

On Wings of Mercy

Missionary pilot Jerry Witt risks his life every day flying into remote regions of Mexico. It's a risk he's willing to take to reach a group the world has forgotten.

Circling his plane high above the arid valley, Jerry Witt releases his cargo and watches as the parachute falls from the sky. Carefully surveying the ground below, he waits for a reaction.

He doesn't have to wait long. As the package touches down in this remote village in central Mexico, children rush from their hiding places and surround the mysterious gift. But they are afraid to touch it. Curiosity finally gets the best of one little boy who darts in, quickly grabs the box and runs with it to an adult.

Hesitation turns to excitement and gratitude when the gift is unwrapped. Inside is a booklet containing the Gospel of John and a palm-sized solar-powered radio that begins operating when the package is opened. The one-frequency shortwave device, made by Galcom International of Hamilton, Ontario, receives gospel messages transmitted by High Adventure Ministries in Los Angeles. It is the first time many of these villagers will hear about Jesus.

Witt doesn't want it to be the last. Armed with a passion for souls, some unusual cargo and plenty of love, he has dedicated his life to evangelizing the isolated indigenous people groups that live in the canyons and mountains of the Mexican outback.

The 39-year-old pilot operates a small, independent bush-pilot ministry called Mercy Wings International based in Durango, Mexico. Covering a region as large as Louisiana, he and two other pilots use frequent parachute drops to serve the bread

of life to forgotten Mexican tribes.

On a recent mission, a box carrying a Bible landed near a man plowing a field with oxen. As Mercy Wings pilot Jerry Wiley circled overhead, the man picked up the Bible, looked up and waved at him to come down.

"It tore my heart out," Wiley told Charisma. "I said, 'God, what I'd do for a helicopter right now to go lead that man to Christ.'

"The man took off his big-brimmed hat and put it over his heart, letting me know he appreciated the Bible. In these hills many people have never seen a Bible or even held one."

In two years, Witt estimates Mercy Wings has distributed 1,200 radios by air and several thousand by foot. The ministry has received many reports of salvations and healings in some of the most remote regions of Mexico as a result of the airdrops.

Witt heard about a 62-year-old woman who was healed of a disease after listening to a message about Jesus. The program instructed anyone with an affliction to lay one hand on the radio and the other over his body. Listeners were told that the Lord could heal them if they believed.

"She received healing instantaneously," Witt says. "This was in the middle of no man's land. She suffered for 40 years and had tried to get healed by witch doctors.

"Now she understood that this little book in the box was a portion of a book they kept mentioning on the radio called a Bible. She went on a quest to find a Bible in Spanish, even though she couldn't read. I don't know how long it took, but she got a Bible.

"She prayed, 'God, if You can heal me of this disease, You can teach me to understand this book.' Nine days later the woman was reading in Spanish and having meetings with her

relatives.”

Seeing lives radically changed by the power of Christ is what inspires Witt and the other pilots of Mercy Wings to serve the Lord in a region where spreading the gospel is dangerous and requires an amazing amount of courage.

Blood of the Martyrs

Historically, this remote territory in the Mexican desert has been hostile to evangelical Christianity. Witt’s father, Jerry Witt Sr., died in a plane crash at age 21 while dropping gospel booklets. Some believe he was shot down on that day in April 1964.

The burnt bodies of Jerry Witt Sr. and a co-worker were pulled from the wreckage and reportedly strapped to chairs in the main plaza of a nearby mining town. Children were released from school and given ice cream if they would spit on the corpses.

Jerry Witt Jr. was only 4 years old when his father died. He vaguely remembers the funeral in San Antonio. Years later he would hear reports of the incident, including the death of two city officials who were responsible for the persecution of Christians.

“Within three weeks those men were dead,” Witt says. “One died of a massive heart attack, the other in a truck accident. It’s a graphic demonstration of Scripture when the Lord says, ‘Vengeance is Mine.’ One of the men was buried before my father was.”

The vision for missionary aviation was inspired by Walter Witt, Jerry Witt Jr.’s grandfather. Walter, who now lives in Texas, was a missionary pioneer in central Mexico in the

1950s, dropping Gospels of John from his airplane. "In those days, aviation was a hobby for the rich. People couldn't envision using planes as a tool for world evangelism," Witt says. "My grandfather struggled with finances, left Mexico and went back to work."

Three generations later, Jerry Witt Jr. continues to sow seeds of the gospel in Mexico's desert soil. This passion for souls seems to run in the family. His mother, stepfather, two brothers and twin half sisters also serve in different ministry capacities.

Jerry's brother, Marcos Witt, is an author and a key leader in Latin America's growing praise and worship ministry. He helped lead the largest worship event in the history of Latin America on Oct. 14, an event that drew more than 90,000 worshipers to Aztec Stadium in Mexico City.

It is Jerry Witt, however, who continues the family heritage of aviation ministry. But initially he had no desire to become a pilot.

As a young man he helped his stepfather plant churches in Mexico and also served with a Baptist missionary who invited Witt to join him on trips into the mountains to minister among the Tepehuans. When the missionary died of cancer, Witt says he felt the ministry mantle fall upon him.

"After hiring special flights into the mountains, I began to see how I could multiply my work," says Witt, who earned his pilot's license in 1987. "So I seriously jumped in. But when I flew over the mountains I began to realize the size of the task."

Witt's aviation ministry has expanded during the years to accommodate the growing vision God birthed in his heart. Mercy Wings International now uses four airplanes, which are owned by three missionary pilots.

Mercy Wings International is a branch of Halusa Ministries, a nonprofit organization Witt founded in 1992. Objectives of the ministry include identifying areas in central Mexico unreached by the gospel and developing strategies to reach people while promoting missions within the Mexican church.

One of the methods Halusa uses to make contact with a community is conducting a census as a nonreligious organization. "Our prayer teams will do the census. While one is filling out paperwork, the other is praying in a low-profile manner," Witt says.

"We turn that census into a house-by-house prayer journey," he adds. "At the end, we'll make a presentation to the authorities and show them what we can provide in social services. Usually it's medical and dental, but we've also drilled wells, done educational programs, fixed community buildings. We don't use Christian lingo. But it's inevitable that the Christian testimony is there, and they begin to ask questions."

When relationships are formed, Halusa networks with other ministries to both spread the gospel and meet practical needs of indigenous people groups. Witt has used airplanes to support outreach teams in the field, transporting supplies such as cement, lumber, medicine and gasoline. "We've even flown in bees," he says.

In central Mexico, the ministry field is more of a frontier. The demands can almost seem overwhelming.

"When you fly over and see these huge canyons littered with thousands of huts and little trails going up and down, you realize it's going to take more than conventional transportation to reach these people," Witt says. "Where I work, we have mountains as high as 13,000 feet. We have canyons twice as deep as the Grand Canyon.

"The Spanish conquest under [Hernando] Cortés [in 1520] drove

the people out of the flatland, and this is all that's left. One canyon is 11,000 feet deep and has 13,000 people living in it. The living conditions vary. Some cultures are very self-developed, but in a majority of the areas I've identified as 'black holes,' people are living in caves and wearing loin cloths."

Mercy Wings is one of many aviation ministries serving Christ in some of the world's toughest regions. The oldest and largest organization is Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF), which operates in 21 countries with 75 aircraft. In 1999 MAF flew 2,761,453 miles and made 40,428 landings while serving more than 500 Christian and humanitarian groups.

JAARS Aviation is a support service of JAARS Inc., formerly Jungle Aviation and Radio Service. Pilots and mechanics are trained in Waxhaw, North Carolina, to meet the challenges of flying in remote locations worldwide. Last year JAARS logged 12,096 flights, which included transporting Bible translators and literacy workers.

"Our ministry is more of a mom-and-pop operation," Witt says. "We haven't grown into a big organization for several reasons. Our kind of work isn't very popular. People have a romantic view of aviation. Some call me 'Indiana Jones.' But not many people want to rough it and pay the price to work in such difficult areas.

"Another aspect is finances. Going into these places you have to invest huge sums of money to have modest amounts of progress." Witt, who is married and has children ages 16 and 15, receives funding from friends and family in the U.S. and Mexican ministries. The task is daunting at times, but this Christian "Indiana Jones" is rising to the challenge—even in the face of danger.

Risking Everything for Jesus

To drop radios into Mexico's arid canyons and mountains, Witt and his pilots encounter high-risk conditions on virtually every flight. They thread their planes over and around mountain ridges and land on primitive airstrips made of rock, dirt and rough patches of grass.

"I have one strip I call the 'aircraft carrier,'" Witt says. "It has a launch ramp. You literally go off the side of the mountain. Wind is always a big factor. A down-draft can put you into a mountainside, and there's nothing you can do."

The pilots credit their survival to total dependency on God's protection. Witt damaged his plane once on a remote airstrip when it hit a muddy bog and tilted onto its nose. Unable to fly, Witt had to hike 43 miles for help. Later, he learned that the mishap probably saved his life.

During repair work, a hidden flaw was found in the plane that could have caused a crash. "We believe God for the miraculous," he told Charisma. "But that's an everyday thing when you're working where there is no other resource than God's hand."

Witt has been robbed by bandits and shot at in the air by drug runners. Once, while driving on a remote logging road, a pickup truck approached him, and its driver waved at him to stop. The stranger warned Witt that an ambush was waiting for him down the road. Witt thanked the man and turned his car around, believing that God had sent an angel to spare his life.

"Everybody is looking at me with high suspicion," Witt says. "It's hard to explain why a foreigner with a good airplane is spending so much money to take a message to people they don't even care about."

Although Witt says he doesn't fear flying, he approaches his

work cautiously and prayerfully. "We have to rely on these machines to operate correctly. We can't fly with any wind or heat. It has to be cool early in the morning. We're dodging ridges and huts by 20 feet," he says.

"Sometimes the Lord will warn us off of stuff. We always do drops with two pilots so we can judge flight conditions. One time we had a bad situation develop on one of the ridges, and we backed away. A big down-draft almost put us into the side of the mountain. We spent another 20 minutes meditating and praying. We bypassed the area."

On one flight, wind prevented Witt from reaching a mountain airstrip. "I prayed, 'Lord, I believe You have authority over the waves and wind, and You are going to calm this wind so I can land.'" The wind, which had gusted all night and morning, suddenly stopped, and the team landed safely. Thirty minutes later, the wind returned and continued for another 24 hours.

In the field, Witt and his pilots have witnessed God perform miraculous signs and wonders. During one medical outreach, a 5-year-old girl was raised from the dead and a boy was healed of a coral snake bite, both through prayer.

The little girl, who had collapsed during the day, was carried to the Christian camp after a staffer at the village clinic told the mother her daughter had died. "One of our team members picked up the girl in his arms and started weeping and crying out to God," Witt says. "Within five minutes she opened her eyes. After 30 minutes she walked home with her mother."

The boy bitten by a snake was struggling for life by the time he reached the team. "We laid hands on him, cursed the venom, and he walked out of here. We couldn't find him an hour later because he was playing with friends," Witt says.

On another trip, a scorpion fell from a tree into a pastor's shirt as he ministered during an outdoor service at a remote location. He was stung several times on the stomach, but Witt

and others prayed for him, cursed the venom, and the pastor continued to preach without any symptoms.

“Not every medical mission has those type of miracles, but on every short-term trip we’ve done in these remote areas we’ve had some type of manifestation of God’s sovereignty,” Witt says.

Whether he’s dropping radios or ferrying supplies to mission teams, Witt is committed to reaching the unreachable. The ministry is considering moving into Central America and expanding operations. Witt is looking at buying a custom airplane, designed by an African missionary, that can get in and out of rugged airstrips as short as 100 feet.

The task may look overwhelming to such a small ministry, but the pilots dream big because they’ve seen God’s heart. They sense His mercy and kindness as their airplanes scream over the rooftops of primitive dwellings that most of the world has ignored.

“We’re nothing special,” pilot Jerry Wiley insists. “It’s God who put this desire in our hearts. Someday we’ll be buried here in Mexico after this work is completed. Somebody else will grab the torch and run with it.”*

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