessment, according to new Air Education and Training Command guidance.

The new standards, which had already applied to Air Force-taught combat airman skills training, took effect Feb. 1.

"Joint expeditionary training courses can range from 21 to 70 days, and are very physically demanding," said Lt. Gen. Douglas H. Owens, AETC vice commander. "Due to the physical demands of the courses and requests from Air Expeditionary Group commanders, Airmen will be required to have a passing fitness assessment on record before attending CST."

Col. Chuck Douglass, 602nd Training Group (Provisional) commander, said that Airmen who attend CST are put through an intense simulation of what they may experience while deployed and must be physically fit to complete the rigorous training.

"Soldiers who have recently returned from a deployment in Iraq or Afghanistan train Airmen on what they went through and what could be expected," Douglass said. "Airmen learn how to actively participate in convoy operations; they are put in combat scenarios; they learn how to call for medical evacuations and perform combat lifesaving techniques."

Douglass said the training is very physically demanding because of the movements required and the weight of protective gear worn by Airmen. The extra preparation helps prevent injury and over-exhaustion in the deployed area.

For more information on JET, visit *www.jetairmen.af.mil*, *www.facebook.com/jetairmenfanpage* or *www.keesler.af.mil/units/2ndairforce.asp*.

— Capt. Omar Villarreal
AETC Public Affairs

by Capt. John Severns

An Airman advances toward a hill *during a live-fire exercise as part of combat skills training for provincial reconstruction team members. In the exercise, teams of Airmen and Soldiers leapfrog their way up a hill while firing at targets using live ammunition. Airmen preparing for joint expeditionary taskings must be prepared for physically strenuous activities during their Army-led training courses.*

AIRMAN **RESCUES BABY** FROM FIRE

JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J. — While off-duty and visiting a friend at a nearby fire department during the summer, an Airman here responded to a dwelling fire with people trapped inside.

With the fire located around the corner from the fire station, Senior Airman John Muirhead, of the 87th Civil Engineer Squadron fire department, stopped his vehicle when he noticed a woman hanging out of a third-floor window holding onto an infant.

"I knew I had to do something," Muirhead said.

He ran to the dwelling and climbed to the second-story roof. He then directed the woman to drop the infant to him from a height of nearly 20 feet.

The frantic woman dropped the baby, and Muirhead made a life-saving catch.

After quickly checking for injuries and ensuring the infant was breathing, the Airman passed the baby to a police officer.

The trapped woman then attempted to jump out of the third-floor window. Muirhead tried to catch her, but lost his grip because of the force impact. He almost fell from the roof himself.

The woman landed on the ground below and suffered a serious head wound.

After climbing down from the roof, Muirhead rendered emergency first aid to the woman by removing his shirt to use as a pressure bandage until emergency medical professionals arrived.

The woman later died from the injury.

Local firefighters rescued an additional two children and one adult during the fire.

"I am very proud of (Airman Muirhead's) quick actions," said Tom Nicometi, the deputy fire chief of the 87th CES fire department. "He has developed into a true leader in the department,"

— Pascual Flores
Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst Public Affairs

CHARGED WITH DUI

AIRMAN SPEAKS AT OWN 'MEMORIAL SERVICE'

MOODY AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. — Senior Airman Larry Mitchell had an out-of-body experience.

"This can't be happening," he thought. "I thought I only had a few beers. What was I thinking, driving with a .2 blood alcohol level? I even had other people in the car."

As the 26-year-old Airman hovered beside his flag-draped coffin, he was full of remorse.

Mitchell, a communication navigation journeyman, staged his own memorial service to reach out to a hangar full of fellow 723rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron members. He didn't want them to make the same mistakes he did.

"The night I decided to drink, drive and go 71 miles per hour in a 45 miles per hour zone with passengers was a terrible night," said Mitchell, who was taken into custody early July 18 when he refused a blood-alcohol content test. "I've always thought something like this wouldn't happen to me because I considered myself a good Airman."

But it did happen, and he spent hours in jail wearing a humiliating orange jumpsuit.

Staff Sgt. Anthony Wilson, his supervisor, picked him up from jail.

"I had to explain why I was the designated driver but still sat down at the bar and drank alcohol," Mitchell said. "I had to explain why I still got behind the wheel and let passengers in my car before starting to drive way too fast while way too intoxicated.

"It was unbelievably embarrassing going before my first sergeant and commander in blues and explaining exactly how badly I messed up. It was the worse feeling in the world to confess I endangered not only my life, but the lives of my fellow Airmen."

After explaining it to his leadership, he was put before another audience — his entire squadron.

"(My commander) let them know how I had screwed up," Mitchell said. "It was embarrassing, and I felt so bad."

But then his commander challenged him with turning a negative situation into a more positive one by finding a way to educate the base.

Once Mitchell completed the 12-week Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment program, he developed the idea for the mock memorial service as a new way to help reach others in his squadron.

Through the service, he let the audience know about the process he went through to get there, as well as what it cost him.

"I paid more than $3,000 for classes, fees and getting my license reinstated," Mitchell said. "I lost money, but I also lost respect.

"I could have called Sober Ride, my supervisor or anybody else on the recall roster," he said. "By taking a risk and making the decision not to call anyone was the stupidest thing I've ever done. It wasn't worth the risk, and it had a large impact on my Air Force career."

— Airman 1st Class Brigitte N. Brantley-Sisk
23rd Wing Public Affairs

***Staring down at his own coffin**, Senior Airman Larry Mitchell from Moody AFB, Ga., reflects on the events that led him here. After getting a DUI, Mitchell staged his own memorial service as an attention-grabbing way to help educate other members of his squadron not to make the same mistakes he had.*

photos by Senior Airman Stephanie Mancha

***Mitchell reflects on the actions that led to his "death"** during the mock memorial service, while members of the 723rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron listen intently to his message on the dangers of drinking and driving.*

TALES OF THE STRANGE

A DOGGONE SHAME

AIRMAN ACCIDENTALLY KILLS PET ... AND NEARLY HIMSELF!

A few years back, my friend John and I were working weekend duty. But we had big plans for after-hour entertainment. We were building a sand rail go-cart and were just a few hours from completing the job.

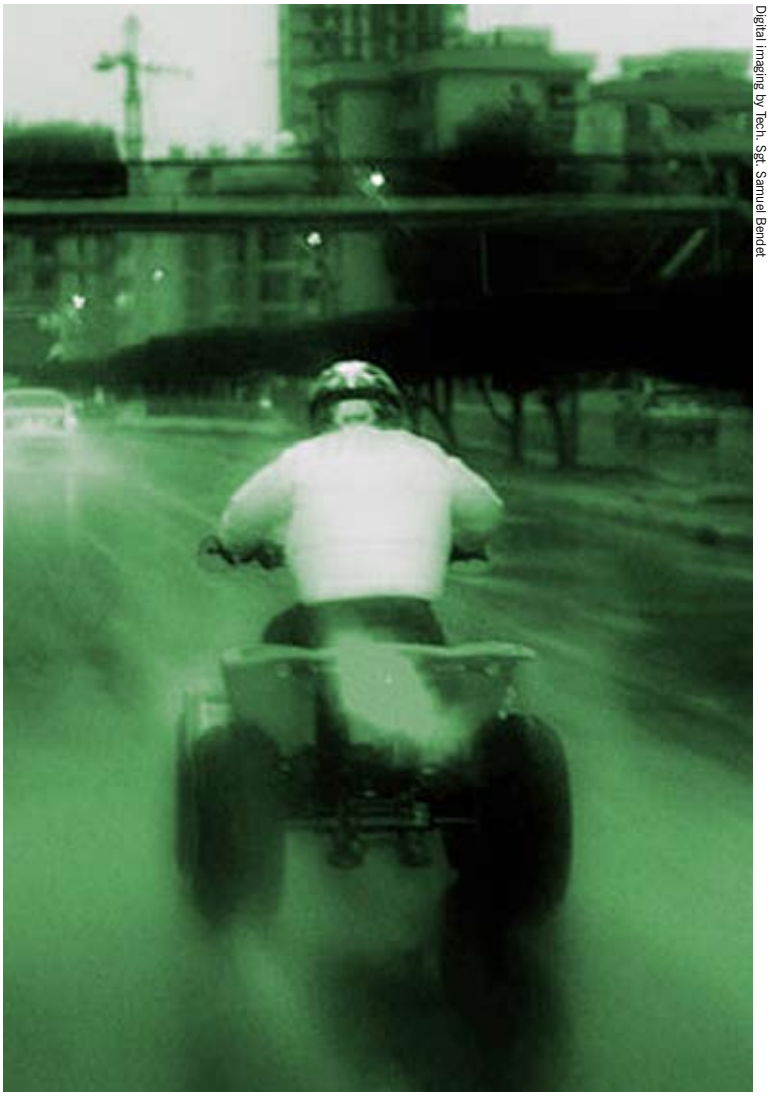
We both clocked out around 6 p.m. I picked up a six-pack of beer and headed to my house. John left work, picked up his dog and met me at my place. We each had a beer, and then went to work on the go-cart.

Usually, we would have knocked down a couple of more beers while we worked, but we were focused and determined to complete our project so we could do a test run at a track by the lake the next morning. So we finished up the welding and started to work on rebuilding the carburetor, which was easier said than done.

At about 8:30 that night, we finally got the carburetor back together and installed it on the engine.

Time for a test run!

We fired up the go-cart, and John took it out on the dead-end road in front of my house. Since we did not know if the newly-built machine would stay running or not, I decided to follow him on a four-wheel, all-terrain vehicle in case we needed to tow the cart back.



Digital imaging by Tech. Sgt. Samuel Bendet

***When he drove an ATV too fast at night**, an Airman accidently ran over his friend's pet dog and nearly killed himself in the process.*

John called his dog over to ride with him in the sand rail. We drove down to the end of the street and back and decided to tweak the carburetor a little.

Then we decided to take it on a second run.

John drove away with the dog sitting on the passenger seat of the go-cart. I grabbed a tow rope and headed after them. I was in a hurry to catch up, and it was only a short drive; so I decided not to waste any precious seconds to strap on a helmet.

With John a good way down the road and me anxious to see how the go-cart was performing, I had the ATV throttle wide open. I was going way too fast for how dark it was that night. I should have known better, but got caught up in the excitement.

The only thing I saw a split-second before I hit the dog was its eyes reflecting from the ATV's headlights as it turned its head to look back at me.

I hadn't realized John's "best friend" had jumped out of the sand rail and was chasing a little way behind it.

As I struck the poor pooch at roughly 50 mph, the ATV tipped onto its right side and was riding on two wheels. I didn't think I could control it, so I bailed.

When I hit the ground, I slid down the road on my hands and knees. As the leather on my gloves wore down, I instinctively rolled to my back so my hands wouldn't be ripped up. At this point, my body slowed down to a stop. I lay on the asphalt, my mind still reeling.

Luckily, I regained enough of my wits to realize I better get off the street because John might not see me when he returned on the go-cart. I turned over and crawled to a ditch at the side of the road.

When John approached, I waved him down. He spotted me and helped me onto the sand rail. I drove it back to the garage while he grabbed the all-terrain vehicle and looked for his dog.

As I checked myself over, it was obvious that had I not been wearing my coveralls and leather gloves, I would have had one bad case of road rash. It was also apparent that had the ATV flipped instead of tilting on two wheels, I would have sustained some serious head trauma from not wearing a helmet.

When John returned, he informed me that the dog was dead.

Sadly, we retrieved his furry friend and buried it.

I was just lucky, with all my bad choices, that someone wasn't doing the same to me.

— Tech. Sgt. Michael Martin
Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.

SOMETHING TO SMILE ABOUT

MOUTH GUARDS CAN DO MORE THAN JUST KEEP YOUR TEETH INTACT

RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — When a technical sergeant in San Antonio lost three of his front teeth to an elbow from an opponent in a pick-up basketball game, he learned a valuable lesson: If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, then a mouth guard can keep broken teeth at bay.

Mouth protectors do more than prevent busted teeth; they can even reduce the chances of a concussion, according Dr. (Maj.) Daniel Palazzolo, chief of periodontics, 359th Dental Squadron.

"Mouth guards work by absorbing the shock of a direct impact and collision and spreading the force over the entire mouth or jaw," Palazzolo said.

According to the American Dental Association's Web site, "Anyone who participates in a sport that carries a significant risk of injury should wear a mouth protector. This includes a wide range of sports like football, hockey, basketball, baseball, gymnastics and volleyball."

Palazzolo added that Airmen, in particular, should have mouth guards on hand because the Air Force's stringent physical training requirements mean more Airmen participate in activities that put them at injury risk.

"Accidents can happen during any physical activity," the ADA warns. "A misdirected elbow in a one-on-one basketball game or a spill off a bicycle can leave you with chipped or broken teeth, nerve damage or even tooth loss. A mouth protector can limit the risk of such injuries as well as protect the soft tissues of your tongue, lips and cheek lining."

— Brian McGloin
502nd Air Base Wing OL-B Public Affairs

by Tim Barela

Mouthpieces like this "boil and bite" version *not only help protect users from broken or lost teeth, but from concussions as well.*

THREE TYPES OF MOUTH GUARDS

STOCK

Stock mouth guards are available at most sporting goods stores. They are not form fitted and are bulky. They also may interfere with speech and breathing. They may not be as effective because they move around.

"BOIL AND BITE"

A better option than stock is the "boil and bite" type of mouth guards. These are available at most sporting goods stores. The wearer must soften the mouth guard by placing it in boiling water and then bite down on the material. This type of mouth guard offers a better fit and more protection than the stock variety. The wearer should follow manufacturer's instructions for the best fit and use.

CUSTOM-FITTED

The custom-fitted mouth guards are the best option and are made at base dental clinics. They require two short dental clinic visits for proper sizing and fitting. Custom-fitted mouth guards can be trimmed to keep any bulk to a minimum, especially for patients who have a sensitive gag reflex. They also offer the best protection, fit and comfort without interfering with speech or breathing.

— Dr. (Maj.) Daniel Palazzolo
359th Dental Squadron

Miracle on the Mountain

Sixteen years ago, an Air Force officer and his 10-year-old son vanished in a blizzard on the mountains of Turkey. Discover how they survived nine days of freezing temperatures in the rugged wilderness with no food or fire

By **Tim Barela**
Illustration by **Steve Doyle**
Photos by **Rose Reynolds**

Ten-year-old Matthew Couillard's eyes couldn't seem to focus on the scene below, but his every instinct told him something was wrong, terribly wrong.

His heart pounded in his chest.

The scene slowly came into focus. Trees, snow, a stream. Then at the stream's edge …

A body!

Half in the water and half on the shore, a man's decomposing remains lay with ripped flesh exposing bone. Paralyzed by fear, Matthew cautiously peered at the man's face. With sudden, horrifying recognition, Matthew opened his mouth to scream. But terror clutched his throat, stifling the cry.

The man was his father!

Matthew woke up with a start, his heart racing, his breath coming in short gasps, like he'd just finished running the 100-yard dash.

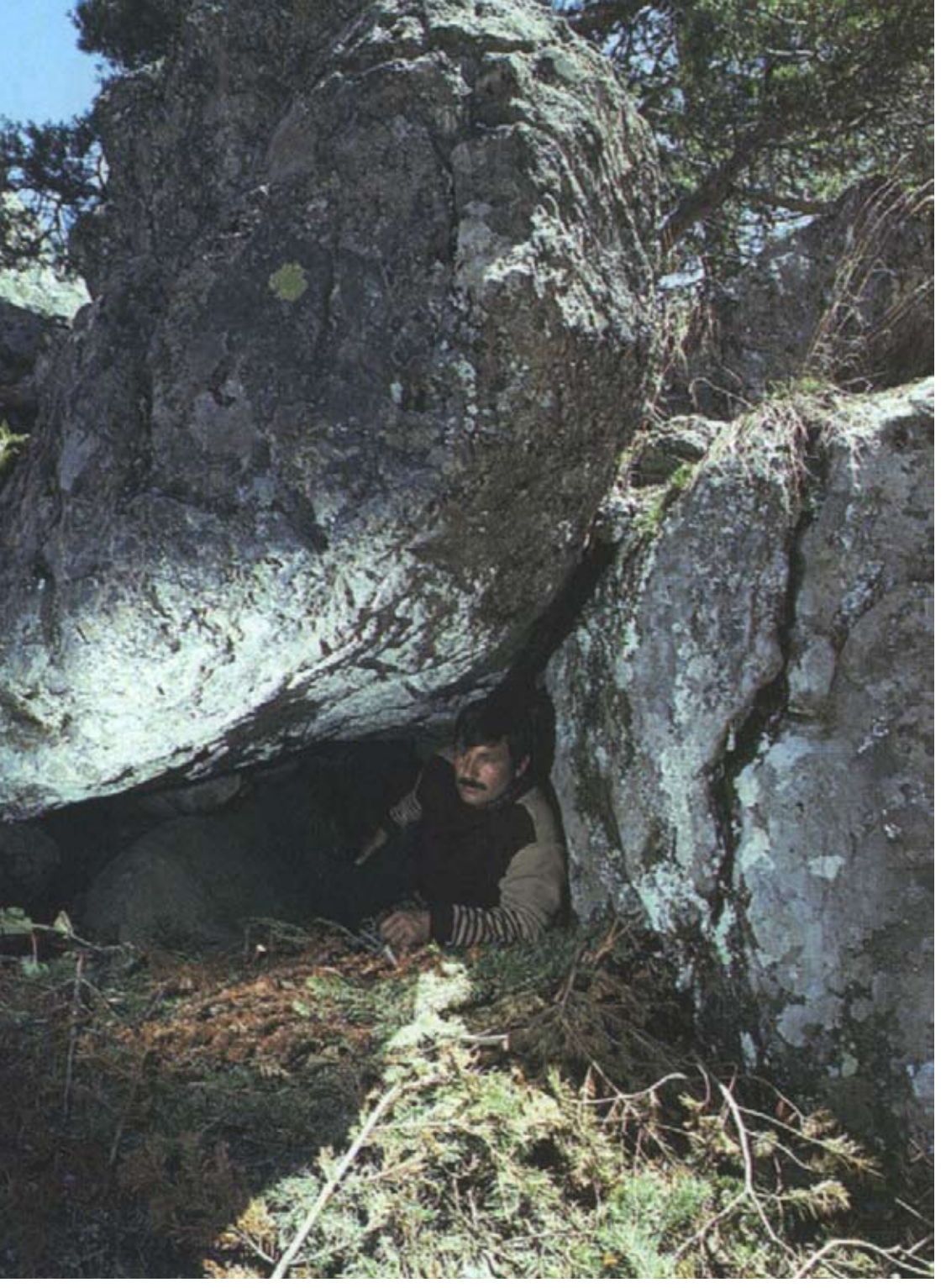
"A dream. It was only a bad dream," he told himself, his mind still reeling.

He tried to calm himself, though he couldn't seem to stop shivering. Then he realized fear no longer shook him. … He was cold.

Disoriented, he searched his surroundings. As he gained his wits, a new fear infiltrated his being. But this time the nightmare was real — one he couldn't end by waking up.

Matthew Couillard was lost in the wilderness.

And he was alone.



***A Turkish lumberjack**, Isa Celik, demonstrates how cramped the quarters were for Mike and Matt Couillard in the small cave. Throughout the night, each dozed in about half-hour spurts before being rudely interrupted by the icy fingers of Mother Nature or by a sudden movement from the other, hopelessly jockeying for a more comfortable position.*

Nine days after they vanished on the mountains of Turkey Jan. 15, 1995, and one day after a "service of hope" lauded their virtues in the past tense, Lt. Col. Michael R. Couillard and his son, Matthew, turned up alive. They had survived in an icy cave for more than a week on melted snow, five pieces of candy and guts. But before they were found, dad had to make a gut-wrenching decision that no parent should ever be forced to face — to leave his son alone in a vast, snow-covered wilderness.

On a skiing trip with a group from the American Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, father and son decided to go up the slopes to make a last run of the day. At the mountain summit, a blinding blizzard hit, and the pair lost their way. For nine days they remained lost in the unforgiving, frozen forest — no food, no matches, given up for dead. But the colonel, a C-130 Hercules pilot by trade, had been through Air Force survival training. That, and perhaps a miracle, brought them out of the mountains of northern Turkey Jan. 24, 1995.

Sixteen years later, memories of the ordeal still linger all too vividly.

Mike, who was stationed in Ankara as the operations chief for the Office of Defense Cooperation, decided to take his sons, Matt and 13-year-old Mark, on a ski trip in the mountains near Bolu, Turkey. After making several runs in the morning, they stopped at the lodge for a typical Turkish lunch — cheese and vegetable sandwiches with tea.

For Mike and Matt, it would be the last meal they'd eat for nine days.

After lunch Mark hung out with some of his Boy Scout buddies, while Mike and Matt decided to tackle the toughest slope on the mountain.

"Up to that point, the weather had been nearly perfect," Mike said. "So I was very surprised to see how much it worsened at the summit. Visibility was about 20 feet, and we began what we thought was the difficult run."

Little did they know just how "difficult" the route would become in these whiteout conditions.

Within 15 minutes, Mike knew he had taken the wrong trail. Nevertheless, he figured they could backtrack a little and get right back on course. They sidestepped up one hill, then another and finally a third.

No familiar landmarks.

"We were lost all right, but I hadn't admitted it to myself," Mike said. "I had it in my mind that if we could just get down the mountain, we could still make the bus."

Instead, they unknowingly skied further and further away from the safety of the resort.

"I was cold, and I was tired," said Matt, who by this time was complaining, even crying, for his dad to stop. "I fell down

a bunch, so my clothes got soaked. Sometimes, I even fell down on purpose, just so I could rest a little."

Mike knew his son couldn't take much more.

"I finally admitted to myself we were lost, and I was scared," the then-38-year-old father said. "I wouldn't have been so concerned if I was by myself. But I knew Matt was wearing down, and I was desperate to find shelter. I even tried carrying him, but the snow was too deep. I drove him hard — something I apologized for later."

"I had screwed up. … I broke the first rule of survival training: When lost, stay put. We had moved, and we had moved far."

After traveling nearly five hours, their progress had slowed to a crawl. Matt's 4-foot-6-inch frame could no longer struggle through the 5 to 6 feet of snow. Neither soccer nor street hockey had prepared his body for this. So at about 8 p.m., Mike spotted a big pine tree that seemed to offer adequate shelter to bed down for the night. He ripped branches from nearby trees to use as insulation and to form a crude hut.

He got Matt out of his wet clothes, gave him his jeans to wear, and then they huddled together, chest to chest, in Mike's ski suit and jacket.

"My hands were freezing, so I had to tuck them under my dad's armpits," Matt said, scrunching his nose, sticking out his tongue and shaking his head in disgust. "We just kind of hugged each other and went to sleep."

That first night tormented Mike.

"I had screwed up," he said with a deep sigh. "And look at the mess I had gotten us into. I broke the first rule of survival training: When lost, stay put. We had moved, and we had moved far."

That night, only half awake, his eyes kept wandering toward a dark area at the base of an adjacent rock. Like a giant owl's eye, the mysterious spot stared back at him.

The next morning, through the swirling snow, Mike investigated the area and discovered something essential: better shelter. It was a tiny cave, not more than 2 feet high and 6 feet deep. He laid tree boughs on the floor of the cave; then he and his son huddled inside.

Another necessity? Water.

"Dehydration is a problem in these situations," said Mike, who found his mind drifting back to the ever more enticing climate of Los Angeles, where he grew up. "You can eat snow, but that lowers your body temperature, and you still don't get enough liquid."

Another stroke of luck. Not 25 yards away, a mountain stream. Mike used Matt's ski boots to haul the water back to the cave and broke both ends of a ski pole to use as a sipping tube.

The relentless snowstorm persisted.

The duo "feasted" on the five pieces of candy they had jammed into their pockets.

They took turns using each other's bellies to warm their feet and toes — not an easy task in the cramped quarters of the cave.

Throughout the night when they'd wake up at the same time, Mike would try to comfort Matt by talking about positive things … his warm bed at home … places they'd vacationed … mom's homemade chocolate chip cookies. …

While Mike and Matt battled for their lives, events quickly unfolded at the ski resort and in Ankara.

Mark, the elder son, had started to worry about his dad and brother as the time for the bus to leave crept closer.

"I hadn't seen them since after lunch — no one else had either," Mark said. "Me and a friend checked the equipment area to see if they had turned in Matt's rental gear. They hadn't."

The bus left at 7:30 p.m. Mark stayed behind.

Mary Couillard, at home with their 8-year-old daughter, Marissa, didn't panic when she found out her husband and son were missing.

"My heart skipped a beat," she said. "But I just knew they'd show up — come walking out of the woods or something."

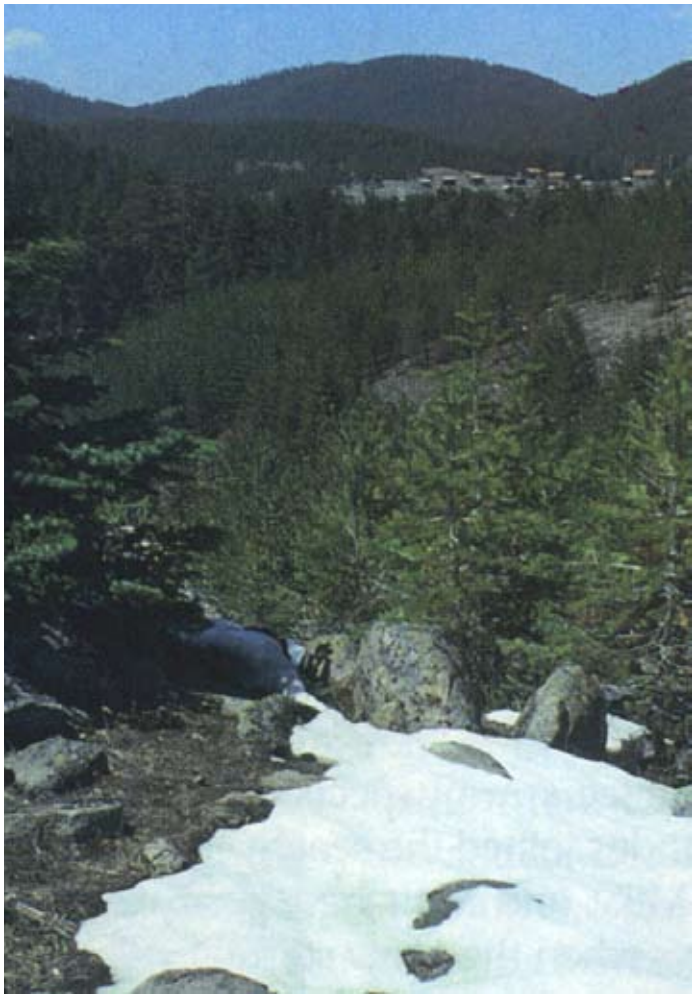
The resort's ski patrol made an exhausting search the first night, but the blizzard had already wiped out any tracks. Mike and Matt had seemingly vanished without a trace.

Over the next two days, some 500 Air Force volunteers, Army special forces and Turkish commandos joined the search.

Mike and Matt had been missing for three days when the snowstorm finally subsided.

"The sun was a welcome sight," Mike said. "But our situation still wasn't good."

Matt's soaked clothes had frozen, rendering them useless.



This is the ridge *where Mike Couillard spotted the forestry service's woodcutters summer cottages where he was eventually found and saved.*

Courtesy of Milliyet News, Turkey

***Turkish commandos**, Air Force volunteers and Army special forces soldiers dotted the countryside searching for the lost father and son. Search and rescue workers used American UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, as well as Turkish UH-1s.*

"(My feet) were so swollen and blistered, I thought they were going to burst," Matt said with a painful expression.

Mike's feet were in similar condition. Nevertheless, he decided to climb a nearby bridge to get a better view.

Each time he ventured out of the cave, he endured 30 minutes of torture. His boots, now brittle from nights that dipped as low as 14 degrees, shot excruciating pain through his mangled and swollen feet.

That first jaunt up over the ridge provided nothing but a glimpse of some cabins too distant to travel with Matt in tow. Mike, who had already planted skis on both sides of the road adjacent to the cave, decided not to repeat his first survival mistake.

This time they would stay put.

"I didn't relish the thought of dying alone, but I didn't want Matt to have to watch me die and suffer alone."

On the fourth day, hope appeared on the horizon: Turkish and American search and rescue helicopters.

"We could hear the helicopters before we could see them," Mike said.

In their excitement, they scrambled out of the cave in their bare feet. But the helicopters disappeared over a ridge.

Matt hung his head. "I was really getting worried now," he said. "I mean, we were out there waving our hands and jumping up and down, yelling … and they just didn't see us."

So their days continued. Two bodies fused together trying to keep warm in the cave most of the time, only leaving to get water from the stream or when they heard the beckoning call of a helicopter's rotors. The choppers flew nearby twice more on the fifth day and once on the sixth, each time just far enough away that the would-be rescuers couldn't see the stranded skiers. Nobody expected the duo to have traveled so far in a blizzard — nearly 10 miles from the resort.

Slowly, Matt's conversation had turned from what foods they would eat when they were found, to what heaven would be like. And if they didn't die, the fourth-grader already had plans for artificial limbs.

"My feet and legs were so numb, I could hardly feel them," he said.

Devout Catholics, dad and son prayed often, asking to be found. But on the sixth day, when all hope seemed lost, Mike found himself asking God that if they must die, "Please take Matt first."

"I didn't relish the thought of dying alone," Mike said, swallowing hard, "but I didn't want Matt to have to watch me die and suffer alone."

On the morning of the seventh day, Mike could no longer stay put. He struggled with his boots one more time, and set out up the mountain to wait at the top for a passing helicopter. This

time, at a different vantage point, he noticed some more cabins — much closer than the ones he had seen before.

He waited two hours for the helicopters. But his eyes continued to wander back in the direction of the taunting cabins, until he finally came to a desperate conclusion.

"I knew if I didn't do something drastically different, they'd find our bodies in the spring when the snow melted," Mike said. "That's when I decided."

He paused for a few seconds, his eyes red-rimmed and welling up.

"I decided to try to make it to those cabins and get help," he said. "I knew if I didn't try now, I wouldn't have the strength later. But there was no way Matt could travel."

Leaving Matt alone was something Mike had sworn he would not do, but he couldn't just sit there and watch him slowly die. He went back down the hill to Matt. Surprisingly, his son took the news well.

"I didn't care at that point," Matt said. "I just wanted to be found."

Mike left his jeans and jacket with Matt and carefully went over what Matt needed to do to survive: Keep bundled up, drink plenty of water, and most of all, don't leave the cave. Then dad, wearing only his black ski bibs and a red turtleneck, strapped on his skis and left his son.

A foreboding feeling knotted his stomach.

Mike's trip proved exhausting. He would ski a little, lose his breath and energy, then plod on. An hour and a half later, near collapse, he reached the cabins.

They were abandoned ... not a soul in sight.

"I had reached the low of lows now," he said. "I had fully expected to find somebody there."

After breaking into several cabins, he got excited when he discovered a single match. He soaked some wood with kerosene he'd found and struck the match.

It fizzled out along with his hopes.

"I had done everything in my power to save us, but it wasn't enough," said Mike, who had finally collapsed. "I could just manage to rise to my hands and knees."

Panic hit him hard for the first time. Handcuffed by exhaustion and weak from hunger, he could barely crawl out the door, much less make the treacherous trek back up the slope where Matt anxiously awaited him.

"I had let him down. I left him alone and was now too weak to go back and get him." Mike said, his voice cracking. "I was at the mercy of someone finding us. I begged God to take care of Matt. It was in God's hands now."

"I had let (Matt) down. I left him alone and was now too weak to go back and get him. … It was in God's hands now."

Back in Ankara, Mark had reunited with his mother and sister. Mary, who struggled to be strong for the kids during the day, would often break down and cry at night. She held on to one thought that helped to keep her sanity: The last time Mike and Matt had been seen, they had been together.

Army Col. Edward J. Fitzgerald, the on-scene commander for the search and rescue effort, called Mary twice a day to keep her updated. The first thing he'd say is, "We didn't find them." Then he'd provide details on the day's search.

At night, mom had to answer those tough questions an 8-year-old won't hesitate to ask.

"Marissa wanted to know why this was happening to us," Mary said, her voice trembling as she wiped tears from her eyes. "I told her I didn't know why, but that God has a plan, and we just have to trust Him."

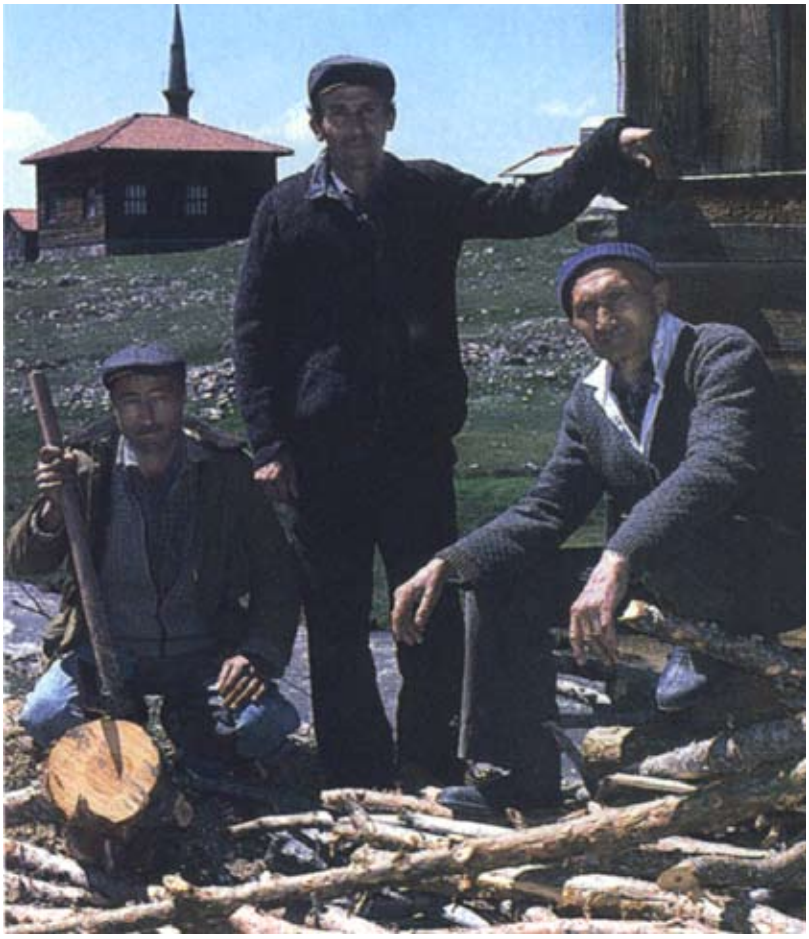
Wiping more tears, Mary suddenly burst into laughter.

"Marissa was kind of frustrated by my answer," she said still chuckling and crying. "She said, *'I knew you were gonna say it's some kinda God thing.'* "

Tasked with finding more "concrete" answers, Fitzgerald and the rescue workers labored day and night.

"We searched every meter of a 40-square-kilometer area," he said. "Each day the likelihood of them being alive diminished. Six feet of snow fell the first three days. By the sixth day, most believed there was a greater likelihood their bodies were buried under 3 or 4 feet of packed snow."

Ironically, on the seventh day — the same day Mike reached the cottages — the search ended for the most part.



"Guardian angels"
Murat Bayram, Ruhi Karababac and Ismail Keklikci (left to right) were among some 17 Turkish lumberjacks who rescued the Couillards. Keklikci, the first to discover Mike, said it was a fluke the woodcutters were even in the area. "We had never cut timber there before."

The Turkish commandos went back to their base, and only a small contingent of U.S. special forces search and rescue workers remained to continue the diligent hunt.

Most speculated the two were dead. In Ankara, a service of hope was held.

On the morning of the ninth day — two days after he had left Matt at the cave — Mike Couillard slowly, agonizingly crawled out onto the porch of one of the cottages to scoop a handful of snow. Suddenly his eyes caught a glimpse of movement. For a minute, he stared in disbelief. …

A truck full of Turkish lumberjacks!

"I started yelling like crazy, using my limited Turkish to tell them *'Please, help!'* " Mike said.

One of the woodcutters, Ismail Keklikci, a rugged 65-year-old man, plowed through waist-deep snow to reach the colonel. Mike found himself looking into a brown, leathery, smiling face. Keklikci, a seemingly frail 5-foot-5, had amazingly big hands, still sticky with tree sap. In one he held an ax, with the other he reached out for the colonel, and said, *"Yarbay?"*

"They knew who I was," Mike said with a wide grin. "Yarbay is Turkish for lieutenant colonel. They told me they'd seen my picture on TV. They were very excited — almost as excited as me."

The woodcutters wrapped Mike in a blanket while he explained to them where Matt was. Half the group took Mike to a forestry service station, while the other half set out to find Matt.

Mike waited in desperation, tormented for news on his son.

Matt, meanwhile, had been drifting in and out of consciousness. Waking up that morning from the nightmare about the death of his father, he tried to leave the cave.

"My dad had told me not to leave, but I thought something bad had happened to him," Matt said. "I tried to leave, but I couldn't walk. So I just stayed in the cave and waited. I was just starting to fall back asleep when I heard some birds making a lot of noise."

But as his drowsiness left him, Matt realized the sounds weren't coming from birds at all. They were voices — *men's voices!*

Matt hollered, *"Hey!"* The lumberjacks rushed over to him, yelling, *"Whoohooo!"* They carried him back to a waiting truck and took him to be reunited with his father.

Keklikci described the scene.

"Yarbay wasn't sure he would see his son again alive," the lumberjack said through an interpreter. "When he saw him in good condition, he just grabbed him, hugging and kissing him. I was so happy I cried more than they did. I was hugging the father and son as tightly as they hugged each other."

The terrible dread about Matt's fate relieved, Mike couldn't stop the tears.

"No words can explain the emotion," Mike said, his voice quivering and his eyes welling up. "I couldn't wait to get my hands on him."

Mike, 15 pounds lighter, and Matt, about 10 pounds thinner, were flown to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, for treatment for hypothermia, dehydration and frostbite. Also, that's where they would be reunited with Mary, Mark and Marissa.

"There were a lot of tears shed at the hospital that day," Mary said. "It was a miracle they were alive."

Capt. Barbara A. Rugo can vouch for that. She is the pediatrician at Incirlik who first treated Matt in the emergency room and then followed his case.

"His (Matt's) condition was amazing," Rugo said. "I thought he would be totally out of it, but he was sitting up, joking around. The first thing he asked for was a Coke and fries. So I knew he was going to be OK."

Mike and Matt could only consume milkshakes and other liquids at first. Rugo said stomach and intestinal problems can develop if food is reintroduced too fast.

"Matt had been in good spirits — very brave," said Rugo, who still keeps a picture of Matt from his stay at the hospital. "But when he saw his mom, he became a little boy again. He started crying, and said, *'Mommy I was so cold, so scared.'* It was very, very emotional."

In and out of the hospital at Incirlik and then at Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio until mid-April 1995, the Couillards were then stationed at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. — ironic in itself since Colorado is where Mike and Mary took their first ski trip together as a couple.

Mike and Matt still have some physical signs to remind them of their ordeal. Matt lost half of one toe and the tip of another — both on his right foot; although, it didn't affect his mobility. Only a few months after the ordeal, he was already running around picking on his little sister and would try to karate kick and otherwise annoy his older brother every chance he got. Mike's healing went a little slower. He was still hobbling around a few months later, but was back on flying status by early June 1995.

Now a drummer in a heavy metal band, Matt will turn 26 May 12. Mike has since retired from the Air Force, and he and Mary will celebrate their 32nd wedding anniversary June 2.

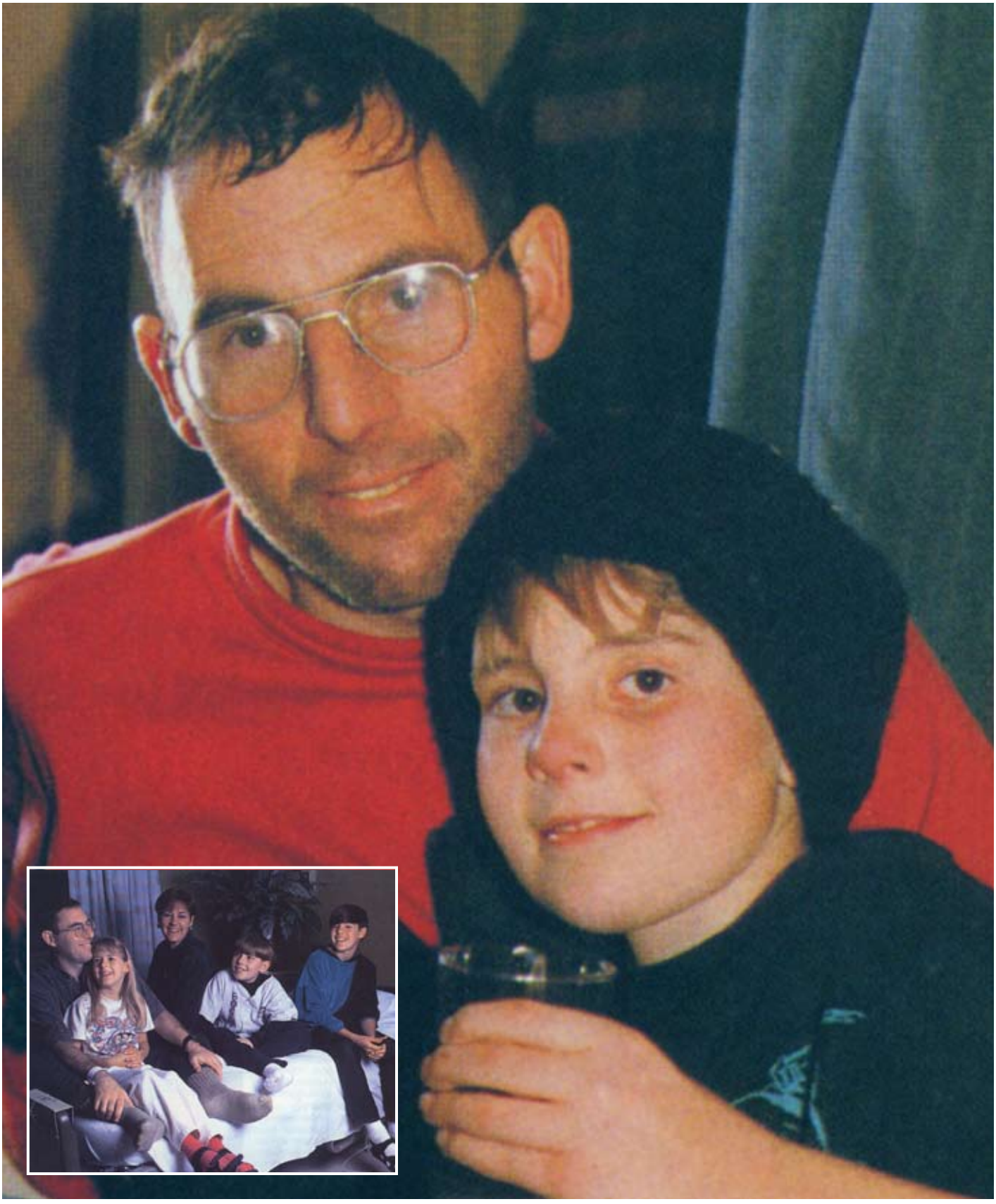
And none of it would have been possible without the miracle on the mountain.

What They Did Wrong

- *Got lost in a blizzard*
- *Kept moving instead of staying put*
- *Had no food, water or matches*

What They Did Right

- *Found a small cave for shelter*
- *Found a stream for a steady supply of water to stay hydrated*
- *Used each other's body heat to minimize effects of hypothermia and frostbite*



***Suffering from exposure, dehydration, malnutrition and frostbite**, Mike and Matt seemed re-energized just moments after their heart-wrenching reunion. Surrounded by his family (inset) at Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio, Mike still couldn't wear shoes after doctors had operated on his frostbitten feet. The family shared a laugh, recalling how Turkish tabloids claimed Mike was an American spy who took pills to sustain himself and used his son, Matt (center), as a cover up. In another instance, a prank caller claiming to be with freedom fighters said he had kidnapped the pair: "You know things are bad when you would actually be relieved to find out your husband and son are in the hands of terrorists," Mary said. "Because at least then you'd know they were alive."*

Seven Summits

A team of Airmen set out to conquer the highest peaks on each

By Maj. **Robert Marshall**
Photos courtesy of the **Seven Summits Team**

Driving my ice ax into the lip of snow separating our team from the summit of Antarctica's highest peak, I trusted its tenuous hold and took the last step up. The scenery during the entire trip was amazing, but nothing quite beats the view, or the feeling, that greets you on the summit when you are standing atop the bottom of the Earth.

It is hard to imagine that just a few days earlier our tents were battered and broken by 30 to 40 mph winds in a spell of bad weather that lasted four days. But with a little tenacity and patience, our goal of flying the Air Force flag from atop Antarctica was realized.

Five years ago, our group of Air Force members started a

of the seven continents

Reaching the summit of Mount Vinson, Antarctica, *Capt. Graydon Muller, left, and Maj. Rob Marshall proudly display the American and Air Force flags. Mount Vinson is the fifth of the seven summits that the Air Force team has conquered.*

historic undertaking: to be the first team of American military members to climb the famed "Seven Summits," which consists of the highest point on each continent. At the time, no military group had ever attempted it. We dreamed of seeing the Air Force flag proudly flying from the pinnacle of each continent, and eventually, on top of the world.

The successful expedition to reach Antarctica's summit was the fifth peak tackled in the challenge, leaving just a small mountain in Australia and then the world's tallest peak, Mount Everest, remaining.

Exiting the Russian IL-76 transport that had just delivered us to a remote runway of blue ice was like stepping onto the sur-

***The Seven Summits team**, comprised of Airmen, makes its way up to Mount Vinson's 16,077-foot summit.*

face of a different planet. There were no plants, animals, insects or smells — just the sound of bitter wind blowing off the glaciated peaks surrounding us.

Shortly after arriving in Antarctica, our team loaded hundreds of pounds of food, fuel and equipment onto a small turboprop plane that flew us to a huge glacier flowing off the side of our goal: Mount Vinson.

Standing at 16,077 feet, Mount Vinson is a rugged and beautiful combination of ancient ice, packed snow thousands of feet deep and crumbling rock.

As the small plane turned on its skis and departed, the truly remote nature of our location sunk in. Without that one plane, there was little way we were leaving this mountain range. It put smiles on the faces of the team members, as it was just us and Mount Vinson. Our task was free from distractions. We had been meticulously planning this climb for weeks, and it was time to execute.

Being in Antarctica, we planned for extreme conditions. Our primary risk came from the possibility of cold injuries: frostbite and hypothermia. After reviewing cold injury prevention and treatment with Hurlburt Field, Fla., medical personnel, and in conjunction with our winter mountaineering equipment, we were prepared to deal with ambient temperatures of 40 below zero.

Luckily the coldest temperature we encountered was 15 below during our summit day. While we always protected against the cold, the team also had to take significant steps to avoid severe sunburn because of the 24-hour sunshine and reflective snowcap.

With base camp built at 7,500 feet on the beautiful Branscomb Glacier, we began several long days during which we carried equipment and supplies to camps further up the mountain. Traveling to higher altitudes and then returning lower to sleep helps the body acclimatize.

Each day averaged 12 hours of hauling backpacks and sleds, digging tent platforms and cutting snow blocks for protective walls. Travel required crossing deep crevasses and climbing steep faces of snow and ice, so we remained roped to each other at all times outside camp.

Four days later, we had established ourselves at the 10,000-feet camp and stashed supplies at the 12,500-feet camp. We were ready to move everything to the higher camp when a storm system moved over the entire mountain range. For the next six days, high winds, cold temperatures and low visibility forced us to hunker down at 10,000 feet. Out of

At Their Peak

Here is a list of the seven summits the Air Force team has set its sights on. They have already topped five of the peaks.

1. EUROPE: Mount Elbrus, Russia, 18,481 feet. Status: Completed July 2005.

2. AFRICA: Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, 19,330 feet. Status: Completed July 2006.

3. SOUTH AMERICA: Aconcagua, Argentina, 22,841 feet. Status: Completed February 2007.

4. NORTH AMERICA: Mount McKinley, Alaska, 20,327 feet. Status: Completed June 2008.

5. ANTARCTICA: Mount Vinson, Sentinel Range, 16,077 feet. Status: Completed December 2010.

6. AUSTRALIA: Mawson Peak, Heard Island, 9,006 feet. Status: Tentatively scheduled for fall of 2011.

7. ASIA: Mount Everest, Nepal-Tibet, China, border, 29,029 feet. Status: Tentatively scheduled for summer 2012.

reach of our supplies at 12,500 feet, we watched as food and fuel began to run low.

But, in line with the training and risk management taught to all special operations troops, we stayed put, not willing to foolishly risk our welfare to push up and further into the storm. Slowly, the clouds broke and the winds abated, leaving us just enough time to push higher toward the summit before running out of supplies and catching our scheduled flight.

Attempting a mountain summit is much like taking on a long-distance swimming event: You must ensure you have enough energy to not only reach the top, but to turn around and make it back.

Carrying enough water, keeping it from freezing and consuming thousands of calories from the right foods is as important as staying warm during a high-altitude summit attempt. Luckily for us, the weather and snow conditions were perfect. Taking a more challenging route than normal, the team reached a ridge just 1,000 feet below the summit that offered breathtaking views of the Antarctic landscape.

An hour later, we climbed over the steep lip atop the summit, proudly swapping high-fives and soaking in the accomplishment of reaching the top.

In line with a long-standing tradition started during my early years of climbing at the Air Force Academy, we did pushups on the summit. The idea is to give a military twist as well as show the mountain didn't take all our strength.

Additionally, the pushups have become a great way to raise money for military-oriented charities, with donations made for each pushup accomplished. Since 2005, team members have raised approximately $60,000 for charities.

After proudly flying the American and Air Force flags, we quickly packed up and began the descent.

Poor weather was rolling in at base camp, threatening the ability for our small plane to land. What took us four days of active climbing to ascend only took 12 hours to descend; that's how motivated we were to catch a flight and begin our trip back home. The plane landed through thickening clouds and fog, getting us off the glacier just as the weather socked in.

Three days of poor weather later, we loaded back onto the Russian cargo plane and flew the four hours back to the tip of South America. Our physical training, mental preparation and extensive equipment paid off. No one on the team got frostbite or seriously injured, and the Air Force became the first military team to reach the summit of Antarctica.

Funny enough, it felt much like "another day at work" in the unpredictable and exciting life known to special operations troops.

***At a 14,000-foot base camp** prior to reaching the 22,841-foot summit of Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, the Air Force team makes final preparations.*

Major Marshall is a CV-22 Osprey pilot with the 8th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla. He has piloted combat missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan doing everything from eliminating known enemies of America to resupplying special ops troops. He was also among the first pilots to fly the Osprey across the ocean en route to Africa. For more information about the Seven Summivts Challenge, visit www.usaf7summits.com.

Seven Greatest Risks

Reaching the Continents' Tallest Peaks

If you're adventurous enough — or crazy enough — to tackle the seven summits, here are seven hazards you can expect to encounter.

1. ALTITUDE SICKNESS: This is a problem for most of the high mountains. You need to know how to prevent, recognize and treat it. Allowing yourself to acclimate to the altitude, being fit and staying hydrated help prevent altitude sickness.

2. FALLS: There are two main fall hazards: Slipping down a sheer cliff face or falling in a crevasse. It's important to stay roped together and know how to self arrest.

3. WEATHER: Facing the elements on the mountain is always hazardous. Blizzards, high winds and freezing temperatures can come without notice. Winds have been known to rip tents apart. Ironically, even in the frigid environment, climbers are susceptible to severe sunburn as sunrays reflect off the ice and snow.

4. COLD: Frostbite and hypothermia are real threats. It's better to over-pack so you are prepared to combat the freezing temperatures.

5. AVALANCHE: You have to constantly be aware of this risk, know the conditions, and choose your routes carefully.

6. DISORIENTATION: Mountaineering means you're out in an unforgiving wilderness and it's easy to lose your bearings. Mark your trail with little flags, use GPS to mark your positions and don't forget a compass, just in case the satellites fail you. Communication devices are also key.

7. SUMMIT-ITIS: This is a phenomenon that occurs when climbers think they must reach the top of the mountain at all costs. And it causes people to make deadly decisions, such as continuing even in horrible weather or when sick or injured. So you need to tell yourself the mountain will always be there, and call a knock-it-off when necessary. You can always climb it next year.

— Maj. Robert Marshall

Emergency in the Talon!

By Maj. **Cory "Ogre" Christoffer**
Photo by Tech. Sgt. **Matthew Hannen**

Nearly every Air Force pilot, having gone through undergraduate pilot training, would probably agree that the emergency procedures "stand up" was the most dreadful aspect of the 4:30 a.m. formal brief. I remember being a student in class 00-06 at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, waiting for the stand up portion to start … palms sweating, heart beating, checklist and in-flight guide open. I remember hoping that if I was called upon to handle a simulated aircraft emergency, that it would be one that I had reviewed and studied, knew the indications, where it was located in the checklist, and how to recover the jet appropriately.

Every student knew that "hooking" a stand up meant that you failed in front of your peers, classmates and instructors. You didn't want to be that guy. More often than not, it meant you were taken off the flying schedule to study the appropriate way to handle the "emergency."

Of course, there's always a purpose to the madness.

Last February I found myself in a T-38C Talon in the east military operating area at Randolph AFB, Texas, working a real-world, complex emergency as an instructor pilot.

The aircraft emergency, albeit not complicated itself, happened at a time of deteriorating weather, with a wingman short on fuel, and with a constant flow of traffic recovering to the same runway.

While in the airspace in tactical formation and at 20,000 feet, I experienced a rapid decompression of the front cockpit. I took control of the aircraft from my student in the rear cockpit and descended below 10,000 feet, while simultaneously accomplishing other checklist items. I then requested

As soon as I broke out of the weather just below 300 feet above ground level, in the rain and mist, I heard that the jet in front of me had blown a tire on the runway.

***With bad weather surrounding them**, a T-38 instructor pilot and his student experienced a rapid decompression in the cockpit and had to make an emergency landing.*

the lead in the airspace and worked a plan to bring myself and my wingman back to base as safely and expeditiously as possible.

The weather at Randolph was at minimums, and the top of the clouds began at 8,000 feet. Landing fuel was higher than normal because of an alternate requirement that was a significant distance from Randolph. I kept my wingman with me until we got to radar downwind, accomplished all checklist items required, told the supervisor of flying my intentions, and made the squadron supervisor aware of the plan.

The "stand up" emergency, if you will, was going just fine and as advertised. There were no physiological symptoms with me or my student. We were in line for the approach and had the gas for one approach and landing before we went below divert fuel.

It was raining significantly. The runway was wet, but the ceiling and visibility were above minimums.

On the way back to base I remember thinking I had fuel to divert. However, if my gas were to go below divert gas, I would be unable to emergency divert because I did not have any cabin pressure and did not want to climb above flight level 250; the emergency divert required a climb above flight level 300. So, basically, I had one shot at the approach, and then I would have to make a decision to divert or try the approach again.

To sum it up, I was on a 10-mile final in poor weather with an in-flight emergency. I was at my limit for divert fuel, and my wingman was behind me 10 miles awaiting his turn to land.

That's when I heard something that forced my decision-making process to speed up significantly.

As soon as I broke out of the weather just below 300 feet above ground level, in the rain and mist, I heard that the aircraft in front of me had blown a tire on the runway.

Thirteen years ago as a second lieutenant I did not have the experience to make a decision like the one I had to make at this point. I had to make a decision to either land with another jet on the wet runway, to go around and divert to the alternate, or to go around and back in the weather for an approach to the other available runway at Randolph.

As a previously declared emergency aircraft, tower told me I could land on the opposite side of the runway as the disabled jet with a blown tire. However, I looked up and down the runway and could not see the end of the runway or the other jet because of the limited visibility.

I decided to pass on that option.

Instead, I elected to take myself and my wingman around to 14R, the other runway at Randolph, which had different approach frequencies yet similar minimums. I had the fuel to do another approach at Randolph but not to divert below flight level 250.

After talking with my student, my wingman and the supervisor of flying, they all concurred with my plan to do the approach to 14R, hoping at this point that the deteriorating weather did not get any worse. There had not been a pilot report on 14R, but we all felt confident that the weather was at least at a 200-foot ceiling and one-half mile visibility.

I coordinated quickly for the approach to the other runway for myself and my wingman, continued to state that I was an emergency, which at this time included emergency fuel for me and my wingman, reviewed the approach for 14R, and began to receive vectors. Radar approach control and tower did an excellent job giving us priority among other aircraft with more fuel and more of a capability to hold.

The 14R weather was 200 feet; visibility was three-quarters of a mile, and the runway was wet. Nonetheless, landing was uneventful for both of us in the rain and the mist, and we all made it to the squadron safely. We had to take a trip to the flight surgeon because of the rapid decompression, and were not allowed to fly for 24 hours.

Rapid decompression at 20,000 feet, vectored to weather minimums at divert fuel, sudden runway closure after breaking out, going below normal divert fuel, getting vectored to minimums again to a different runway, and landing with emergency fuel … that is quite the "stand up" emergency! Because of experience, using crew resource management and, together, making timely decisions, this emergency was resolved safely. We stayed on the flying schedule to train another day.

Major Christoffer is a T-38 pilot and the chief of flight safety for the 12th Flying Training Wing at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas.

by Tech. Sgt. Samuel Bendet

***Maj. Cory "Ogre" Christoffer** was glad to have his "stand up" emergency training when he experienced an in-flight emergency in the T-38 and had to land in bad weather, low on fuel at an alternate runway.*

CLICHÉS IN SPADES

T-6 PILOT FINDS HIMSELF ON WRONG SIDE OF STEREOTYPE

By Maj. **Tim "Vito" Vituszynski**
Photo composite by **David Stack**

We've all read enough safety clichés to make our heads explode. Let's face it; there are no new accidents (another cliché). I mean, seriously, how many times do we have to read about some idiot who doesn't take his flying job seriously and goes out and does something stupid to get himself killed? … Ugh!

I'm sick of it. I'm never going to become one of these statistics (ouch, another cliché). Heck, I'm a safety officer for Pete's sake!

Of course, then I became "that guy" … the one who made the "stupid" mistake that transformed him into a walking, talking cliché.

On a routine flight in the T-6A Texan II, I neglected to attach my shoulder straps into my harness. This meant that if I had pulled the ejection handle, the seat would have cleared the jet; and I would have fallen to my death because I was not attached to the parachute.

How'd it happen? The list of clichés that created this potential disaster is long.

Complacency: How routine could this flight be? A student out-and-back in the mighty Texan II. The first leg didn't even have a drop-in. Just straight there for three instrument approaches in perfect weather. What could be easier?

Fatigue: OK, a 4:45 a.m. show does stink a little bit. I'll counteract that with an energy drink. No problem.

Checklist Discipline: The student reads the checklist, I just respond when prompted. I know it so well that I don't have to refer to it. I can tell when the student reads a step wrong. How many times have I responded, "Legs, lap, seat kit, shoulders, harness, hoses, helmet" or whatever?

Old Head Syndrome: Man, I've got nearly 4,200 hours in everything from trainers to tankers. After 17 years of flying with only one little three-year stint at headquarters, I've been flying my entire career. I have seen it all.

Distracted Thinking: Everyone's got this. How much stuff builds up and starts to intrude on flying? Lives, wives, kids, desk duties, changing gate entry times, syllabus changes, inspections … everything has its place, right? Just don't bring it to the jet. That's what we get paid the big bucks to do.

The 200-Hour Milestone: They say that the most dangerous time in an aviator's career is at about the 200-hour point. Just do a Web search on "200 hours" and "flight safety" and there's a litany of sites that talk about 200 hours as a job requirement: 200 multi-engine hours, 200 night hours, 200 hours in type, you name it. Two hundred hours is a magic number. My hours in the T-6 at the time of this flight? … 216.

As expected, the flight proved to be a cakewalk. The student pilot turned out to be actually pretty good, and the flight was calm with not a cloud in the sky and hardly any air traffic to get in the way. I thought I might actually get to enjoy my free breakfast as we debrief.

"If I had pulled the ejection handle, the seat would have cleared the jet; and I would have fallen to my death because I was not attached to the parachute."

So what in the world happened? Plain and simple, all of these things added up to me not latching myself into my ejection seat properly before I flew. And I only noticed it once the engine had been shut down, and I started to unstrap.

Now comes the worst part of these kinds of articles. Suddenly, some guy who narrowly escapes his own demise because of his own doing has the authority to tell you how to fly safer? … Please.

Well, I'm not going to even try. I know what I did wrong, as I'm sure you do too. This incident has re-caged my focus, because I realize how close I came to being that statistic.

Am I embarrassed and angry that it happened to me of all people? You bet.

Do I think this article can change the flying world? As you probably guessed, I don't. More than anything, this is my own "journal entry" that will hopefully remind me not to do something so idiotic again. But if I can get one other skeptic to take a second look and catch the thing that could almost kill him, so much the better.

Sorry, I'm not going to sign off with "Fly safe," yet another cliché. Instead, I'll just say, "Don't be stupid."

Major Vituszynski is a T-6A instructor pilot and the chief of flight safety for the 455th Flying Training Squadron at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla.


A
USAF
A

CLEAR THE RUNWAY

AIRMEN RESCUE FOUR PEOPLE FROM

HELICOPTER CRASH

DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. (ACCNS) — Air Force reservists from the 943rd Rescue Group responded to a Pima County Sheriff's helicopter crash in a rugged Avra valley, northwest of Tucson, Jan. 31.

Around noon, 943rd RQG Airmen were conducting two rescue helicopter training missions in the local area when they heard radio chatter indicating there had been a potentially serious accident.

"We are an Air Force rescue helicopter with a hoist. Do you need our help?" the aircraft commander asked.

The 943rd RQG is an Air Force combat-search-and-rescue unit that trains to rescue downed or injured service members from combat situations.

The distressed helicopter crew responded yes, and the Airmen immediately returned to Davis-Monthan AFB and picked up para-rescuemen, or PJs, to assist with the rescue. The PJs are highly-skilled personnel recovery specialists trained to perform rescues in all types of environments, to include mountain, cold-weather, water, etc.

by Capt. Cathleen Snow

An HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter *pierces the desert sky over the southern-Arizona mountains for high-altitude training. Members of the 943rd Rescue Group at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., rescued four people from a helicopter crash Jan. 31.*

Because of the rough terrain in the valley, local rescuers had difficulty hiking to the accident scene.

There were four people on board the mishap aircraft; two were able to escape, and two were trapped in the helicopter.

"We were very concerned that our rotor wash would cause the wreckage to tumble down the cliff," said Capt. Brough McDonald, HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter pilot, 943rd RQG.

The helicopter below was teetering, so the aircrew put the helo's main gear in contact with the ground while three para-rescuemen jumped out and secured the wreckage with ropes.

The PJs also are trained trauma specialists. In addition to getting to the victims in this hard-to-reach spot, they provided immediate medical aid.

Two of the survivors were able to walk and could board the aircraft with some assistance, while the other two had to be hoisted with litters. The survivors were transported to local medical facilities.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

— Capt. Cathleen Snow
943rd Rescue Group

by Tech. Sgt. James L. Harper Jr.

C-17 MARKS
2 MILLIONTH FLIGHT HOUR

A C-17 Globemaster III drops pallets of water and food over Mirebalais, Haiti, Jan. 21, 2010, to be distributed by members of the United Nations. In December, the C-17 celebrated its 2 millionth flight hour during an airdrop mission out of Bagram Airfield, Aghanistan. As a testament to the C-17 mission tempo, reliability and outstanding safety record, the aircraft passed its 2 millionth flight hour just four years after passing its first million-hour mark, and the first million hours took 16 years to reach. One reason for the C-17's success is its versatility in both strategic and tactical airlift operations, Air Mobility Command officials said. The C-17 has broken airdrop records monthly during the past year, keeping an estimated 970 trucks off of hazardous roads per month. It also plays an integral role in airlift and the 98 percent survivability rate in aeromedical evacuation operations.

F-16 FIGHTING FALCONS BRING WING

'BATTLE RHYTHM'

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. — After 17 months of silence, the 33rd Fighter Wing flight line finally roared back to life Jan. 13.

The 33rd Fighter Wing received four F-16s from the 56th Fighter Wing at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. The jets will help establish a "battle rhythm," as the wing stands up the first Joint Training Center for the fifth generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

"Everybody who operates on this base will benefit from an airplane taxiing out of here," said Col. James Ravella, 33rd Operations Group commander, "and outside the base, from Tyndall Air Force Base to Pensacola Naval Air Station and other divert bases will get used to us coming over there."

Officials elected to bring the F-16 to the wing because of its similarity to its descendant, the F-35. Its flying characteristics are similar to the F-35, so the training and mindset pilots are going to have in a single-engine fighter transitions from the F-16 into the F-35.

by Samuel King Jr.

In an F-16 Fighting Falcon, *Lt. Col. J.D. Wilbourne, 58th Fighter Squadron commander, greets 33rd Fighter Wing leadership upon arrival to Eglin AFB, Fla., Jan. 13. Four F-16s from Luke AFB, Ariz., were brought to the wing to help prepare the pilots and maintainers for the imminent arrival of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.*

The initial cadre of F-35 instructor pilots will fly the F-16s for about one year to validate processes and warm up the ramp, which has not been used to fly an aircraft since the wing transitioned to Air Education and Training Command in October 2009. Officials from AETC, Eglin and Luke worked for more than a year to bring the F-16s to Eglin.

"You are driving down risk by the type of aircraft, the type of flying we are going to be doing, and just establishing a battle rhythm at the 33rd with the integration of Team Eglin," said Navy Capt. Michael Saunders, 33rd OG deputy commander.

Team Eglin members play multiple roles in the success of the 33rd FW training mission, and the addition of these four aircraft will rekindle those partnerships.

"It exercises the whole 33rd as well as our coordination with the 96th Air Base Wing for their support and the 46th Test Wing where we coordinate air space and scheduling," Ravella said. "We can't fly without linking into the 46th Test Wing or the 96th Air Base Wing. Those are the same relationships we are going to exercise when we fly the F-35."

The benefits of the F-16s have already been evident, even prior to their arrival. Wing personnel began testing hardware like hotlines that had not been in service in the 17 months since the last F-15 Eagle left the wing.

The 33rd Fighter Wing is producing the template for F-35 pilot and maintainer training, a model which will be applied across the spectrum of fighter operations for the foreseeable future. Those processes will be fielded on those four initial aircraft.

"This program is too important to the future of our nation to leave to conceptual planning," Saunders said. "We need to test our processes with real iron — actual aircraft. It is one of those things that is going to help us root out the processes and identify seams or rough spots before we start up F-35 training here. This is a critical piece of that."

In addition to the aircraft, about 50 maintainers from Luke will stay to work on the jets during the year, said Capt. Timothy Plante, 62nd Fighter Squadron Aircraft Maintenance Unit officer in charge. The advanced team of 10 has already received seven 40-foot trucks full of equipment.

"We got all our parts and equipment to fly these airplanes," the captain said. "It is just one step closer to the stand up of the F-35."

The board-selected, best-of-the-best pilots from three services have flown a diverse group of aircraft from F-15s to Harriers. The group, including Sailors and Marines, will fly with a common base thanks to the F-16.

"It is a joint effort," Ravella said. "Eventually, the Marine pilots that will transition to the F-35 will also fly the F-16. The Air Force provided hardware for the joint solution for the wing."

The 33rd "Nomads" re-designated under AETC on Oct. 1, 2009. The joint wing is responsible for F-35 A/B/C pilot and maintainer training for the Marine Corps, the Navy and the Air Force. In the future, 59 aircraft and three flying squadrons, one for each service/aircraft variant, will be established.

"It is a part of a continuing process," Ravella said. "Bringing an airplane in here is a huge step; it is a visual step that the 33rd is restarting flying operations."

— Ashley M. Wright
Team Eglin Public Affairs