

man saves 5, loses his life

It was a cold Wednesday in January 1982 in Washington, D.C. A blizzard was blasting the northeastern part of the United States.

A plane, Air Florida Flight 90, was ready to take off from the Washington National Airport. The plane had been sitting for an hour on the tarmac. Nobody had examined the wings for icing. Still, the plane took off.

As it tried to climb into the air, it clipped the top of the 14th Street Bridge over the Potomac River, struck seven occupied vehicles on the bridge, and destroyed 97 feet of guardrail before it plunged through the ice into the Potomac River. The aircraft was carrying 74 passengers and five crewmembers. Four passengers and one flight attendant were rescued from the crash and survived. Four motorists on the bridge were killed.

There was a momentary silence, which seemed to last for an eternity. Suddenly, there were sirens: ambulances, police cars, fire trucks, but, for the most part, they were too little, too late. A few people had crawled out of the airplane and onto the wings. One woman standing on a wing panicked, dived into the water and floated down the icy waters screaming for help. From the bank, a man plunged into the river and swam to the woman, rescuing her from certain death.



Now there were six people standing on a wing of the plane. A rescue helicopter hovered above them. Someone in the helicopter lowered a long line with a life ring at the end. It was the only hope the six survivors had.

Among those six people on the wing was an older man, in his 50s, balding, portly, pot-bellied, with a giant mustache. The lifeline came down from the chopper and the big man grabbed the ring. But rather than putting the life ring around himself, he put it around another person on the wing. The helicopter flew the rescued person to shore. A second time the scene was replayed, then a third time, a fourth time and then a fifth. Each time, the big, portly, balding man with the large mustache took the life ring and gave it to another of his fellow passengers.

(more)

The helicopter came back the sixth time ... but the big, portly man was gone. He had drowned in the icy waters while saving others. The helicopter pilot said, "I have never seen anyone with that kind of commitment in a crisis situation." And later, when they found and identified the man's body, a friend said, "Well, that is the kind of man that he was. He was always giving of himself to others; that was the nature of his life."



The man's name: Arland D. Williams Jr., who had always had a fear of water.

We often talk about compassion when describing our faith. We rarely talk about the courage it takes to live a life of compassion. That big, portly, balding man with the large mustache wanted to survive that crash just as much as anyone on that plane, but he had the courage to risk sacrificing his own life in order that others might live.

It takes compassion to be a follower of Jesus, but it also takes courage to put that compassion into practice. Sometimes, we have to be very, very brave to follow Jesus.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:9 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter