

High Adventure in Dangerous
and Heavenly Places

MISSION PILOT

The David Gates Story

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Foreword

We believe in God, we know He exists, we see His handiwork, and we say we trust Him unconditionally. Then why are we surprised when He works marvels in our lives?

Mission Pilot shouts to the world God's great deeds and His direct, remarkable intervention in the lives of David and Becky Gates.

You'll recognize God's miraculous hand in manipulating infant David's internal organs so they'll function. You'll see why God impressed eight-year-old David to ask a special girl to marry him when he gets big. You'll understand why God saved teenage David in a plane crash, and shudder when David feels a gun in his back as his plane is hijacked. You'll have no doubt that God chose David and Becky for specialized service when He called, prepared, led, and guided them to take their five children to a jungle village with no financial backing, depending totally on God.

For those of us who have admired David through the years, this book confirms our appreciation. The beautiful part is that the end of the story cannot be told, because it has not yet been lived. As I write this, David, his beloved Rebecca, and their children still serve in the jungles of South America. Almost daily God opens new vistas with direct signs and intervention for his mission work to expand. Many stories will fol-

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low to increase your love for God and your admiration of a missionary couple who gladly choose this way of life to honor God and serve Him in dangerous places.

At this time, when material things engross the world, I find it refreshing to know and see how the Lord still calls, equips, and sends missionaries to depend wholly on Him in their service. Your life will be blessed and enriched by the dedicated service of the Gates family. So, in your mind and spirit, join them in the simple jungle life, fly over vast stretches of rain forest, experience angel protection when robbers in the cities assaulted them, knowing God will keep you too.

As you pray for David, his family, and the Amerindians of South America, count your blessings. Then ask yourself, "Do I practice the contented life of constant trust in God's leading in the work God has called me to do?"

Israel Leito, President
Inter-American Division of Seventh-day Adventists
Miami, Florida
September 2001



*A most recent family picture taken at
Katrina's graduation from Laurelbrook Academy (2001).
Back row, L to R: Katia, Carlos, Lina.
Front row, L to R: Becky, Katrina, David, Kristopher.*

Foreword



In the airplane (Cessna 185) about to begin flight to Mexico.



Hijacked!

“Doesn’t look good, professor. Fog has socked in the Highlands.”

David Gates, an American mission pilot in his mid-twenties, leaned forward in the cockpit of the Cessna 185 Skywagon and scanned the horizon. Thick clouds were draped low over the Sierra Madre of southern Mexico.

“Must have rained heavily all day around here,” he continued. “I’m afraid the little airstrip by our hospital will be totally unsafe for landing.” He spoke clear, precise Spanish with a Bolivian accent to the older Mexican man sitting in the copilot seat.

“What’s the problem, *Capitán?*”

“The airstrip is in a low place. If the short grass is covered with water, the surface becomes as slick as ice. Even at a slow landing speed, the brakes become useless. I’d have no control over the plane, and we would crash into a tree.” With more than ten years of experience as a pilot, David knew the danger they faced. He sat tense and stiff.

“So what shall we do?” Professor Chente asked.

“I’ll fly low and circle the area several times. Maybe we can find a flat place on higher ground.” The plane began to lose altitude and dropped below the clouds.

“There it is.” He pointed to the left. The rays of the setting sun highlighted the compound of the mission hospital, high school, and

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nursing school. Clustered around the perimeter were the homes of the doctor, nurses, and other workers. “See that little house near the landing strip—that’s where my family lives. I’m sure Becky and the kids are watching the sky for us now. Because the repairs to my radio were not finished at the airport, I can’t give her a call.” He circled the area again, coming in lower this time.

“Just what I thought—a sheet of water over the short grass. We dare not land there. But it’s also risky to leave the airplane in an unprotected area. The only safe place is inside the hangar.”

“You’re right,” the professor, a supervisor of Seventh-day Adventist church schools, agreed. “I’ve heard that several private planes have been hijacked in the last couple of months.”

“The fuel gauge shows minimum reserves, and it’s almost dark. With no lights, we must make a decision now.”

David’s favorite Bible promise flashed into his mind. “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” *Thanks, Lord*, he prayed silently. *Please help me make the right decision.*

“There’s the road that parallels the hospital. It’s high, dry, and seldom used this time of the evening.” He circled the school until he saw someone waving. Then he scanned the road. *No vehicles in sight.* Dropping down toward the ground, he landed and parked the plane in a wide place at the side of the road. A teacher and the security guard soon arrived in a pickup truck.

“I’m glad you didn’t try to land on the airstrip. Rain has poured all day,” the guard commented. “I’ll stay in the plane tonight. You can lock me inside.”

“You can get out anytime you want to,” David said. “Just turn the knob.”

With fear in his voice, the guard exclaimed, “No, no, I don’t want anybody to know they can get in or out. Nothing is safe in this part of the country.”

“I’ll be back early in the morning. Good night, and God be with you,” David called.

He walked along the gravel road through the lush, green campus and gazed up at the darkening mountains in the distance. As he approached the driveway of his home, his two little girls squealed in delight, “Daddy,

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you're home!" One-year-old Carlos toddled on his chubby legs, hands outstretched. All smiles, their lovely blond mother ran to meet the man she loved.

"A king couldn't get a better welcome than this," David said joyfully as he hugged and kissed each one. Becky made sure everyone headed straight for the supper table. After David finished praying, Becky served the children and sat down next to David. She squeezed his hand and smiled.

"The sound of your plane landing always thrills me, and I breathe a prayer of gratitude to God."

"And I feel a kind of heavenly joy sitting here beside you, eating your delicious food and listening to the children chatter. After all the problems I faced out there today, this is peace."

After they finished eating, Becky suggested, "I'll clear the table later. Let's go to the living room and listen as Daddy tells us about his day." All three children climbed onto their father's lap, looking up with anticipation.

"I tried over and over again but failed to pull a young girl's infected tooth. The roots appeared to curve in and join together at the tips. It may be necessary to break the jawbone. When she screamed in pain, I promised I'd return as soon as possible with a dental surgeon. Her look of gratitude more than paid for the many other stops we made today."

Always sympathetic, little Lina interrupted. "I'm so sorry she hurt so much. I'll pray to Jesus to fix it."

"Thanks, honey. I'm glad you'll pray for her." David continued, "The professor and I visited several isolated schools that needed his help and were facing problems. We have a few more to visit tomorrow. I must get an early start because I need fuel."

"I see some sleepy little people," Becky remarked with a smile. "Time for all of us to go to bed. But the children see so little of their daddy, I told them they could wait up for you."



At 6:00 A.M. the next morning a couple of high-school students knocked on the front door of the Gates home.

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“Capitán, there are soldiers around your airplane, and they want to see your documents.”

“No problem. Tell them I’ll be right there.”

David turned to Becky. “I’m sure my documents are all in order. Let’s see,” he said, counting on his fingers. “I have a letter from the president of the country thanking ADRA for the work they do, plus my credentials from ADRA. I have permission from the director of civil aviation, one from immigration, and another from customs. Everything required to operate an airplane here is in order.”

David turned to walk out the door, then stopped and came back to Becky. He joked, “Oh, I almost forgot to kiss you. In case I don’t see you again, I want to give you a kiss.” He was joking but held her tight for a moment. Becky said she didn’t see anything funny about it. Then he walked outside and met the professor. With the students they drove in the school’s pickup truck to the spot where he had left the plane.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” David greeted the soldiers standing by the plane. “I understand you wish to see my documents. You will find everything in order.” The soldier in charge, a captain, took the papers, looked them over carefully, and acknowledged that David was telling the truth. David noticed the name on his nametag, Gonzalez.

“Are you the pilot who was flying this plane two years ago?” Captain Gonzalez asked.

“No, I’ve been flying this plane for only a year and a half. The previous pilot left about two years ago. I’m David Gates.” Captain Gonzalez appeared to be confused by his answer. Going back to their truck, the soldiers huddled and talked while the captain spoke on his radio. Then the soldiers returned to David and the professor. “We have to wait for instructions,” the captain said. “Please stay right here.”

“Gentlemen, I’m scheduled to make urgent visits to several villages today. I just received a telegram saying a man is dying and needs to be evacuated. I was also hoping to help a young girl with an infected tooth.”

“Well, you can’t move until the general gives the orders.”

David felt impatient at the delay. He fidgeted and paced around the plane while the soldiers waited and waited. Turning to the captain, he asked, “Have you been here all night?”

“Yes, we have.”

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“Have you eaten supper or breakfast?”

“Neither,” he answered.

David counted the soldiers. He called to one of the students standing nearby and said, “Please go to the hospital and bring back ten trays of food for these soldiers. They’re hungry.” The students climbed into the pickup and drove away.

A short time later they returned with breakfast for each of the soldiers. David stopped a passing truck and purchased a case of soft drinks. He handed one to each of the men. After they ate and drank, Captain Gonzalez smiled at David. “We had a good meal. Thanks a lot,” he said.

Finally the soldiers heard the general’s voice on the radio. Running to their truck, they listened for a few moments and then returned with the message, “The commanding officer wants you to fly to a special runway.” David recognized the name of the place.

“But that’s an abandoned runway,” he said.

“That’s where he will meet us.”

A feeling of dread came over David, and he broke out in a sweat. Orders to land on an abandoned runway surrounded by armed soldiers! Something seemed terribly wrong.

“Sir, I prefer to land at the commercial runway just five miles from it. There’s no reason for me to go there. You know everything’s in order, so there’s no problem.”

“You’ll be coming right back. Just a short stop for the general to check your papers.” David didn’t believe the captain. Getting more uncomfortable by the minute, he continued to resist.

Finally, one soldier stuck his gun at David’s back and ordered, “Get in the airplane.”

He knew he had no choice. Arguing wasn’t going to work. The captain and another soldier climbed in the back of the plane, and the professor and David got in the front.

“I have a custom,” David said, looking back at the two soldiers. “Before each flight I pray to the God of heaven for protection. Would you kindly remove your hats and close your eyes?” They complied as David prayed, “My Father in heaven, we ask Your blessing on each of the soldiers, on the professor, and myself. Please protect us from harm and evil with Your holy angels. I thank You in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

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David took off from the road filled with apprehension. Because he had removed the two-meter radio to get it fixed, he had no way to inform anyone of his circumstances or destination. He would have given anything to talk to Becky.

As they flew he decided to act as if he were communicating over the radio. Putting the microphone to his mouth, he pretended to call the conference office. "Please advise Mexico City right away that we are headed for the abandoned airport. There may be some paperwork problems. Send a lawyer right away to deal with it."

Captain Gonzalez, sitting behind David, heard every word. He did not know that David was talking to a dead radio. David ended with, "Roger, roger, yes, we'll be landing in a few minutes. Please send a legal advisor immediately."

Still hesitant to land at the abandoned runway, David called back to the captain, "I'm going to land at the commercial runway."

"No, no, you can't. I have orders from the general that you must land as he instructed."

"But you told me that I'm going to be flying back home in a few minutes. I need fuel for I won't have enough."

"No," he spoke firmly, "orders are for you to land where the general said."

"Then you'll have to shoot me, won't you, because I am landing on the other runway." Captain Gonzalez began to act extremely nervous.

On the ground at the commercial airport, David filled the plane with gas. He overheard the general's voice shouting over the captain's hand-held radio. "Why did you let him land there?" the voice screamed angrily.

"The pilot refused to obey, said he needed fuel," Gonzalez explained.

David spoke quietly to the airport's air taxi operator. "Listen carefully. I am being hijacked. Call my wife or anyone at the mission hospital. Tell them I think I'll be held at the air force base." He felt confident someone would try to find him or make contact with the right people.

With the four men back in the plane, David took off and flew toward the abandoned airstrip. As soon as they landed, David felt a wave of swirling emotions. One soldier politely commanded, "Excuse me, leave the plane and stand over here. Please put your hands behind your back as

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I handcuff you. Kindly stand against the wall while I blindfold you.” Then David heard another command. “Put machine guns in their backs. If they move, just shoot them.”

Is this for real? he thought. As he stood perfectly still, he could hear the soldiers noisily ransacking the airplane. Soon after, they placed David and the professor in the back of a pickup truck. Knowing the roads in that area, David could sense the turns in the route that took them to the air force base. He thought of John the Baptist, of whom the Bible says, “He came as a witness to testify concerning [the] light, so that through him all men might believe” (John 1:7, NIV). *Please God*, he prayed, *whatever is ahead, stay close and help me witness for You.*

The truck stopped, and the soldiers led them, still blindfolded, rapidly through long, narrow hallways with low doors. Fearful of banging his head, David ducked as low as he could. Finally they entered a room.

“Sit down,” the rough voice of an interrogator ordered them. After a few minutes guards took the professor to another room while David remained. An interrogation began immediately. For an hour the soldiers questioned him, and then they placed David in the other room while they questioned the professor for an hour. The cycle repeated several times. David thought to himself, *This is part of a well-laid plan.*

Puzzled at the many irrelevant questions, David answered carefully, asking God for wisdom.

“You are all good people, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we are.”

“You wouldn’t do anything illegal, would you?”

“Of course not.”

“But you did distribute Bibles.”

Knowing that the law barred foreigners from distributing Bibles, David had never done it himself, so he answered, “No, I have not. I am a registered nurse. I do medical work.”

“Put down that he has distributed Bibles.”

“If you put that down, I won’t sign your document.”

“OK, strike it.”

The give and take of the interrogation lasted all day. Finally Captain Gonzalez stopped everything. His voice sounded kind. “You know, these men haven’t eaten. They fed us a good breakfast this morning. The least

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we can do is give them lunch. Bring in the other guy. Take off their blindfolds and handcuff them in front. Can I get you chicken sandwiches?"

The professor answered, "Yes, thank you."

David added, "I don't want to appear picky, but you wouldn't mind making mine an egg sandwich, would you?"

"Not at all. Bring a chicken sandwich for him, and give the pilot an egg sandwich."

After a few bites of sandwich, David remembered the small piece of paper in his pocket listing contact information of friends and church leaders. In tiny print were many names, phone numbers, and addresses. In the wrong hands the information could be abused. He didn't want any Church officials arrested on false charges.

What should I do? I need wisdom, God, he thought. An idea popped into his head. He looked around the room. The soldiers were talking quietly among themselves. Reaching with both handcuffed hands into his pocket, he pulled out the small piece of paper, stuck it into his egg sandwich, and ate it. After he had chewed through the tough sandwich, he felt relieved.

When they had finished eating, blindfolded again and handcuffed behind their backs, the professor was pushed back into the interrogation room. The cycle of hour-long interrogations began again. Late in the afternoon David could hear the professor's answers for the first time. Someone had left a door ajar by accident.

"I hardly know *Capitán* Gates. Until just the other day we met for the first time. I don't know what he does."

David squirmed. The professor and he had worked closely together ever since he had begun his job as a mission pilot. *So he's buckling under fear and needs encouragement,* David thought.

When the soldiers brought David in for more questions, he spoke to the professor. "You have to tell the truth. If you start bending the truth, God cannot protect you. If they ever catch you telling an untruth, you'll hurt yourself. We know angels surround us. The soldiers can't touch us without God's permission. True, it appears we're prisoners now, but really, they're the prisoners and can only do what God allows them to do. Please don't be afraid to tell the truth."

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The professor turned his face toward the interrogators and said, "I'm sorry. I should have told you the truth. I work with David Gates and know him well. For almost two years we've done everything together. Please correct my statement. I got scared." Captain Gonzalez struck it all out.

Then the blindfolds came off. David saw that a clerk had typed about twenty pages on an old typewriter. Nothing the soldiers had said gave David a clue as to why he'd been arrested.

"Read it and sign your name," the captain said.

David and the professor did as commanded. Then, blindfolded again, they were led by soldiers to the back of a pickup. David guessed they were in for a long ride over the mountains to the prison. He could tell when they were driving through town by the sounds around them. Just a few miles away, his precious wife and two little girls, Lina and Katrina, and their newly adopted boy, Carlos, waited for him. Now he knew how Joseph felt when the traders who were taking him to Egypt passed by the hills where Jacob, his father, lived. Why had God allowed this when David had prayed for wisdom and guidance? Did He have a plan to send him to a strange place as a witness to people who didn't know God, just as He had sent Joseph?

Confused and lonesome, David longed to be with his family. His heart began to break. Would he ever see them again?