

Pilot Saves Hundreds When Holy Spirit Prompts Him to Take Off Moments Before Quake Strikes

The Holy Spirit prompted a Christian airline pilot to speed the departure of his Batik Air flight from Palu carrying 140 passengers, narrowly averting a potential disaster with the loss of many lives.

The epicenter of a powerful 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck Friday, Sept. 28, in a mountainous area of Central Sulawesi, 48 miles from the provincial capital of Palu. Only minutes later, underwater landslides apparently triggered a massive 10-20 foot tsunami that swept through Palu and other coastal areas.

The waves were intensified by Palu's location at the end of a narrow bay. At least 1200 people perished and smaller villages in the surrounding area were entirely swept away. Because communication has been poor in remote areas, the death toll may increase dramatically.

"All day Friday I had been feeling unsettled and I didn't know why," Captain Icoze Mafella recounted at a Jakarta church, Duta Injil BIP, on Sunday, Sept. 30.

To displace his feelings of unease, Mafella—a strong Christian—began to loudly sing worship songs on his flight from Ujung Pandang to Palu. "Usually I only hummed, but that day I wanted to praise the Lord as best I could," Mafella said.

"I think you should make a CD of worship songs," his Muslim co-pilot told him, jokingly.

When they were about to land at the Palu Airport, the wind was unusually strong and Mafella “heard a voice in his heart” directing him to circle again before landing.

The Palu airport is squeezed between two mountain ranges, and some pilots refer to airports situated in this way as “valleys of death,” so once again, Mafella felt prompted to be extra careful in landing and recited Psalm 23:

“I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won’t be afraid. You are with me, and Your shepherd’s rod makes me feel safe,” he said.

After they landed, the Holy Spirit prompted Mafella once more that he needed to be quick. He instructed his crew to take a shorter, 20-minute break before the plane was due to take off for Jakarta via Ujung Pandang.

“I didn’t even leave the cockpit and requested permission from the control tower to depart three minutes ahead of schedule,” Mafella recounted.

He received approval for the expedited time for takeoff from Air Controller Anthonius Agung, and the crew prepared for departure.

Mafella felt such an urgency that he broke with standard flight procedures and took over some of the co-pilot’s responsibilities to speed up their exit.

The moment arrived for takeoff, and the plane barreled down the runway. “I don’t know why, but my hand kept pushing the lever, causing the plane to speed up as it took off,” Mafella said.

As they sped down the airstrip, the massive earthquake began to strike Palu, and both pilots felt the plane sway noticeably to the left and right. The Muslim co-pilot glanced at Mafella with a look of fear in his eyes.

"If I had taken off three minutes later, I would not have been able to save the 140 passengers, because the asphalt on the landing strip was moving up and down like a curtain blowing in the wind," Mafella testified.

Several minutes after takeoff, he attempted to communicate with the control tower, but there was no response.

Then he looked down and saw an unusual sight. "The sea water on the coast was forming a very large hole so that the foundation of the sea bed could be seen," he reported. "I saw circles getting bigger and bigger. I thought it was very strange."

Prior to a tsunami, the shoreline often recedes dramatically, exposing areas that are normally submerged.

When the plane arrived in Ujung Pandang, he was told the shocking news that there had been an earthquake and tsunami in Palu.

The air controller, Anthonius Agung, 21, made sure their plane—the last to leave the airport — had safely taken off before he jumped from the crumbling control tower at the height of the quake.

"They said people tried to call him to get away from the tower, but he said, 'No, the aircraft isn't airborne yet.' Then the roof started collapsing, and he jumped," Mafella explained.

Tragically, Agung broke his legs, arms and ribs as a result of the fall and died from internal injuries on his way to the hospital.

"In this difficult time, during the split seconds of decisions, he waited for me until I was safe before he jumped. That's why I call him my guardian angel," Mafella said.

Many others are calling the air controller a hero—along with

Mafella.

"It is important that we hear the voice of God," he said.

"And whatever happens we must be calm, not in a panic, so that we can clearly hear the voice of God coming to us by the Holy Spirit."

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