

# FLIGHT 122

# Chapter 1

## AIRPLANE CRASH

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We were relaxing in our hotel room in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in Central Africa. Our oldest son, Keith, who had just graduated from college, needed help launching a new supporting ministry called Congo Frontline Missions. This was my fifth visit to the country. But on this trip, my beloved wife, Marybeth, and our two children, April, age fourteen, from Ecuador, and Andrew, age four, our lively son from Tanzania, were traveling with me. Our family had been praying for more than a year for guidance about the possibility of moving from Tanzania to DRC to join Keith, and we hoped that this visit would clearly show us God's plan for us.

The two-day trip to reach Goma had included two airplane flights, two border crossings, and a three-hour car ride—and we were tired. We'd spent the previous month preparing for this trip, cramming many supplies for the new mission station into our luggage. Now, finally, we were almost there!

"I'm hungry!" April announced.

Later we sat at a restaurant table watching Andrew play race cars with the French fries on his plate. Marybeth commented, "I can't wait to see Keith! But I'm not looking forward to being in the jungle. I've told you many times I would never move to a jungle. But, if God shows us that it is His will for us to work with Keith, I'm ready to serve Him anywhere."

Reaching for Marybeth's hand, I responded, "No wonder I love you!" Marybeth tries to do God's will—even when it is contrary to her own desires and inclinations. I admire the way she follows Jesus'

example, “Not My will, but Thine be done.”

Excitement woke us up early the next morning. After breakfast, we took a short walk to Lake Kivu, occupying our children while waiting for our ride to the Seventh-day Adventist Union office to collect our travel papers and plane tickets.

“Ouch! Dad, this lava rock is sharp! I don’t see how people in Goma can walk barefoot,” April remarked as we carefully made our way down to the lake. Once there, we dipped our feet in the water while Andrew threw stones into the lake to watch them splash.

After a while, we returned to the hotel, where we prayed again for God’s protection. Then we loaded our luggage into Pastor Manyama’s vehicle and headed for the Union office. The vehicle lurched slowly over the potholes and lava-covered streets of Goma.

I enjoyed meeting my old friend Pastor Manyama again. He had been the treasurer of the Tanzania Union before accepting an assignment to work in North East Congo Attached Territory (NE-CAT). He would be able to give me insights into how conditions really were in DRC. In the office, Solanje, Pastor Manyama’s secretary, had all our documents in order for us, and we soon left for the airport.

When we arrived at the airport, porters fought for the chance to handle our luggage. Inside the terminal, the confusion worsened. Passengers elbowed past others on their way to the counter to check their luggage. Without the help of the porters, I could be a target for pick-pockets in the crowd jostling for position at the check-in counter.

“You’d better stand over there against the wall with the children while I get us checked in,” I told Marybeth. I tried to keep our luggage in sight at all times. Finally, after about half an hour, we had our boarding passes for Flight 122. The man in charge of the security check held a metal-detection wand as we approached him. When I explained that we worked for a church organization, he

halfheartedly waved his wand at me before beckoning us through. There wasn't any real security.

While waiting for our flight, we noticed how close Mount Nyiragongo was to the city. Day and night the volcano menacingly belched out smoke. The locals told me that if it stopped smoking, everyone had better get ready for the next eruption. "Look, Dad, some of the UN planes are ready to take off," April pointed out. Bored by now, we had waited several hours for our late flight to arrive.

"I think they have to make room for the Hewa Bora plane to land. Maybe we'll see it soon," I answered. This was the first time I was flying with Hewa Bora Airlines. DRC had an unusual number of airline companies because much of the country is roadless. On other trips, I had flown with other airlines that offered cheaper fares. But now, Bravo Airline has gone bankrupt, and CAA had stopped flying due to mechanical problems with their airplane. I hoped the higher fare we paid for Hewa Bora meant that they are a safer airline. I didn't like flying in and out of Goma. Lava from the volcanic eruption in 2002 still covered more than a third of the runway. Now, as large planes landed, they had no margin for error. At the end of the runway ahead of them lay an unforgiving eight-foot-high wall of lava. Seven months earlier, a Russian-made cargo plane had failed to stop in time, and all eight crew members died in the crash.

After the fifth United Nations plane had taken off, we heard the roar of the DC-9 as our plane landed and taxied up to the terminal. People and luggage poured out of the plane that had left the capital city of Kinshasa early that morning and briefly stopped at Kisangani on its way to Goma.

"Let's go stand close to the door. Then we should be some of the first ones on the plane," I urged Marybeth and April.

Heavy rain clouds were coming our way, and it started to sprinkle as we walked across the tarmac. Marybeth tried to shield Andrew from the raindrops. We boarded the plane from the stairs at the tail section of the airplane. Being some of the first passengers, we had our choice of seats.

“Let’s sit here next to the exit doors over the wings,” I suggested. However, after we had stowed our heavy hand luggage and taken our seats, a frowning flight attendant stated, “Small children are not allowed to sit by the exit door.”

“These seats are still available,” observed Marybeth as we moved ahead two rows to the twelfth row. Sitting at the right window seat, April watched the rain come down in torrents. I sat directly on her left, watching the ground crew trying to cover the luggage that they had just unloaded from the plane.

Next to me sat an African businessman. Across the aisle sat Andrew at the window and Marybeth next to the aisle, that side of the plane having only two seats on each row. I took advantage of the rain delay to continue my memorization of the French days of the week. It had taken me eight years to learn Swahili, and I wondered if I could ever master another new language. I chatted briefly with the businessman.

“We’re almost ready to take off. You must keep him in his seat belt,” warned a flight attendant to Marybeth as she passed by. Andrew, excited, jumped around as we waited. Quickly, Marybeth fastened him in again for the third time.

Punching the numbers rapidly on my cell phone, I made a quick call to Keith. “Son, we are just taking off now. We’ll see you in forty-five minutes.”

“OK, Dad. I’ll be there, and I can’t wait to see you. I love you. Bye.”

Slowly, the plane taxied into position with its back next to the

wall of lava. The engines roared as the ancient DC-9 lumbered down the runway. The lava flow next to the runway became a blur as April and I stared out the window. The tired old plane shook as the speed increased. We anticipated being airborne any moment, but instead heard a loud *bang* from underneath the plane. We learned later that one of the two engines had failed. The pilot had only an instant to decide whether to continue to attempt takeoff or try to stop the plane. He later reported that the plane could have taken off, but probably would not have flown far. As he applied the brakes, the front tire blew out, creating a second *bang*. Could he stop this plane in time with so little remaining runway?

In the passenger section, we knew only that the pilot was trying to stop the plane. "Something's wrong," I said to April. My mind raced as I remembered that we took off over a lake. *How will we get out of here if we crash into the water?* I wondered to myself. Then, I remembered that Goma lay between us and the lake. *We will crash into the city*, I realized. Careening off the runway, the plane shook violently as we skidded across a vacant area covered with large boulders. The front wheel of the plane snapped off as we bumped over these huge rocks. Still traveling at a high speed, the plane now slid forward on its belly. Parts of the fuselage flew from the plane as it started to disintegrate. One woman's seat in the first-class section hooked on one of these boulders, and she died instantly when the momentum sucked her underneath the plane.

Next came a twenty-foot drop-off, below which were homes and an open-air market. The plane slowed as it smashed through the walls of these buildings.

Inside the plane, I knew we faced a violent crash. As I began to assume the brace position, the final impact came. All passengers jerked violently forward as the airplane finally came to a stop on top of the busy market. On impact, my glasses flew from my face, along

with the cell phone from my shirt pocket. Immediately, I realized my glasses were missing and frantically started feeling the floor in front of me and under my seat to locate them.

“Dad, we’ve got to get out now!” April shouted as she unfastened her seat belt. Glancing up and across the aisle to where Marybeth and Andrew sat, I was horrified to see fire covering the wing. The fuel tanks on the wings had ruptured as the plane crashed through the buildings. Obviously, we faced a fiery death as the plane could explode at any second. As April reached the aisle, she joined the throng of people already clamoring toward the front of the plane. I instinctively started to follow her.

Trying to step into the aisle, I found my right foot trapped against the seat in front of me by the crush of passengers in the aisle. With a huge jerk, I wrenched my right foot loose, gashing my calf and leaving my right shoe behind. Looking across the aisle, I was shocked to see Marybeth still seated.

Dazed by a broken nose and without her glasses, she seemed to be living in a bad dream—a nightmare in slow motion. “Marybeth, give Andrew to me! We’ve got to get out of here!” I shouted back to her. Hearing Andrew’s name alerted her, and she quickly handed him to me. Immediately, I again plunged into the avalanche of people pressing ahead.

A woman whose face was covered with blood grabbed me with both arms, screaming hysterically for help. Her face looked like a blur as smoke filled the cabin. I had plenty of my own problems as Andrew’s dangling leg had become pinned between a broken seat and me by the shoving horde. Frantically, I tried twice to pull him out without hurting him, but couldn’t seem to get any leverage. The thought *Run; get yourself out!* flashed through my mind. However, I never even considered this an option. Looking down at my adopted son, I knew that I could never leave him. If we were going to burn, we would burn together.

I looked up from Andrew's dilemma to see Marybeth in front of me. Somehow she had managed to crawl across the seatbacks to where I stood. As she saw the fire covering her side of the plane, she had prayed, *Lord, if it is my time to die, it's OK, but please make it quick!* Having worked as a nurse in burn units, she knew the torture of burns.

"Andrew's leg is stuck, and I can't get it out!" I shouted. Pulling from another angle, she mustered a mother's strength in a crisis. As she jerked him free, she snapped his femur bone in the process. As she pulled him free, I glanced down at my left hand and realized that I was still clutching the French notebook. In that split second, I realized that the notebook had made it harder for me to lift Andrew and could have cost both of us our lives. I flung it toward the front of the airplane in total disgust as I took Andrew back from Marybeth.

Almost immediately in front of us was a four-foot drop-off created when the plane broke up on impact. Now every breath became difficult as smoke poured into the plane. Outside, a wall of fire blazed on the left side of the plane. Without being able to see well, I feared to leap from the precipice to the broken floor below, so I leaned down and dropped Andrew onto an empty seat. He screamed when he landed as the pain from his broken leg stabbed through his body. Scrambling down to the lower section of seats, I had a vague recollection of seeing human arms and legs. Perhaps I saw people from the market who had been trapped under the plane, but I will never know for sure.

I continued stumbling through the wreckage, cradling Andrew in my arms. Time seemed to stand still as I fought my way through the smoke toward a large hole in the right side of the plane. As I reached the hole, a man stood outside with arms outstretched ready to take Andrew. After handing Andrew to him, I turned back to



make sure Marybeth was coming. As she scrambled over the seats, she saw a man with his legs trapped under the broken seats. Fire had started to enter the cabin from under the plane. Filled with compassion, she strained several times to pull him free, but even a mother's strength could not win this battle.

As people pushed and shoved to try to get past her in the narrow aisle, she realized that her efforts might be preventing other people from getting to safety. So, with an aching heart, she left him to flee toward the gaping hole in the side of the plane. We met as I struggled back against the crowd to make sure she was coming.

Quickly, we jumped the short distance to the ground and fled across the street. We needed to put some distance between us and the airplane, which could explode any time. Surely, the Lord had intervened to keep it from exploding. Even as we glanced back, three massive explosions occurred over the midsection of the plane. We doubted that anyone got out after that.

We were alive, but where were April and Andrew? Had April gotten out alive?