TRIBUTE TO A FAMILY MEMBER: MIKE WARD, HELICOPTER PILOT, 1949–2004

Riva Duncan

Sitting in the back seat of the helicopter, I vomit into the empty blue canvas bag used to hold the Ping-Pong balls. Mike Ward, the pilot, comes over the radio. “You okay back there, Riva?”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my glove and pull my flight helmet microphone back down over my mouth. I push the button to transmit.

“Yeah, I feel a little better,” I say, as a big bead of sweat slides down the side of my face. “I’ll get you up into some fresh air for bit,” Mike says as he pivots the helicopter up and away from the smoke.

We are on the Long Bay Fire. It is May 2000. I’m working on the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida. Lightning started this fire in a large, roadless area. Already a few thousand acres and growing, we decide to do a massive burnout operation by using the helicopter to drop these small, plastic spheres—that look just like Ping-Pong balls.

**Burst Into Flame**

A machine inside the helicopter injects the balls with anti-freeze, causing a chemical reaction with the powder inside. When the balls hit the ground, they burst into flame, igniting the unburned vegetation. I run the machine, Mike Ward is the pilot, and Mike Dueitt, our fire management officer, directs the operation from up in the front seat next to Mike Ward.

The late Mike Ward fills his bucket while working on Georgia’s Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Photo: Thomas H. Anderson, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

We are dropping balls into the fire’s interior to intentionally burn the green vegetation—depriving the main fire of anything left to burn. As we do the burn-out, we can see the firefighters below us. Matt Keyes and Buddy Kelley are driving ATVs with torches mounted on the back to light from the roads. The Asheville Hotshots are scattered along the roads looking for spot fires.

The job of running this machine can be fun; but I also seem to find it stressful. You have to keep emptying balls from the big canvas bags into the hopper while stirring them to avoid a jam. And you have to keep looking down at the chute that hangs outside the helicopter to make sure the balls are clearing the machine.

The combination of flying in smoke, the helicopter’s tight turns, having to constantly look down, and the blast of noxious jet fumes, sometimes does me in. Like today.

**Best Pilot Around**

Everyone knows that Mike Ward is one of the best pilots around. He’s been flying on our forest for years, both for wildfires and prescribed burns. I trust him with my life, but not always with my stomach.

“How you feelin’ now, Riva?” Mike Dueitt asks on the radio. “You ready to get back at it?”

We still have quite a few balls to drop to get this fire successfully
burned out. Although there is no hint of impatience in his voice, I understand the importance of finishing the job—soon. Surprisingly, I do feel better.

“I’m ready.” I slide over to the open door and hang my right leg out of the ship.

**Vietnam War Vet**

That day wouldn’t be the last time that I vomit in Mike Ward’s helicopter.

I would fly many times with him, on many thousands of acres of prescribed burns as well as several recon flights. Mike was a great pilot and a lot of fun. A U.S. Army Vietnam War veteran, he could fly a helicopter like no one else. And his joy of flying—and fighting fire—was contagious.

We always knew that when Mike flew for us, the job would be done extremely well. He knew the country and he knew fire behavior. On prescribed burns, whoever rode up front with Mike was supposed to determine the firing location and pattern. But Mike had done so many burns with us, he needed little direction.

When you asked Mike to go size-up a wildfire, you could count on an accurate assessment. But, of course, he did have a tendency to sometimes exaggerate. His famous line was: “It’s got potential!”

We eagerly awaited that observation on nearly every wildfire that he flew. As we heard Mike’s three familiar words—once again—come over our radios, we would always look at each other and smile.

**“Walkin’ the Doggie”**

Once, on a wildfire that was cooking pretty well, we had Mike take his helicopter up for a size-up. When the incident commander got him on the radio and asked him how the fire looked, Mike—with pure glee in his voice—answered, “It’s walkin’ the doggie! Want me to go get my bucket?”

We had countless fires in which Mike—working his bucket—cooled the flames for us to allow everyone to safely get firelines around them. We all knew that Mike Ward often made the difference between us catching the fire or losing it.

Though he actually worked for the contractor who owned the helicopters, Mike Ward truly became a part of our Forest Service family. When he wasn’t fighting fires in Florida, he lived in Georgia. During some of the more active fire seasons, we actually saw Mike more than our own spouses.

Mike always kept a 60-pound dumbbell with him. During down time, sitting at the work center, he would do curls with it. Mike explained that—in case things went bad—he needed a strong arm to work the helicopter’s “collective” pitch stick control.

Mike had gusto for everything in life. Like all good Southerners, he loved to eat and was constantly fretting over his weight. Every winter and spring when he showed up with his helicopter, we never knew what size he would be. But we always knew there’d be a hug or a handshake along with that perpetual, broad smile.

If we were lucky, we’d even get to work with Mike on fires out West. During the summer, he and his helicopter went wherever they were needed.

**Helicopter Crash**

In 2003, I moved from Florida to work in fuels management for the Uinta and Wasatch-Cache National Forests in Utah. In the summer of 2004, I got a call from my friend Karen Brent, an assistant fire management officer in Georgia. I could tell by the tone of her voice that something is wrong.

“Riva,” Karen said, “I have some bad news. We just heard from one of our guys on the fires out West. Mike’s helicopter crashed.” Karen pauses for a second or two. “He’s dead.”
I could barely get out any words. I told myself it might be a mistake. Mike might be injured. Or it could be some other pilot.

I called Mike Dueitt, my fire management officer back in Florida. He would know, or could find out for confirmation. I got his voicemail and left a message, trying to keep the tears out of the sound of my voice—as if, somehow, my false confidence could change the outcome.

After I left that message, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I couldn’t stop thinking about Mike Ward. I couldn’t concentrate on my work. I kept wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. I decided that it had to be mechanical; Mike was just too good of a pilot.

He’s Gone
A couple of hours later, my phone finally rang. It was Mike Dueitt in Florida. “Oh, Mike, please don’t tell me that it’s true.”

“It is, Riva. He’s gone.”

I started to cry. I wanted—and needed—more details. Mike said he was sorry, but he doesn’t have any details. I know this had to be very difficult for him, too. Mike Ward was now the second good friend that this man had lost to wildfires.

The helicopter fell, roaring down into the opening, crashing through branches and trees.

His joy of flying—and fighting fire—was contagious.

Never Read the Report
Mike was using a long line to drop supplies into a small clearing. He’d already made several trips. The smokejumpers on the ground said he was aware of the tight fit. They’d communicated with him many times about his tail rotor clearance.

On that last trip, they could see that his head was turned, looking toward the back, when his helicopter suddenly lurched slightly and the tail rotor hit a large, dead tree. The helicopter fell, roaring down into the opening, crashing through branches and trees.

I never read the official report. I don’t want to know if the helicopter caught on fire after it fell. I don’t want to think—not think—to make him lose his concentration. I’ll never fully believe that it was entirely Mike’s fault. If I did that, I feel I would be disrespecting him.

I still tell myself that he must have had a heart attack—or something—to make him lose his concentration. I’ll never fully believe that it was entirely Mike’s fault. If I did that, I feel I would be disrespecting him.

A Georgia native, Mike was a prominent resident of the small community of Nicholson, GA. He leaves behind three children.

I always keep a picture of Mike Ward by my desk at work. He’s got that great, broad grin and the ever-present cap on his head. When people ask me who he is, I just tell them that he’s a really good friend. Then I’ll smile and say:

“Did I ever tell you about the time I threw up three times on one helicopter flight?”