

the Airborne Bible

by 1st Officer
Jim Freeman

One day in April 1973 a rather unusual flight took off from a small airport at Waxhaw, North Carolina.

Even the plane was out of the ordinary. It was a 10-passenger/cargo aircraft called the Evangel — with two engines and STOL capability (Short Takeoff and Landing). It is manufactured by the Evangel Corp. in Iowa specifically for missionary work — involving flights into remote, inaccessible, often hostile patches of real estate that are laughingly called airports.

Which, in turn, explains why this was an unusual trip for a couple of Frontier pilots — Captain Ron Litton and myself. We were heading for the Amazon — that region of danger, hardship, opportunity, romance and hundreds of Stone-Age Indian tribes, most of which have yet to make their first contact with civilized men and the outside world. Theirs is a world of constant fear, superstition, sickness, pain and war among themselves.

Some 30 years ago, an organization known as Wycliffe Bible Translators conceived the idea of supplying missionaries throughout the world with a means of bringing the word of God to tribes that have no written language. Wycliffe (W.B.T.) is worldwide, non-denominational and non-profit. It consists of some 3,000 linguists who work without pay to put some 2,000 unwritten languages into writing and to translate the Bible into these words. The linguists are located in 25 countries.

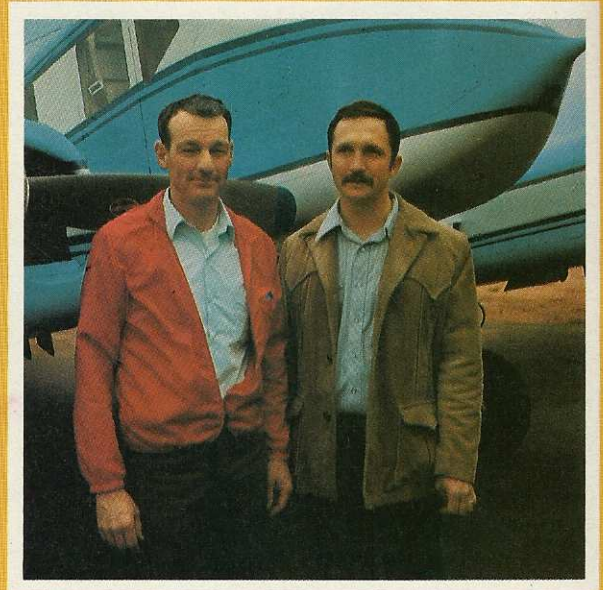
W.B.T. has a technical branch, the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS), which is made up of radio technologists, construction workers, auto mechanics, aircraft mechanics, pilots, typists, teachers, doctors, nurses, dentists, photographers and even public relations specialists. It is the job of JAARS, under Director Bernie May, to get the translation teams to the various tribes and keep them there with supplies and any necessary emergency assistance.

Without the airplane, the task of the missionaries is virtually impossible — particularly in the vast Amazon. Transportation in Amazonas has to be either by air or by water, for an overland traveler is certain to encounter areas that are im-

penetrable. This was the reason we two Frontier pilots were in the cockpit of the Evangel, heading for Loma Linde, Columbia, South America. (Bernie May had asked me if I could get enough time off to ferry the aircraft to the Amazon. Knowing of Ron Litton's interest in missionary work, I invited him to be my copilot.)

We knew it was going to be a long, tough trip. For Ron it was a new experience, but I had previously flown a DC-3 for JAARS, making scheduled flights from Miami to bases throughout the Amazon. We filed a flight plan for Evangel 15 Victor that called for 15 hours and 45 minutes of flying time, from Waxhaw (JAARS' headquarters) to Loma Linde (the W.B.T. Columbian interior base) via Miami; Montego Bay, Jamaica; and Barranquilla and Bogota, Columbia. We carried an extra fuel tank, a 55-gallon barrel strapped down in the passenger compartment.

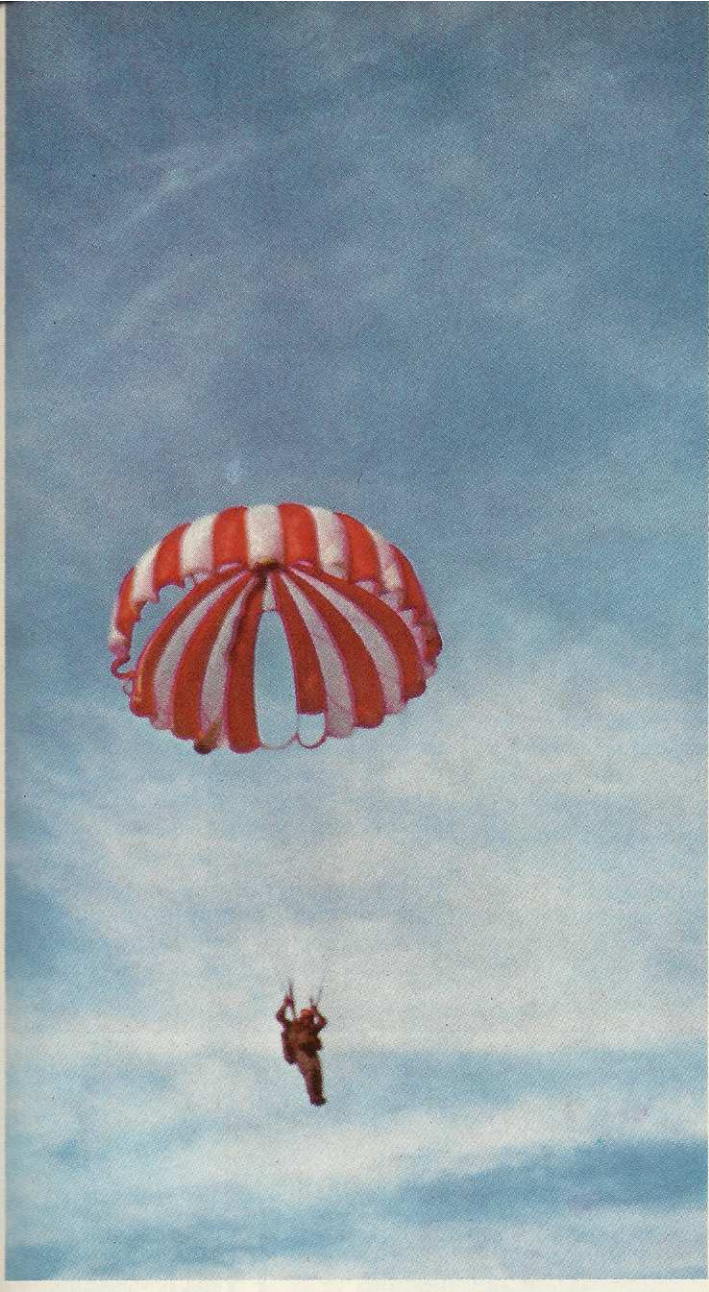
Ron brought along a parachute, not for "bailing out" purposes but to give some parachute training to the missionary pilots — he is an expert sky diver who runs his own sky diving school in Billings, Montana, when he isn't on a Frontier trip. He got to use his chute almost as soon as we arrived in Waxhaw to pick up the airplane. The news media had come over from Char-



Ron and Jim in front of Evangel 15 Victor. This is a STOL (short takeoff and landing) type aircraft.

lotte to cover the Evangel's dedication ceremony, and May asked Ron to make a jump for the audience of some 400 which was there for the dedication. He put on quite a show, too — jumping from 10,000 feet and during the free fall performing a series of rolls, somersaults and spins.

The flight south was no pleasure ride. We took off about noon, refueled in Miami and departed just after dark for a 600-mile overwater flight to Jamaica. We spent the night in Montego Bay and took off for another 600-mile overwater hop to Barranquilla where the trip almost ended in disaster. We were pumping gas into the auxiliary tank and Ron, whose flying is a lot better than his Spanish, gave the refueling man the wrong directions. All of a sudden the barrel was overflowing and fuel was spilling throughout the plane. We had to stay clear of the aircraft to prevent a stray spark from setting off an explosion, waiting until the inch of fuel on the floor evaporated.



Ron during his skydiving demonstration in South America.

Amazon Jungle Airstrip



The refueling incident was almost a warning of further unpleasantness. We took off for Bogota but didn't get very far — running into a rainstorm that kept getting worse. It was so heavy that we seemed to be flying through a solid wall of water. We changed course but still couldn't work our way out of the weather so we finally had to return to Barranquilla, where we stayed overnight while the weather cleared.

Finally, arriving in Bogota, we were met by Ron McIntosh, JAARS' chief pilot in Columbia. We cleared customs, completed the airplane's papers, and were off again — climbing in a great circle over the city to gain enough altitude so we could cross the eastern range of the massive Andean Mountains. One hour later, our wheels touched down at the humid jungle location of Loma Linde. We received a warm welcome, although understandably it was more for the airplane than for a couple of Frontier pilots.

We stayed at Loma Linde for two days, going on a supply flight to one of the tribes where we visited with one of the linguistic teams and got a first-hand look at what was being done for the Indians. The dedication of these men was incredible. We were told that a missionary may spend as long as 15 years with a single tribe, before moving on to a different tribe speaking an entirely different language where he had to start in all over again.

Ron was kept busy repacking the parachutes of the JAARS men who were part of an emergency air rescue team, giving them packing lessons at the same time and training them in jumping techniques. Both of us were aware of the pioneering work done in this area by Fred Chambers, an American Airlines pilot. Fred, also a sky diver, had previously gone to Loma Linde to set up a parachute training program for jumps into the jungle so airstrips could be cleared and bases established. Chambers also trained the first "para-rescuers" in the art of parachuting men and supplies to the sick and injured, the only means of survival if a missionary plane were forced down in this rugged country.

Our stay was only too short — Ron making one more jump onto the airstrip at

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Jim oversees the loading of the Evangel, prior to departure from Waxhaw, N.C.

Loma Linde just before we departed by commercial airline, mumbling by way of explanation that "I just wanted to log a jump in South America." But we felt good about the trip, knowing we had played a small part in a worthy cause. The role of the airplane in missionary work cannot be overstated. I cite the story of a missionary named Eugene Scott, his wife and his children.

"Scotty" arrived several years ago at Yarina Cocha, W.B.T. main base in the jungles of Peru. Having already been through Wycliffe's jungle survival training in Old Mexico, they were soon ready to go to the Sharanahua, a tribe living on the Perus River.

Scotty and his family struggled for three weeks, trekking through the dense, wet jungles and traveling by dugout canoe where streams permitted. Finally, suffering from dysentery and the loss of supplies when their dugout overturned in rapids, they arrived at the Sharanahua village. Able to stay only a short while due to their physical condition and loss of supplies, they returned to Yarina Cocha after another terrible three weeks of travel.

Since then the airplane has been brought into service in Peru. Now a JAARS pilot in a single-engine Helio Courier can fly Scotty and his family to the same tribal location in two hours, fifty-five minutes!

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