



Sole Survivor

By Rochel Burstyn

Occasionally, we hear amazing stories of people who, b'chastei Hashem, "somehow," against all odds, emerge alive from catastrophic crashes or accidents. Today, we're heading to Arizona to meet one such "walking miracle" – retired U.S. Air Force Captain George Burk, who is a Vietnam veteran.

Hi, Captain Burk. Please tell our readers a bit about yourself.

I'm from Pittsburgh. I joined the Air Force in 1963, went to technical school, got married, and trained as an air-traffic control officer. I volunteered to go to Vietnam in 1967. I served for a year and then I was selected as a Team Chief of Air Traffic Control Analysis and Maintenance at Hamilton Air Force Base (AFB), California. My team would fly to different military bases, do the required analysis of the air-traffic control and maintenance, then after a week, we'd return to Hamilton AFB.

How'd that go?

Like clockwork... until May 4, 1970. We were going to make our next-to-last visit before we were done. There were fourteen of us. We boarded a plane that day at Hamilton. There was fog, a light rain, but it was deemed safe enough to fly.

The plane's pressure locks were sealed, the engine rumbled and we taxied down the runway. The plane took off. Over the roar of the engines, I called to two of the men seated near me that I wanted to talk about the visit to the base, but I was tired and wanted to take a nap first. I took off my sunglasses, put them on the table, lowered my head in my arms and tried to nap.

I found out later that only nine minutes had passed when I heard a noise, which caused me to snap to alert and look around.

What kind of noise?

It was a loud, crackling sound.

When I looked up, I saw a huge spider-like crack in a window. I immediately yelled that we had better let the pilot know; it looked like we had a problem. But then things went from bad to worse. The noise became high pitched, getting louder and more pronounced. And then — BOOM! The windows blew out completely, and air rushed in. The noise was deafening. The plane was pitching violently, rolling back and forth in the air, flames lapping at the sides of the plane. I remember my coworker Kenny coming back up the aisle — he'd gone to speak to the pilot — his eyes the size of silver dollars, his coat flapping in the wind. We knew we were in trouble. The nose of the plane had split open and the left side of the cockpit was completely gone.

What was going through your mind at the time?

Time seemed to slow down. I assumed the survival position recommended for a crash, but I knew there was no chance I was

getting out of this alive. In those few minutes, I experienced fear like I never have and probably never will again. My brain was working feverishly. I went through a million emotions. Why me? Why was this happening? I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to my family. They were going to be devastated. I hoped my life-insurance policies were intact. I was very aware of every precise detail, every sensation, every sense was heightened.

And then I remember the impact. The bending, screaming of metal, being thrown violently back against my seat and then, when the plane stopped, I was thrown forward and my face struck the table. I broke my nose, but I didn't even notice. I started to stand and hollered, "Come on, let's get out of here!" Then I felt a sensation like hot water flash all over me. Everything went black.

When I opened my eyes again, I was face down on the ground about 10 feet (3 meters) away from the plane. I must have dug my way out through a crack in the side of the plane, although I have no memory of it. The laces in my left shoe were gone, but oddly enough, my right shoe was still on and the laces were tied. I thought I heard cries for help from inside the plane and though I was burned all over, I instinctively started crawling back to help. But I heard a hissing sound, a muffled explosion, and then felt a great deal of heat on my face. I realized at that moment that ... I was the sole survivor of the plane crash.

Please tell us about your rescue.

I started to get up but experienced terrible back pain. The air stank of aviation fuel. I couldn't believe what had just happened. I was sure I would wake up from this awful nightmare at any moment. I didn't know where I was or how to get help. Somehow, I managed to stumble down a small slope through waist-high grass to two small trees. I lay down and pulled myself into a ball. I began to go into shock. I was really cold and extremely thirsty. I ran my hand through my hair and ash came raining out.

That's when I started having a battle with myself. Part of me thought, "Close your eyes; this will all go away." The other part kept calling me

nasty names and warned me, "If you close your eyes, you will die." Then the gentle voice said, "Go to sleep." And the other voice replied, "Don't you dare!" I pictured my family and felt the will to live.

Then, suddenly, amazingly, I heard voices. I forced myself to my feet, waved my arms over my head, ignoring the pain, and called, "Over here, over here!" Then I collapsed. It turned out firefighters had been called by a local farmer who had seen smoke. When the two volunteer firefighters first saw me, they were horrified. I was burned all over my face.

I was put on a gurney and flown by Coast Guard helicopter to the base hospital. I had multiple fractures and suffered burns on over 67 percent of my body. It was a long road – I was in intensive care for 90 days and spent 18 months in a burn unit. My doctor at the burn unit in San Antonio, Texas, told my family that he didn't think I would survive past day 14 of the accident. But here I am!

What do you do these days?

I'm a motivational speaker, trainer and author. Being a sole survivor of a plane crash, I've had to learn to live with different types of emotions, such as survivors' guilt. Why did I survive and not my friends? I dealt with post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. Now I try to help others identify and manage their challenges. I've taken my personal experiences and share some of my many "lessons learned" with veterans and others who face similar life challenges.

I like to say, "If you expect a difference, make one. If you want a miracle, be one." It's been 46 years since that terrible day, 46 years of days that I wasn't expected to have, and I'm so grateful.

After I was medically retired from the Air Force in late 1971, I've had 45 years of "Free Days," days I wasn't expected to experience, and which I cherish. ■

