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Resilient Survivor

Capt. Burk describes plane crash that killed 13 other military personnel

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Almost 40 years ago, he was alone in a field, surrounded by explosive aircraft wreckage, listening to the “snap crackle pop” of the fire that was consuming the debris and nearby trees — the fire that had burned more than 65 percent of his body — and he realized death was imminent.

Capt. George A. Burk, United States Air Force (retired), begged God to not let him die in the field alone.

“My second self, my spirit, my soul, was prepared for me to die,” he said Thursday in council chambers at City Hall when he spoke to a large group of city personnel and leaders, firefighters, law enforcement officers, and other community members.

“I know now what it’s like to be alone,” Burk, 68, said. “The feeling that you’re alone and no one’s going to find you — that you’re going to burn to death in this field all alone without a chance to say goodbye to your mother, your father, your family, your children, your wife.”

As he started to go into shock, he faced an internal struggle of whether to close his eyes — and perish — or keep his eyes open and fight.

Burk was aboard a twin-engine transport plane May 4, 1970, with 13 other military personnel en route from Hamilton AFB near San Francisco, Calif., to Spokane, Wash. About four minutes after takeoff, radio contact was lost when the aircraft suddenly experienced massive structural failure, and the pilot was killed instantly. The co-pilot attempted a crash-landing, but was not successful.

“I had no idea — nothing could have prepared me — my military training, my athletic background, anything my parents tried to teach me — that could have prepared me for that morning May 4, 1970.”

Burk described the hot air from a fireball that had shot through the plane as “someone dumping a large bucket of scalding hot water on me, then everything went black.”

He opened his eyes, facedown about 10 feet from the airplane, he said, and rolled over onto his back and noticed his skin was black.

“I knew if I sat there I was going to die,” he said.

His instinct and will to survive made him fight for life, and hold on to a slight thread of hope until he was discovered and transported to a medical center.

But then a new journey began that changed his life forever. In addition to the severe burns, Burk suffered multiple internal injuries, spent 90 days in intensive care where he had two near death experiences and spent another 18 months in the hospital afterward.

Through the arduous path to recovery, it was the personal competence, personal courage, personal leadership and compassion and love of his doctors, nurses, and family members that fueled his will to live, he said.

“I’m a direct recipient of that,” he said. “That’s why I’m alive.” Burk now is a nationally recognized motivational speaker, author and trainer.

He is a guest speaker at the United States Naval Academy, United States Military Academy and the United States Air Force Academy on issues of character development, ethics, and leadership. In February 2001, his story was profiled on the Discovery Health Channel.

Burk has received numerous awards, including The Bronze Star; Air Force Commendation Medal; Presidential Award for Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Department of Defense Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Department of the Navy Outstanding Employee with a Disability; Air Force Meritorious Civilian Service Award; and the Adrian College (Michigan) Alumni Achievement Award.

Almost 40 years later, Burk still suffers physical ailments as a direct result from the crash, but refuses to be treated as a victim. He also has been contacted by four adult children of the crash victims, including Cañon City council member Daryl Robinson, whose father, Major

Robert L. Robinson, Jr. was the pilot of the airplane.

“Daryl is the third ‘child’ who since 1990 has contacted me,” he said, “literally out of the blue.”

Robinson found Burk’s Web site online in January and hesitantly sent him an e-mail. “I picked up my cell phone, we talked for 45 minutes and here I am,” Burk said.

Robinson and Burk have since formed a close-knit relationship.

“I no longer fear death,” Burk said. “Because I know where I am going; I know there is something else ... I’m good to myself, I eat right, I exercise, I pray a lot and I know where I’m going and I’m a very blessed man.”

Burk will share his story of faith, hope, perseverance and commitment at 9 a.m. Sunday at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, 801 N. Sheridan Ave.

