



Surviving six near-fatal mishaps was luck; the next time Bob Mihalik wasn't so sure. After the 7th crash, Bob became a missionary pilot to serve the God who saved him.

Surviving 7 Crashes Isn't Luck, So He Became a Missionary Pilot

Six times in his Air Force career, Bob Mihalik emerged unhurt from near-fatal crashes and mishaps. The seventh time he decided it wasn't just luck.

"God's my pilot now," says Mihalik, who today courts adventure over Central American jungles and African deserts as a globe-trotting missionary aviator.

"Most people think of missionary pilots as zealots preaching to the heathen," says Mihalik. "Of course, many of us are motivated by a religious concern for the suffering. But our work is humanitarian."

Mihalik volunteers for Wings of Hope, a non-denominational relief agency based in St. Louis. "We fly food, medicine, supplies and personnel for the Peace Corps, Red Cross, religious missions and others trying to help people in remote areas."

However, Mihalik concedes the other popular notion about missionary pilots: "We can tell some hairy stories of jungle flying—literally on a wing and a prayer!"

Testimony Time. Mihalik joined Wings of Hope in 1977 after leaving his civilian career—and 18 years after leaving

the Air Force. Yet he believes God began the preparation for missionary work in 1939, when he first enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

"I was a good boy who went to church and did all the traditional things, but didn't feel God was personally involved with me—or I with him," recalls Mihalik.

But in 1941, while based in Puerto Rico as an airborne radio operator, Mihalik believes God began a series of "close calls that brought me into a personal relationship with Him."

His first brush with death was in 1941 when Mihalik survived a swimming accident in which seven others were drowned.

"We were swimming off the coast when one of us went out too far and couldn't get back." With no other recourse, the remaining men made a human chain down a 200-foot cliff to retrieve their friend.

A huge wave broke the chain and, Mihalik remembers, "when I came to, there was sand and saltwater running from my nose, mouth and ears. They said I was lucky."

Later that year, Mihalik participated in

a simulated bomb raid over San Juan. His plane was struck by lightning, fell tail first and was righted just 2000 feet from impact.

"The lightning left a 24-foot streak, bent one wing, and knocked out all the wing fairings," Mihalik says. "The pilots said they had no control over the plane—and that landing gear, flaps and bomb bay doors all came down without assistance."

Engineers scrapped the plane, unable to explain how it avoided mishap. Mihalik, then 19, decided he was lucky again.

Eight years went by. Then on a 1949 training flight to obtain a pilot license, Mihalik was forced by an unexpected storm to land in an Illinois cornfield.

"The corn was cut so landing was no problem. But taking off, I hit a fence post that flipped the plane." Despite total wreckage of the aircraft, Mihalik escaped with only a pulled muscle—and his belief in luck still intact.

In 1950, aboard an Air Force C-47 en route to Japan, Mihalik remembers "laying asleep on the radio desk, when water woke me. So much water was coming through the bulkheads, at first I thought we were in a submarine!"

The plane had run into a typhoon over the Sea of Japan.

"The controllers wouldn't let us land at our home base because other planes were lost in our vicinity," Mihalik says. "So they sent us to a base further south—where we couldn't land either for the same reason."

But over the second base at 7000 feet, the pilot by chance spotted the ceiling light used by weathermen to gauge the altitude of the cloud cover.

These lights seldom penetrate the lowest clouds. "But there we were, almost out of fuel, when this light broke through all the multiple layers of swirling clouds."

The C-47 spiraled down to a safe landing. But Mihalik wasn't so sure anymore that he owed his life to simple luck.

Mihalik, moonlighting as a flight instructor, survived unhurt an explosion over Ohio in 1957 that destroyed his aircraft. Two years later—and just a month before leaving the Air Force—he escaped unharmed from an auto crash.

"It was in Oklahoma," Mihalik recalls, "and I had fallen asleep at the wheel. The car hit a signpost, rolled down an embankment and turned over three times."

The Miracle. Saved six times from death in his Air Force career, Mihalik still held only vague recognition of distant God. "Despite all He had done, I did not



Above: Bob Mihalik (standing at left) poses with Guatemalan villagers; below: he helps villager board Wings of Hope airplane for transport to hospital.

feel personally involved with Him.”

Stationed last at Scott AFB in Belleville, Ill., near St. Louis, Mihalik settled there with his wife and worked for the Defense Mapping Agency.

But in 1972, God intervened again.

“I was giving flight instructions and just after takeoff, at about 200 feet, the engine stopped,” Mihalik says. “I couldn’t go straight because of town buildings, and couldn’t turn right into a row of parked airplanes.”

Mihalik banked 120 degrees to the left, hitting the ground with enough force to put the engine partly into the cockpit. When pulled from the wreckage, he had sustained torn chest cartilage, severe whip lash—and a left foot hanging by the skin.

His student suffered internal bleeding and was not expected to live. However, the bleeding stopped next day and the man

was discharged later without any operation needed.

“While I lay in the bed, I prayed for the first time as if talking to Jesus and He was in the same room with me,” says Mihalik. “That’s when I knew His loving hand had personally rescued me ever since 1941, and that for 31 years he had kept me alive to serve Him. Though I should have been dead 7 times, now I live for Him.”

Thus does Mihalik say he was “born again.” His experiences have taught him “to trust Jesus in a personal way, and to put God in the pilot’s seat of my life.”

Though doctors told Mihalik he would never walk without a limp, today at age 63 he is a vigorous missionary pilot who has endured the hardship of many treks through the jungle.

“God in His wisdom saw fit to heal my leg and back,” Mihalik says to explain the

recovery from his injuries.

In 1977, six months after retiring from the Defense Mapping Agency, Mihalik joined Wings of Hope as a volunteer “because the Lord told me to use my flying skills.”

The Work. Most of Mihalik’s work for Wings of Hope is in the Central American countries of Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica. In particular, his job has been “advance work” to check the feasibility of opening up new areas.

“The mountains of Guatemala go up to 14,000 feet,” says Mihalik about the challenges of jungle flying. “So in the space of a few minutes the temperature can go from 20 degrees to more than 100 when you land in the jungle.”

The temperature changes make pilots susceptible to pneumonia, while work on the ground exposes them to severe heat rash. “Then there are snake bites, tropical disease—and when back home I head right for the barber to check for lice.”

The airstrips are hacked out of the jungle, and serve perhaps more than 20 other villages who are in radio contact.

“When a villager is snake bit, or having a baby, or otherwise needs help,” says Mihalik, “the village radioes the information to the main strip, and we fly in supplies or evacuate the person in need.”

To get one volunteer pilot into the jungle, the cost can be nearly \$85,000, according to a Wings of Hope estimate. Yet the agency charges users nothing for its services, and is instead supported by the gifts of donors.

In fact, when Mihalik is not flying to Central America, he often flies the agency’s president to speaking engagements and fund-raising events around the country. Ninety percent of the funds raised are put directly into field operations.

Mihalik, a member of AFSA Chapter 872 since 1962, also donates much of his time in training others to become missionary pilots.

Wings of Hope was born from a 1964 project undertaken by St. Louis businessmen to aid African famine victims. Today, the agency has helped provide 40 planes for relief in Alaska, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico, New Guinea, Paraguay and Peru.

But to Mihalik, the real proof of success is not with planes in service or geographical areas covered, but in the pictures he draws from the scrapbook of people who might not be alive but for Wings of Hope.