



● *It has been our custom in recent years to produce something unusual in these pages for the Christmas issue. This year we reproduce for your benefit a remarkable story which came our way some time ago. Though not strictly a Flight Safety story, it is so remarkable as to be of interest to all concerned with aircraft and their operation.*

Here is a classic example, not only of a fantastic will to survive, but of the noble compassion of the Good Samaritan. It serves to remind us, at this season of hail and good cheer, that the human spirit can transcend physical limits if the determination is there.

MAJOR Thomas D. Smith, a former Olympic athlete and now a USAF F-4C commander, was one of ten persons on board a C-47 aircraft when the fuselage cracked open in severe turbulence. The day, 13 Jan 66; the place, Mt Helmos, Greece. Seated at the point of disintegration, Major Smith was blown out of the side of the aircraft still in his seat and without a parachute. He unbuckled his seat belt and kicked free of the seat. While freefalling, he observed a large area of snow drifts and granite outcroppings. Hoping to land in the snow he rolled into a tight ball, which saved his life as he hit between two boulders in an area which had been packed with drifting snow. The other passengers remained fixed to their seats in the aircraft and they fell to the earth approximately three thousand feet from the Major's impact point.



This area of the mountain, far above the tree line in a snow and ice field, offered absolutely no material for shelter or fire. The weather was 20° Fahrenheit in 30 to 40 knots of blowing snow and ice.

The Major's injuries consisted of three fractured neck vertebrae, three fractured back vertebrae, multiple crushed spinal discs, multiple severe joint sprains and massive bruises. Clad only in a summer flying suit, he awoke with severe frostbite, badly frozen hands and feet, and was totally blind. He managed to dig the frozen and torn flesh from his eye sockets and regained partial sight. He spotted the debris of the wreck and made his way to the crash site, there discovering seven bodies scattered about in the snow. The largest piece of wreckage was a 10-ft section of empennage.

ordeal by frost

The Major assisted six bodies which showed sign of life into this tail section. The blizzard quickly covered them with ice and snow.

Despite his injuries, complicated by partial eyesight and hands frozen into claws—he made repeated trips into the blizzard to gather debris with which to close the gaping hole and then finished sealing the wind out with two parachutes. He went back into the blizzard and gathered 14 parachutes which he dragged one at a time into the shelter, clawed them open, peeled ice and snow off the bodies, and covered his patients with parachutes and scraps of aircraft insulation. At no time did any of the other passengers assist Major Smith in constructing the shelter or with any subsequent life-saving or rescue activity.

The Major discovered his body was stiffening almost beyond control. He realized he could not afford the luxury of sleep as both he and the others would freeze to death if he did not remain awake to keep the parachute covers fluffed up to insure a minimum amount of airspace



insulation to keep out the freezing cold. He then began to exercise until he regained the use of his arms and legs. This regimen was to continue for the entire 48 hours.

By morning the blizzard had blown the shelter along an ice ridge until only 10 feet lay between the shelter and a drop of thousands of feet obscured below in fog. Two of his patients had died in the night. Of the three remaining, one was in total shock and the other two were maimed and could not move without assistance. All rescue radios were broken, there was no food or water, and the wreck was hidden from search aircraft by drifting layers of snow cloud. Major Smith examined the survivors and decided that another day of exposure and lack of medical attention would result in their death. Although he did not know his

location; was not aware of the area of storm coverage; had no warm clothes, food, water, or facilities for a fire; but did fully comprehend the danger of descending an ice cliff in a snow storm—he decided to attempt a try for help.

After tying a signal flag to the top of the shelter and securing a signal parachute around his waist, he moved down the ridge in dense fog until he slipped and plummeted down the ridge. This process of falling down ridges continued for 1500 feet until he broke out of fog and was able to climb a peak which was in the clear. The Major sat down, unwrapped the parachute, held it in the wind and waited. Presently a C-130 flew by and spotted the red parachute against the white snow. For the first time, rescue headquarters knew in which country the aircraft had crashed.

After pointing out the direction of the wreck, he began the long climb back. However, he slipped once more and this time tumbled to the edge of a crevasse. As he lay there unconscious, the pilot of the C-130 decided drastic measures were in order and "buzzed" the unconscious figure until he struggled to his feet and tried again. Major Smith has no recollection of the remainder of the climb back. When he fell into the wreckage that night, the other survivors state that he was delirious and mumbling incoherently.

The United States Sixth Fleet was directed to the Greek Coast and helicopters from the USS *Forrestal* finalised the rescue the following day, 17th January 1966, at 1300 hours; three days and two nights after the accident. The three other survivors were placed on stretchers, carried to the helicopter, flown to Wheelus AFB, Libya, and hospitalised in critical condition. Doctors there declared the three would not have survived without Major Smith's care and the risk of his life in a timely bid for rescue.

★ Major Smith was awarded the Airman's Medal for heroism by General Bruce K. Holloway, Commander-in-Chief United States Air Forces in Europe, at a special awards ceremony attended by the USAFE General Staff.

General Holloway stated that the Airman's Medal was the highest award for peacetime valour which he could bestow, and Major Smith's actions were the most deserving of the medal in the General's personal history.