

The Man Who Would Not be Defeated

BY W MITCHELL

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A story of human endurance and unbelievable courage.

*“It’s not what happens to you in life that counts,
it’s what you do about it.” W Mitchell*

W Mitchell (or just Mitchell, as he prefers to be called) was born in Pennsylvania in 1943 to an upper middle-class American family.

After dropping out of school and serving briefly in the Marines, he became a cab driver and then a gripman on the San Francisco cable cars. Mitchell claims, for a man with a love of mechanical things and an eye for a pretty girl, this had to be the ultimate job in the world.

Mitchell was a good looking young man with a zest for living life in the fast lane. He had a passion for fast moving sports, including snow skiing, flying light planes and riding motor bikes. It was this love of fast moving machines that led to the events that so dramatically changed his life.

An appointment with fate...

On 19 July 1971, Mitchell jumped on his motorcycle and headed off to visit his girlfriend. That morning he had made his first solo flight in a light aircraft. He was working in a job he loved, with plenty of friends and plenty of money. He was riding his new Honda 750 motorcycle, purchased the day before and life was looking pretty good.

Mitchell didn't see the laundry truck until it was too late. He hit it squarely in the side and went down. The petrol tank on the motorcycle popped its lid, pouring gallons of petrol onto the bike's hot engine and all over Mitchell. The ensuing fireball was ten feet high and four feet wide.

His life would probably have ended right there, except for a nearby car salesman who grabbed a fire extinguisher and literally put him out. The ambulance arrived minutes later and raced him to the San Francisco General Hospital. He had suffered horrific burns to sixty five per cent of his body and his survival chances were judged to be extremely low. His crash helmet had saved his scalp but most of his face and hands were literally burnt off. Fortunately for him, he passed into a deep coma and, aided by massive doses of drugs, the next two weeks remain a fuzzy blur.

The ensuing months were spent undergoing extensive plastic surgery. Surgeons virtually rebuilt Mitchell's face but even the best plastic surgeons can only do so much. The end result was a

patchwork of grafted skin that once caused a group of children to run away screaming, "monster, monster."

Feelings of hopelessness...

Apart from his physical appearance, all his fingers and thumbs had been burnt off in the accident and he was left with two stumps where his hands used to be. One can only try to imagine the pain and feeling of hopelessness that he must have gone through in the next few years as he tried desperately to learn to live with his disabilities and rebuild some sort of life for himself.

He recalls that initially the pain in his hands was so excruciating he couldn't even bear a breeze on them, let alone use them for any worthwhile purpose. He was virtually helpless and even relatively simple tasks like opening a door seemed insurmountable.

Probably many people faced with his pain and problems would have given up. But Mitchell is no ordinary person. Despite his seemingly overwhelming disabilities, he continued on, not only learning how to adjust to the problems but actually returning to doing most of things he had done before. He even managed to fly a plane again.

Because of his appearance, Mitchell decided to move from San Francisco. He figured that in a small town people would soon learn his story and after a while forget his appearance and look beyond that to see Mitchell the person.

His eventual choice was Crested Butte, a small mining town 20 miles from the ski fields of Colorado. He used part of his accident settlement money to establish himself in business and he opened a bar in the town which enjoyed good trade. He also made some real estate investments in the area and eventually invested with friends in a project manufacturing a new type of fuel burning stove, which was to eventually return him a tremendous profit.

Entry into politics...

He also made a name for himself in politics. His successful environmental battle with a giant mining company made him a popular local identity and he went on to eventually become Mayor of Crested Butte. He even ran for Congress and went very close to being elected. All in all, life looked pretty good. But fate was not yet finished with W Mitchell.

Mitchell now held a commercial pilot's license and had bought a Cessna 206 airplane, regularly taking passengers to different destinations to help pay his fuel bills.

One morning in November 1975, he was preparing to fly with three friends to San Francisco. It was a fairly routine flight and one he had made countless times before. This morning it had been snowing and it was extremely cold.

Mitchell thought that all the ice had melted off the wings. Unfortunately, he was wrong. The plane reached a height of about one hundred feet and the engine stalled. The plane fell for around two seconds and then slammed back onto the runway belly up, bursting open the fuel tanks.

Fearing his dreaded enemy, fire, Mitchell yelled to his passengers to get out of the plane and tried to free himself. He could not move. He thought his feet must have been jammed under

the rudder pedals. Then, he noticed the numbness in his legs and the pain in his back and realized something was terribly wrong.

Later, in hospital, the doctor told him he had crushed his spine and was paralyzed from the waist down. He would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. For a man who had just spent the last four years of his life recovering from incredibly devastating injuries, it seemed just too much to bear.

However, once again with amazing courage and determination, Mitchell managed to overcome his problems. Despite his many disabilities he continues to live a full life.

Director of the board of a number of companies, an environmental leader and a successful businessman, he still lists amongst his hobbies white river rafting and skydiving! He says simply, before his accidents he could do 10,000 things - now, he can only do 9,000 things. He can either spend his time focusing on the 1,000 things that he can no longer do or the 9,000 things that he can do. Mitchell says he simply prefers to do the latter.

These days, he spends much of his time traveling the world spreading his powerful message of hope and inspiration to others. And, as Mitchell says, disabilities are not always physical. Often our biggest disability is our failure to recognize our problems and to learn to deal with them.

Mitchell's philosophy is simple: "It's not what happens to you in life that counts, it's what you do about it".