February 2010

TWO-YEARS SINCE NORTONS DISAPPEARED: Memories
The Norton and the Gates family go back a long way. Our parents were friends while we were still young. In 1980, after graduating from college I landed at Keene, TX for the General Conference session in Dallas, and Bob’s dad’s plane was on the ramp ready for the trip to Mexico. A few months later Elwyn Norton lost his life along with three others, in the mountains of Southern Mexico.

In the mid-1980s, Bob and I worked together at the same small hospital and school in Southern Mexico where his parents had worked. Bob was director of maintenance. He could fix anything. Way back then he let me know that someday he wanted to fly.

Nearly 20 years later, in early 2002, I met Bob at the Collegedale Airport. Very happy to see him, I asked him what he was doing. He told me that he was carrying out his dream, and was finally finishing his professional flight training, but he didn’t know what God had in mind after that. When he told me that he had just married Neiba, a Venezuelan Nurse, I immediately told him that Gospel Ministries International had just purchased an aircraft in Southeast Venezuela and invited him to pray about serving with his wife as pilot and nurse there.

When he called me back a few days later to let me know of their acceptance, little did we know what a great impact that decision would have on thousands of people throughout Southern Venezuela and an inspiration to the world. He did indeed follow in his father’s footsteps. God used both Bob and Neiba to spread God’s love through GMI’s AMA program (Adventist Medical Aviation). In doing this they gave everything they had; their resources and their time. Then, two-years ago, they gave up even more.

On February 16, 2009, while on a routine flight, accompanied by Neiba, our secondary school director Gladys and four indigenous patients, the plane disappeared after departing from the small village of Karum. An intensive search for the airplane was immediately begun and included over 140 persons doing ground searches, the Governor’s helicopter, and high-resolution satellite images. Special thanks must be given to Celso Benavides, AMA’s indigenous ground search coordinator, and Bob Edwards, volunteer strategist and coordinator from North America. These two have never stopped in their efforts to locate the plane and/or the crew and passengers. Yet, in all these brave efforts no aircraft or accident site has yet been located. This is very unusual, especially in light of the fact that most aircraft that crash in the jungles of Southeast Venezuela have been found within a few days. The questions remains, “Where are Bob and Neiba Norton?”

Within a month of the plane’s disappearance, especially in the abnormal absence of any plane wreckage or bodies, I began to suspect that there might be some other factors involved in the disappearance. Having suffered a hijacking myself years ago in Mexico, I was convinced that such a scenario should not be ruled out, especially in an environment where there was highly vocal
opposition to the growing influence of the loved AMA program.

Over the last years, GMI has assisted in funding the ground search teams and kept up monthly stipends to the AMA team. I have stayed in close communication with team leaders and regularly met with them in Venezuela to coordinate further search strategies. At the request of the Norton family, due to the pain of the unknown, I have not written regarding our work or any alternate explanations to the plane’s disappearance. During the entire time GMI has been deeply concerned over the loss of our missionaries, for the pain of their family members and has been quietly very active behind the scenes.

As I am writing this, it is the two-year anniversary of their disappearance and has been a tearful time of year for many of our GMI staff. We loved Bob, Neiba and Gladys, and we miss them greatly. Now, after one year of silence, it is time to share with you some of the findings and what direction the evidence has taken us.

After several months of searching for the missing plane, the team leaders and I met down in Venezuela to evaluate any information that might lead toward alternate explanations for the missing plane. Within a couple of days some significant leads begin to develop, including a phone call from a well-connected person stating that the plane had not crashed but had been forced to fly elsewhere. Further information came from several villages. Though the plane disappeared early in the morning, around 10am, several villages report having seen and heard the AMA plane flying overhead in the same direction, with the engine surging. Most villagers know our plane by the sound of its engine. Lately, it has been confirmed that the plane landed twice in a nearby town. The registration numbers on the plane were left untouched, but the blue stripe was painted with black. The pilot and three passengers on both occasions were clean-cut young people wearing identical shirts and dark glasses. The villagers with whom they were speaking state that they joked sarcastically about Bob Norton and the Adventist Medical Aviation program and that they now were going to take over the work of providing the medical flights themselves. Then they flew off. Further evidences ruling out a crash scenario include several phone calls from Gladys’ own cell phone to students and her own daughter and brother. Sometimes the caller was a male and sometimes female claiming to be in different parts of the country. If they had crashed in the jungles, there could have been no phone calls made from her cell phone.

The above information I can share as it is known publically. There are further pieces of information, some of which have been confirmed, others still to be confirmed, that cannot be shared at this time. When analyzing “chatter” the individual pieces of information may not be as important as the general direction to which they point. In evaluating the information, it is my opinion that nearly all the “chatter” points in only one direction, a hijacking.

Everywhere I have traveled in the world, I have encouraged people to pray for Bob, Neiba, Gladys and the patients who were aboard the plane. We don't know where they are now or what their condition is. If Bob and any of the passengers are still alive, their release back to us would only be through a miracle of Heaven. We do know that nothing can happen to them without God’s permission. We also know that God’s work in Venezuela is not finished but just beginning. Because of this painful situation His work will be strengthened and many more souls will be saved.

Will you please join me in daily prayer that God will continue to protect and return them to us and their families? What ever God’s will may be, their commitment to service will prove an inspiration to those of us still working and the growing number of volunteers which are taking positions of responsibility and risk in God’s work on the front lines.
A big thank you to each of you who have supported and are supporting our frontline volunteers. If you would like to join the growing army around the world, you can apply online at [www.gmivolunteers.org](http://www.gmivolunteers.org). The work in Venezuela is not static, it is still growing. If you wish to continue supporting the AMA program in Venezuela, please call our office in Tennessee at 423-473-1841 and leave your name and number, and I will call you back with an update.

From the front lines in the Andes mountains and jungles of Bolivia,

Uncle David  
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“*The very means that is now so sparingly invested in the cause of God, and that is selfishly retained, will in a little while be cast with all idols to the moles and to the bats. Money will soon depreciate in value very suddenly when the reality of eternal scenes opens to the senses of man.*

*God will have men who will venture anything and everything to save souls. Those who will not move until they can see every step of the way clearly before them will not be of advantage at this time to forward the truth of God. There must be workers now who will push ahead in the dark as well as in the light, and who will hold up bravely under discouragements and disappointed hopes, and yet work on with faith, with tears and patient hope, sowing beside all waters, trusting the Lord to bring the increase. God calls for men of nerve, of hope, faith, and endurance, to work to the point.*

*In these perilous times we should leave untried no means of warning the people. We should be deeply interested in everything that will stay the tide of iniquity. Work on. Have faith in God.*”  
Evangelism, p. 62-63.  
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