

CHRISTIAN HEROES: THEN & NOW

NATE SAINT



On a Wing
and a Prayer

JANET & GEOFF BENGGE

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A Whole New World

Nate Saint turned and waited for his nineteen-year-old brother Sam to give him a leg up into the cockpit. He wished he could have swung his leg over himself, but seven-year-old legs just aren't long enough for some things. Sam gave him a good heave, and Nate tumbled into the leather seat. He wiggled around until he was sitting comfortably, then reached for the goggles hanging in front of him. As he sat in the Challenger biplane waiting for Sam to finish his ground check, Nate could hardly believe he was actually going to go flying. In 1930, most adults hadn't been in an airplane, but young Nate had a brother who was a flying instructor.

Finally, Sam climbed into the cockpit behind Nate. Nate heard him flick some switches, and then the engine came to life. The propeller whirled faster and faster in front of Nate until it seemed to disappear. Sam released the brake, and the plane lurched forward. He guided the aircraft to the end of the runway, where he pulled the throttle lever all the way to the "Full" position. The engine screamed louder and louder. The whole plane vibrated in time to its scream as the Challenger began to speed down the runway. Nate could feel his heart pumping fast as the plane skipped off the dirt runway and into the air.

Nate felt cold air rustling through his curly blond hair. He sat up as high as he could in his seat. He craned his neck and tried to see over the side of the plane, but he was just too short. Sam laughed at his effort and then banked the plane slightly to the right. Now Nate could see clearly. They were circling Huntingdon, the town just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the Saint family lived. In the distance, Nate could make out the shapes of some of the buildings in downtown Philadelphia. He could also see the two tall, red brick chimneys of the coal-fired power generating plant on the edge of the Delaware River. Nate tried to remember every single minute of the flight so he could tell his friends at school all about it.

When Nate got to school on Monday, the teacher was a little surprised to hear that his parents had allowed him to do something as dangerous as flying.

But then, she didn't know his family. The Saints had a reputation around Huntingdon for being a bit different. In some ways, Nate's parents, Katherine and Lawrence Saint, were very strict parents to their seven sons, Sam, Phil, Dan, David, Steve, Nate, and Ben, and their one daughter, Rachel, especially about religious things. Sunday in the Saint household was the Lord's Day, and after breakfast, the whole family went to Sunday school at the local Presbyterian church. After Sunday school, they would all attend the morning church service and then go home for lunch and family devotions, which included prayer and Bible study. After dinner, they all went off to church for another service. They also went to the weekly Wednesday night prayer meeting at the church. Beside the stove in the kitchen was a big jar of pennies from which they could take a penny for every chapter of the Bible they read to themselves.

For seven years, since Nate had been born, his father had spent nearly all his time in church. He wasn't the pastor; he was much too shy for that. Instead, he was an artist who specialized in reproducing stained-glass windows from the thirteenth century, and he was in charge of making the stained-glass windows for the Washington Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Sometimes he would take Nate and show him his work. And when he did, Nate could look up at the large window in the St. John's chapel and see himself. Yes, see himself. When Nate was five, his father had used him as the model for

the stained-glass window of the boy giving Jesus his five loaves and two fishes.

As strict as his parents may have seemed, in other ways they weren't strict at all. A lot of things that bothered most mothers didn't worry Mrs. Saint one bit. Meals at the house were served at all hours of the day and night, whenever enough of the children gathered to make it worth setting the table. The Saints didn't worry if the children didn't eat their vegetables or if they had two desserts and no main course. Nor did they care if the children didn't keep their rooms tidy or had holes in their pants, or even if they were late for school.

Since Mr. Saint was rather forgetful, Nate's mother took care of most of the practical matters around the house. She was organized but, to most people, in a different way. For example, the Saints' three-story wood frame house had a large room with hooks and shelves all around the walls. When all the family's laundry had been ironed, it was placed on the shelves or hung on the hooks. When any of the children needed clean clothes, they went to the room and found something to wear that fit them. It was a case of first up, best dressed! The system gave Mrs. Saint a little spare time to write her poetry and play the piano.

Because her father, Josiah K. Proctor, was an inventor, Mrs. Saint thought it was important to let the children experiment. In the late nineteenth century, he had invented machinery that made woolen

mills operate more efficiently. He had started a company called Proctor and Schwartz, which later became Proctor Silex. This had made him a wealthy man. Despite being raised in a wealthy home, Mrs. Saint knew that having ideas and trying new things were more important than having lots of money. It was something she never forgot when she had her own children.

Indeed, more often than not, Mrs. Saint helped the children carry out their wild schemes. When the children came to her with an idea, instead of no, she would say why not? One time when Nate was only four years old, his big brothers Sam and David decided it would be great to sleep on the roof. Their mother thought it was a wonderful idea, too, and she and the children worked out how to make it happen.

Soon the household was buzzing with activity. Mrs. Saint arranged for a carpenter to build a fence around the flat part of the second-story roof over the kitchen. Then she had him build five cots. Extra blankets were found in the attic, and within a week, the family had a new "sleeping room" on the roof. Mrs. Saint and the children all dragged their blankets and pillows out a third-story window and onto the roof. Rachel, who was nine years older than Nate, would read bedtime stories to the younger children by flashlight. Nate remembered the story of David Livingston she read from the book *Fifty Missionary Stories Every Child Should Know*. Somehow,

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Nate Saint

(1923-1956)

Seven-year-old Nate Saint peered wide-eyed over the cockpit of his older brother Sam's Challenger biplane. The eastern Pennsylvania countryside was spread out neatly below him like a fine tablecloth. Nate was determined to remember every moment of this first high-flying adventure.

Flying soon captured Nate's heart. His air-service ministry to isolated missionaries put him on a path of destiny that would ultimately end with a final airplane flight with four missionary friends to the "Palm Beach" landing strip in the jungles of Ecuador.

The men's lives given that day not only opened a door to the gospel for the unreached "Aucas"; it has been said that possibly no single event of the twentieth century awakened more hearts to God's call to serve in missions.

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