Crow Agency
Written by Bill Williamson

In the Beginning

I finished my Discipleship Training School, DTS, in mid February, followed closely by my marriage to Judith Ann Pansing the next day, Valentine’s Day.

Our honeymoon took us from Montana to Arizona, Oregon, and a few states in between. Soon we were back in Lakeside, Montana, home of Youth With A Mission, YWAM Montana.

Judith had completed a DTS in Kona, Hawaii just two years earlier, and had joined the staff of YWAM Montana to build a mission work at Lakeside. The YWAM base was an Air Force Facility that had been closed for years. A number of Christian businessmen put up the required purchase price for the base and the dream of a Christian mission training base was launched.

YWAM roots go back to 1962 when Loren Cunningham visualized waves of college students landing on foreign soil to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. It had grown to hundreds of YWAM bases located in more than one hundred and sixty countries. All with the purpose of ‘Knowing God, and Making Him Known.’

My DTS had changed my life. I learned more about Jesus Christ and how much he cares for me, and I could see no other alternative but to serve him with all my heart all of my days. Judith had come to the same conclusion in Kona.

God put Judith and me together in marriage, and he certainly had a plan for us to serve him together. And we did that for ten wonderful years before it came to an end. Judith died of lung cancer at the age of fifty. We had been the team God wanted us to be, moving at the drop of a hat somewhere only God would choose. We lived in twenty plus locations in ten years. We sometimes prayed at highway intersections to know which way to turn. We were that serious about following God on our course of life together. It was quite an adventure.

‘A little radical,’ you say.

Yes, we were a little radical for sure. But, radical is what every Christian should be. We are to be Christlike and Jesus was certainly a radical. Jesus is not looking for, ‘lukewarm,’ as he states in the Book of Revelation.

But, I’ve jumped too far ahead, actually ahead of where this story is supposed to go. Let’s go
back to March and the end of our honeymoon.

We had decided before our honeymoon that we would participate in the upcoming YWAM School of Evangelism, SOE. This one would be a first of its kind and would be called a, SWAT, (Survival, Wilderness, Advanced, Training), SOE, and would teach skills needed to survive and endure hardships. Students would be expected to rappel over a ninety-foot cliff, hike many miles with a heavy backpack, stay overnight in the rugged Rocky Mountains alone, (grizzly bear country by the way), and many other tests designed by the school staff.

This was a school right up my alley. I retired from the US Forest Service, and was a dedicated outdoors person all my life. I was thrilled at the opportunity for the challenge of cliffs, rivers, treks, living on little, or just spending time in the mountains by myself.

Of course, I now had a wife. Judith was also a very capable outdoors person. We could do this.

The SOE would include twelve weeks of classroom study, (intermixed with various assignments outside the classroom), and eight weeks of outreach to another part of the world. This outreach was scheduled to be Siberia, China, Mongolia, and Tibet, but was subject to change as a result of the ‘teams’ prayers. In fact, Siberia was taken from the list, almost before classes started.

The classroom portion would present twelve different instructors, one for each week of class. And each week a new spiritual topic to train us to new levels in ‘knowing’ and ‘serving’ our Jesus would be taught.

It was ‘day one’ of the SOE, and many new faces were gathering in our classroom. Some of them Judith and I knew because they came from the staff of the Lakeside base, as many as half the nineteen of us. The others came from far away countries of Fiji, Australia, and closer by, Canada. We consisted of bikers, missionaries, students, and various walks of life, all who had decided to follow Jesus closer.

It was time to meet the leader of our school and his wife. I had heard of him, but now was meeting him face to face. He seemed a radical type who would excel at a school of this nature. He seemed like a good pick to me.

Some of the students, (I’ll call them ‘team’ from here on out), seemed like ducks out of water. It was obvious that they had not seen anything wilder than a renegade bus driver on a busy city street. How would they be able to rappel over a cliff anyway? How would they do alone overnight in a remote mountain region? Time would tell.

The teaching was so good and the weeks flew by. One of our training tasks would be to put a backpack on, load it with fifteen pounds of anything, and then hike to the top of Baldy Mountain a couple of miles away. We were required to successfully complete the hike before the lecture phase of the school was over in three months. An easy task, I thought. I could do that on day one. The hike was along a forest road the whole way and presented no real challenge to us.

It wasn’t so easy for some though, and it would be weeks, many weeks, for some to have victory over the hike. I was beginning to see that the physical requirements of the school were designed for the average of us. I also saw that we each had strengths and it wasn’t going to be the physical endurance, or strength, of any one person who would cause this outreach to be a success. It had to be a team effort.

A Lesson From God
Getting back into classroom routine was not hard for me as I had just completed five months of DTS. Judith had been working as staff and a mom full time but was adjusting to the routine.

Personalities are another thing. You would think to be in a spiritual school, on a spiritual training base, would mean everyone is spiritual and there would be no personality issues arise. Wrong!

People are people, and Christians are people. People have trouble with each other from time to time, Christians included.

There was one person on the team who just seemed to rub me wrong. Don’t ask me why, it was just a personality clash that I could not explain. I took a wide berth around this person whenever I encountered him. I did not want to make the situation worse. Little did I know that I was doing just that by avoiding him.

God had another plan. And I was to learn an important lesson.

We were all in the main lecture hall for an overall meeting of the base. Seventy-five to one hundred people were gathered and our entire team was seated in the audience.

After some announcements and instruction, silence fell across the room. A young man brought a lone chair out and placed it on the platform at the front of the room and left. He returned with a basin of water and a towel. He placed the basin on the floor in front of the chair, and hung the towel across the chair. He left the platform.

I sat there wondering what that was all about. I’m sure most of the rest were wondering too. It was a long five, maybe ten minutes, while the silence remained and no one moved.

I began to think that this is God presenting someone the opportunity to wash someone’s feet. Maybe it was I. My heart began to feel so heavy as I thought about this possibility.

Soon I knew it must be for me. I knew that I was the one. I was supposed to wash the feet of the man I had the personality conflict with. But, even though I knew, I could not get myself to rise and climb onto the platform. My palms were sweaty and I felt surely everyone was looking at me. Maybe I squirmed a bit as I tried to muster the courage to do it. Minutes seemed like hours as I chewed on all this.

Finally, the man returned to the platform and removed the basin and towel, then returned for the chair. The program continued and the room had a buzz of whispering in the air.

I felt bad because I had not done what I knew was God asking of me. He had seen to it that someone else placed the implements on the platform for my benefit. I was glad the ordeal was over. But was it?

I could not get it out of my mind . . . I had disobeyed God. I had failed a test, a test that would have set me free of one particular problem, my dislike and conflict with this person.

There would be no rest for me that night. I tossed throughout the night, replaying that day over and over in my mind. I saw that chair with the basin and towel. I saw it all there on the platform, and I heard the silence.

I rose early the next morning. I showered, shaved, and prepared for class. I told Judith I had something I had to do. She helped me find a basin and a towel.

I left early for class, driving to the classroom. I unloaded the basin of water and towel. I placed them in the classroom near a chair in the rear of the room.

Judith arrived, as did the other team members. My assignment and his wife sat where they had always sat. We all had unofficially assigned ourselves seats and seemed to return to those each day.

My heart was beating so fast and I was nervous beyond words. I knew what I must do and I
must not hesitate. The team was all seated and our leader stepped to the front of the classroom.

I made my move. I stood with the basin in one hand and the towel in the other, and walked to the front of the room and stopped in front of him where he sat in the second row. I knelt and began taking his shoes off. I pulled his socks off and looking up into his face that had a look of astonishment on it, I picked up one of his feet and put it in the water.

You could have heard a pin drop as I washed and dried each foot. I made eye contact with him several times as I washed his feet. More of the conflict and dislike drained out of me each time I looked into his eyes.

Finally, his feet were washed, dried, and his socks and shoes were on again. I looked at him once more and said, ‘I love you.’

I returned to my seat. The anxiety was gone, the dislike was gone, the conflict was gone. I now had a new friend. My ‘friend-column’ had grown by one, he was where the rest of the team was. I was grateful to my God for pursuing me in this matter. Thank you, Lord.

Two by Two

I don’t remember the sequence anymore, but on one particular week we had learned more about evangelism, witnessing to unbelievers, and now it was time for the practical application part of the instruction. We were to go out two by two for the weekend, just like Jesus’ Disciples had done. Staff assigned partners, but we had no real instruction except to pray and ask God where to go. We were to just go as the Lord directed. Go where God said to go.

I asked our leader if Judith and I could go to my brother’s home for the weekend. He was a new believer and I felt God urging us to go there. I received approval.

Others went off in various directions trying to hear the voice of God. Class reconvened on Monday morning and we were able to share about our weekend.

Two young ladies prayed and felt God saying, ‘go to the mall.’ You laugh, but God can say that. They went in obedience and walked around the large mall. They then sat on a bench near the entrance of the Hotel portion of the mall. They were asked if they were waiting for someone. They shared about our school, and the weekend assignment. The person, who happened to be a believer, thanked them for sharing and asked them to come to the registration desk.

At the desk, the person arranged payment for a fine room, and all expenses, including meals, to be paid for the entire weekend. They gracefully accepted the offer.

The husbands of the two young ladies felt, after prayer, they were to simply walk along the highway between Lakeside and Polson. They did just that and nightfall came with nothing at hand except a bridge over a creek. They spent the night under the bridge cold and hungry. Both were well equipped mentally and spiritually for such a night.

What’s the spiritual gaining of this exercise? Probably many, but at least, lessons in ‘letting go’ of our own plans and trusting God to direct us and provide at the same time. All this without expectation.

Judith and I simply enjoyed a pleasant weekend around a campfire at my brother’s home in Truman Creek with hot dogs and Smore’s. God only knows what fruit came from that.

Bar Hopping

Another week of instruction began with teaching by Alan Williams, lecturing on evangelism.
and church planting. It was an exciting week where we learned how not to be separate from those we were trying to reach with the gospel. We were taught to go be with the people, in whatever culture. Live with the people, don’t take a house on the hill above the village, take a room in the village and rub elbows with them in daily living.

At the close of the week, we learned of our weekend assignment. It would all be accomplished on that Friday night.

Friday night came and we all loaded into various vehicles, including my Dodge van, ‘Ole Green Bean’ it was affectionately called, because of its ‘pea green, color. We drove to Columbia Falls, northeast of Kalispell, Montana. We were going to witness the gospel in the local taverns and bars.

We parked as closely as we could to the first bar and exited our vehicles. Alan went inside and asked if we could come in and sing some songs. The bar tender said he didn’t mind if we didn’t bother anyone.

Once inside we spread out a little and one of the guys prepared to lead us in a few worship choruses. He actually sat on a bar stool and played, and we all sang along with familiar songs. I wondered how well this would go over. But, it was received well. The people even sang along with us when they knew the words.

After a few songs we played pool with others while we talked about our reason for being there. Some of us just sat and talked with people while having a soft drink. Some of the patrons wanted to talk about Jesus. But, others weren’t so ready. We had a good time.

We traveled back to Kalispell to another bar. We walked inside the dim lit old tavern. There were only a few people inside and they looked as though they would rather we weren’t there. But, we pushed on inside. I’ve never seen such softening as happened when we began to sing choruses. The wrinkled old worn skin of one patron who was wearing a frown began pulling the wrinkles out with a smile and her mouth began singing the words with us. As we were leaving, the people gathered around us and thanked us for coming in. Again, it was a good time.

Our last stop was a high class place at the south end of Kalispell. The patrons were well dressed and had obviously had their ‘happy hour.’ They eyed us with great suspicion as we entered. This place was packed to the brim without many places to sit. We did much the same as in the other establishments. This was our coldest reception, even though a few didn’t mind that we were there. Most we could see, didn’t budge from their original position and clearly wished we had never come in.

The night was a success in my thinking. God had shown us that we need not fear going anywhere to represent his son, Jesus. People may accept us, or they may reject us. Let that be what it may, just listen and go.

The Cliff

It was a bright sunny day in the Flathead Valley of Montana. The small community of Lakeside has much to offer, just one mile from Flathead Lake, the largest natural lake west of the Mississippi River. It is a beautiful setting on every side.

Lakeside is set at the base of Blacktail Mountain and the surrounding terrain is rugged. There is one spot where a ninety-foot cliff is situated with access to the top by vehicle.

We all arrived at the top of the cliff one morning. This was the day we were to rappel off this cliff to the ground ninety feet below. I was thrilled at the idea. Not everyone was.
One particular girl had agonized at the idea, and so had some others. Many team members had already connected the rappel rope to their harness and stepped off into nothing but air. My turn came and I did the same. I made my descent without incident, even kicking out from the cliff and doing a 360-degree spin around before returning to the cliff. I would like to have gone back to the top of the cliff and done it over and over, but once sufficed to complete the exercise.

Let’s go back to the girl who was clearly afraid of the cliff. By the time she was ushered to the cliff’s edge she was in tears. She was terrified at the thought of stepping off a cliff. All the prayer and encouraging said by the entire team was only able to get her over the edge and there she froze up. She cried, screamed, and it was clear that she was in a spot where she would not ascend, or descend.

Finally, a team member who was an expert climber that set this rappel up for us, harnessed up, and went over the edge to join her. He managed somehow to get his face between her and the cliff. From there he prayed for her, and helped her with her rigging. They began the long descent down the cliff’s face an inch at a time.

The crying stopped and the girl focused on what he was saying. They were moving down safely and that delighted the girl.

At last she arrived at the bottom and climbers who were already there helped the girl gain her balance as she stepped from the cliff to flat ground. Her smile lit up the entire team. She was elated that she had conquered her fear and gotten to the bottom.

That was the objective this day at the cliff. It was only successful because all of us had made it to the bottom. If one of the team had not, it would not have been successful. It was all about team success.

Crow Agency

About half way through the lecture phase of the SOE the staff had designed in a trip to Crow Agency, which is the capital of the Crow Indian Reservation in central Montana near Billings. The outreach to the Crow had come as a result of a request received from a believing Indian woman who happened to be the cousin to the Medicine Man of the tribe. We had been asked to come, to help transform an old deserted motel to a visitor center.

The Medicine Man and most other elders of the tribe were not sure about us and what we could do for them. They conceded to the urging of the cousin to let us come.

We prayed much in the weeks leading up to our time at Crow Agency. Over and over we kept being told in prayer that we were to simply ‘serve.’ ‘Serve’ was our answer. We then determined to keep our mouths shut and just do the things they needed us to do.

The eight-hour trip in our old yellow school bus would begin at daybreak. Our trip went well most of the way, until we realized that our gas gauge was not working properly, and it was thought we were very low on fuel. Sure enough, the bus eventually chugged to a stop on a long climb uphill to a nearby summit. Finally it chugged its last and we stopped at the side of the road.

We off loaded and prayer was our first action. We prayed that God would allow the bus to start and that he would provide fuel to get us to the next gas station. We loaded back on the bus, turned the ignition key and heard the engine roar. The driver shifted into gear and we moved toward the top of the hill.

The engine ran perfectly until we reached the top of the hill and it began to chug once again.
Only this time when the last chug occurred we were on the down slope and we were now starting to roll unassisted. We coasted faster and faster, on down the long downgrade. We coasted at nearly highway speed for four miles, and at the bottom of the hill we could see a gas station.

We prayed as the bus began to slow down. Slower and slower, but as we arrived at the station, there was just enough roll to get us to the gas pump and the bus stopped.

God had answered our prayer exactly. Thank you, Lord.

We arrived in Crow Agency to a nightmare scenario that included no electricity, and that meant no hot water. The place was an incredible pile of debris, walls literally busted apart, floors broken and strewn with unmentionable ‘stuff.’ Pipes were broken, and only one unit had running water, and that was from a deep well, a very cold deep well. It was early in the year for Montana, and you cannot believe how cold deep well water is at that time of year. And this was to be our home for two weeks.

It was no task to determine when someone was having a shower. The screams were evidence enough that the well water had hit its mark on someone’s back.

We repaired, cleaned, painted and prayed. Prayer was an important part of what we did each day. We were there to do more than repairs and maintenance. We were there because God had sent us.

The old motel had a medium sized swimming pool at the back of the units. The pool was half full of water. The only problem was, the pool had not been cleaned, or used in years. The water was likely replenished regularly by snow and rain water over the years.

The water was not clear, nor clean. It was black. Deep black with debris floating on the top, and larger items looming out of the water where they sat on the pool’s bottom. Car-tires were evident in abundance. It seemed this had been the place to throw trash, any kind of trash. In my opinion, part of the debris was that of sewage, but I hoped it was not.

‘Who’s going to clean the pool?’ was a frequent question asked by the team members? The answer to that came, and it didn’t appeal to most of us. ‘We’ were going to ‘clean the pool.’ So, we began. The tires and larger debris came out. Beer cans and plastic bottles were pulled out in abundance. Then buckets of water were dipped out. Once the pool was empty of water and debris, we cleaned and shined the walls and bottom of it until it was respectable again.

Often as we worked, we would see local Crow Indians drive by slowly staring in our direction. We had no help from them. We had our Indian contact and that was where most of our coordination came from. The Indians left us to figure our own plan out. But, they were watching us.

We were watching them too. We watched and prayed. But, mostly we ‘served.’ We worked hard at Crow Agency.

Soon our time was drawing close to an end. We had planned two weeks and our days were now reduced to a couple. The work had gone well, and the motel, conference room, lobby, and the pool, was all looking very good.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was an invitation from the Medicine Man. The men of our team were invited to a Crow traditional Sweat Lodge ceremony. This was an unexpected surprise. Of course we would attend.

We had decided, through prayer, before leaving Lakeside that we would consider all invitations and whatever we would do, it would be as unto the Lord. We would have our limits of course, but we were open, not closed to the culture of the Crow.

The time for the Sweat Lodge event came and the ceremony began outside the Sweat Lodge. It was dawn and our yellow school bus was parked only a short distance away in stark contrast to
this ancient style of Sweat Lodge. The sweat lodge was round on top, and low enough to the ground
that one would have to stoop while moving around inside. It was covered with various materials
to contain the heat. There was a support pole in the center with a hole around the pole to let the
excess heat out.

The Medicine Man explained that the Lodge flap, where we entered, must open to the east
where the sun rises because the sun represents the creator, whom they call, ‘Grandfather.’

Outside the Sweat Lodge, before entering, a fire had to be built. The wood was kindled and
stacked in a way to facilitate a quick start to the fire. Newspaper was at the bottom of the stack.

The Medicine Man asked which of us was the oldest. It was I. The Crow custom dictates that
the oldest man must light the fire. I think I may have been the oldest of even the Crow there. I was
forty-five at the time. I was told I must light the fire facing the east, honoring the creator,
represented once again by the sun. The sun was just rising as I knelt by the pile of wood.

I was struck with my first test in this lighting. Their custom was that the man would light a
cigarette, puffing it until it was well started, and then use the cigarette to start the paper burning.
I’m not so sure this wasn’t just a test of us ‘missionaries’ by the Crow.

I put the cigarette into my lips, put a match to it and puffed. I knew how to do this because
I had smoked for ten years, but it had been about seventeen years since my last puff. I did it unto
the Lord, and got the embers going great at the end of the nicotine stick. Of course I did not inhale,
my lungs were quite clean now and I wanted to keep them that way.

The paper flared, bursting into flame. The kindling followed and soon there was a roaring
fire. I was honored later by the Medicine Man when he told us the measure of a man is in how well
he can start the Sweat Lodge fire. Surely there was a Holy Spirit breeze that helped the fire that day.

Many large stones were then stacked around the fire. They would be greatly heated and then
placed around the center pole inside the lodge.

Finally all the hot rocks were inside. And we were instructed to enter through the small flap
that opened just enough to allow us to stoop low and enter. It was dark inside, except when the flap
opened. Although there was a small shaft of light that entered the hole at the top of the lodge.

We all moved inside and took our assigned positions. We sat against the outer wall of the
lodge with our faces toward the center. The flap was closed and darkness engulfed us until our eyes
adjusted to the absence of sunlight. Our eyes refocused, and with the aid of the shaft of light from
the hole in the top of the lodge, we were able to see outlines of the participants of the ceremony.

My stepson, age twelve, was with us. He was allowed to go in with the men, but only for a
short time due to the intense heat inside. ‘Will’ was very happy to exit when the Medicine Man
waved at him to go.

It was very hot, but didn’t seem so bad. But, I would come to change my mind on that
statement. It became hotter than what seemed bearable. Again, we missionaries were being tested.

There was a container of water in the lodge and it was used to create steam by pouring
occasionally onto the hot rocks. Of course this only made the conditions worse.

The Crow had a switch that was hand held, and contained maybe thirty tiny branches and tied
at one end to make a handle. The opposite ends of the switches flared out to about eight or ten
inches, much like a small broom. The switch was passed from person to person, and was used to
switch our skin. The switching eased the burn of the heat.

The switch was passed to me and I began lightly switching my arms, my legs, back, the front
of my body, trying not to poke my eye out. The switching helped and I hated to say goodbye when
I passed it on. It would return again and I would be very happy to see it.
Somewhere in the process the Medicine Man lit a pipe, what we would call a ‘Peace Pipe.’ At least in the movies we did. He lit the tobacco and puffed to get it going. He passed the pipe to his right to one of his elders, who puffed a long pull on the pipe, held the smoke and let it out slowly. He then passed it to the next person in line.

I was about seventh in that line and it eventually made its way around to me. I was ‘switching’ while I waited for the pipe to arrive. I used the switch all that I could without hogging it. It was unbearably hot by now. The pipe arrived. I held it as I had seen the others hold it, and said, ‘I do it unto you, Lord,’ and took a long puff. I let it out slowly, not allowing any into my lungs. And then gladly passed it along. I was hoping that the others would puff and pass it on quickly. I was ready to get out of there. By now we were leaning low trying to get the less hot air near the ground.

I wasn’t sure how we were doing on this test, but I was beginning to just want out of that Crow Sweat Lodge.

Suddenly it was over. The Medicine Man said something and waved with his arm toward the exit. We gladly obeyed his demanding gesture. I was wondering if he were ushering only us ‘missionaries’ out. But, he and the elders also exited. It was evident he was pleased with the event.

He approached our leader once on the outside, and stated he wanted a Pow Wow. A talk! Our leader asked if we could meet in our school bus. He agreed and he and the elders climbed aboard, as did we.

We sat silently, as we had most of the two weeks, not offering a word. We were waiting upon our Lord to instruct us. We expected to have opportunity to speak if we just served, and waited.

The Medicine Man began to speak.

‘Missionaries have been coming to the Crow Indians for one hundred and fifty years. They bring their bibles and tell us all that we are doing wrong, and tell us we have to be like them,’ he said.

He went on, ‘They leave and write their books, and we continue doing what we have always done.’

‘But, you are different,’ he said. ‘You listen, you work, you help us, and you ask nothing of us. We want to know why you do this.’ And then he looked long at us waiting for the answer.

This was the time for us to talk.

We explained that God had a Son, and Jesus was his name, and it was all for Jesus that we live and breath. We serve him. And He told us to come to the Crow and serve them.

We went on to tell them that they believe in ‘Grandfather,’ the creator. And this Jesus is the Son of ‘the Creator.’ And that God, (Grandfather to them), had sent His Son, Jesus, to earth to demonstrate his love by suffering and dying on a cross for our sins so that we may have eternal life with God and His Son. We explained the need to believe and trust in Jesus, and to confess we are sinners and repent, or turn away from our sin.

This statement amazed them. They knew that there was a creator God whom they called ‘Grandfather,’ but did not know he had a Son. It was only now that this revelation hit them. After we expounded for an hour, it was clear that they accepted this idea of a Son of the Creator.

We left the bus as friends with the Medicine Man and elders. He explained that the Crow had never allowed missionaries to join them in their Sweat Lodge. They had honored us because we served them unselfishly.

We were invited to come back to Crow Agency whenever we wanted. And I know that subsequent trips were made by YWAM from Lakeside and the relationship continued.
God’s Voice

I was so excited about the coming outreach to Tibet and Mongolia. Sure China was on the list too, but I wasn’t that thrilled to experience that country.

We were no more than a few weeks away from departure and what we thought would be an outreach to remember.

So, why were Judith and I suddenly so puzzled about our part in it? We had planned for months, paid up in full our part of the outreach cost, maybe the only ones to do so at that point, and were moving into the final stage of training. But, we now had a dimming peace about even going. It was time to pray specifically.

We didn’t understand our feelings, but knew the only answer was to take it to God, the one who laid it on our hearts in the beginning. We prayed for an answer to the question, why are we so unsure of our decision to go? We weren’t getting that answer, just more restless by the day.

Finally, we did make a decision. A decision to pray until the week’s end, asking God to take away all desire we had for the outreach, if we weren’t to go. And by contrast, we asked that God increase our desire to go, if that were his will. We knew we would have our answer by the weekend.

Friday came, and it was unanimous. Unknown why to us, we were not to go on this outreach to Tibet and China. God had done what we asked, our desire to go had diminished to zero in the past few days. We no longer desired to go with the team.

God had spoken and now it was time to share this new information with the leadership of the SOE. I made my appointment with the leader and shared the whole story with him.

His advice was quick and to the point. He said we had not heard from God, and we were supposed to go on the outreach contrary to what we ‘thought’ we had heard God say.

There was no doubt in me, however. I knew that I knew what God had shown us. For me to have a change of heart about this outreach, an outreach dream, as far as I was concerned, had to be God.

I too, spoke quickly and to the point. I simply told him that I could not depend upon him, nor anyone else, to hear from God for me. I must hear from God myself. I had not been having problems hearing from God. I spent time with him daily and yearned to hear his instruction for Judith and our family.

I went on to say, ‘We’ll not be going on the outreach.’

This changed how we were able to interact with the team. From this point on, we could only participate in helping with administrative details of further team events, like driving, etc. For the ‘overnight in the Rockies’ exercise, we were asked to help backpack supplies many miles into the remote area. Once over the ridge and into the camp area, we dropped our supplies and hiked the two miles back to the car. Then we drove back to the base at Lakeside.

The team did spend that night in the mountains, each alone with their own shelter made by their own hands, and a small fire they must keep going if they so desired. Snow was still present in much of the location. It was a sleepless night for many. The leader made rounds throughout the night to see to the safety of each team member. A good exercise.

We did remain in the school until the lecture phase was over, and enjoyed it very much. Up to the time of Judith’s death, we had no regrets about our response to God’s instruction. Since her death, I remain convinced that we heard God and we did the right thing.

The Gospel in Tibetan Language
The lecture phase of the SOE ended. Judith, Will, and I packed up and sped off to Truman Creek Northeast of Kalispell to spend the summer in a cabin, and discover the joy of being a family, outside of a classroom setting.

We gathered back at the base to send off our SWAT team on their two-month adventure in China and Tibet. Mongolia had been removed as a destination when papers for the team could not be obtained.

It would be weeks before we would hear much from the team, and when we did hear we found they had been holed up in a city center in China praying for days. Some were sick, direction seemed to lack, accept to pray.

Finally we received word that the women of the team had stayed in the China city to pray, and the men headed off into the high mountains of China and eventually into Tibet. And when I say ‘high mountains,’ I mean high. The mountain passes were at 17,000 feet elevation. Breathing was difficult for those who were not accustomed to such thinness of air. That would be our entire team.

In fact, they were so disabled in that environment they would have to ride the native Yaks instead of hiking along the trails. The Yak, if you have not seen one, is a strange looking animal that has been domesticated. It has long dark hair that is long enough to touch the ground at times. It seems a cross between and a cow and a buffalo when you look at them. They are very strong animals and well adapted to the high altitude of Tibet.

When the team did hike, they would turn their heavy backpacks over to Tibetans for portage. Some of the porters were teenage girls, a really humbling experience for ‘real men of a SWAT team.’ There simply was not enough oxygen in that high altitude air to provide for the deprived lungs of our team.

Weeks would pass as they journeyed into Tibet and visited among the nomads who led their animals throughout the region in search of the green grass growing abundantly on the high slopes. The team would spend nights in the open, in their sleeping bags, then travel on the next day. It was slow going, but they were sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ wherever they had opportunity.

You are probably thinking, ‘how did they share with such a different language?’ This problem was thought through prior to the outreach and a unique method was used to present the gospel.

A simple collapsible cardboard box was made that contained a disk with a testimony of the carrier. Each team member had his own recorded testimony of how Jesus Christ had changed their life. The box, when folded into position, could be cranked by a small hand crank and a voice would sound out in the Tibetan language, sharing the testimony. The voice came out of a cone made from rolled up paper, a simple device, but an effective one. As long as the crank was used, the voice continued. Can’t you just picture these brown weathered faces of the Tibetan people huddled around one of our team as he cranked out the message of how Jesus transforms lives? Many of these makeshift recorders were left behind so that the nomads could hear the message over and over again.

There wasn’t much opportunity to share more, accept by translator when they were available. The team trusted that God would bring fruit from their willingness to go and suffer their way through the high Tibetan passes.

And suffer they did. Altitude sickness was a common thing. The beautiful green slopes and rugged mountains didn’t seem to be such an inviting place while fighting to breathe and keep their meager meals down.

The Tragedy
With the altitude sickness, and slowness of travel, it seemed things could not get worse, but they did.

It soon became customary for the team to use nomad methods within their shelter, when they had one. One custom was the way heat was provided. A large can, or bucket, would be partially filled with common dirt, and then a measure of regular gasoline would be carefully poured over the surface of the dirt letting it soak in. A match would then create a blaze in the dirt. The fire would slowly burn until all the gasoline would be consumed from the dirt. It would take long enough to provide heat for a prolonged period of time.

One team member began this procedure in a stationary dwelling that was available. He prepared the dirt, the gasoline, and struck his match. The entire room exploded into flame. He was unable to escape before all the exposed skin of his face and hands had been consumed. His burns were horrible to say the least.

The main contributing factor for the explosion was an ‘open’ can of gasoline in the corner of the dwelling. The cap had not been replaced by the last user. Fumes had filled the small dwelling and lingered, just waiting for the third ingredient needed to provide the explosion. The three ingredients were, oxygen, fuel, and spark. The last component was supplied when he struck the match.

He was in such pain and the team was days from even a road, much less a hospital or doctor. They were days getting him off the mountains, and to any transportation at all. Once in a village, a taxi was hailed and the driver was horrified at his appearance. His face was a mass of scabs, and black from the burns, and was oozing to make a horrible picture. The cabby refused to let him in the taxi.

Finally a doctor was found and a hospital reached by ground and air transport. It was quickly determined that the medical facility could do nothing for him. Air transport was arranged for flight back to his home country of Canada.

Treatment began, and he was told he would not play a guitar ever again, due to hands so destroyed by the explosion. His face required real help, and a glass mask was constructed and placed over it to prevent air from drying it out as his skin attempted to replenish itself.

The miracle is that, his skin did replenish, and his hands did heal. He is able to play music again. God performed a miracle in response to faith and the prayers. His testimony is stronger than when he began the outreach.

Conclusion

I’ve not heard from most of the SWAT SOE team members for many years, and I’m not sure how they would assess the school all these years later.

As I take my look back at it, I see a wonderful time in my life. I loved the team, the leadership, and YWAM. I still do for that matter. I learned much in the twelve weeks of lectures and practical applications in, ‘survival,’ and, ‘getting closer to God.’ I appreciate the teachings that taught me to be bolder in my faith, putting aside my fear of man, and yielding to God’s leading.

I would do it all again.