



MERCY FLIGHT: MISSING!

DRAMA IN REAL LIFE®

When the plane took off, its two-year-old passenger was fighting to survive. Minutes later, everyone on board was in jeopardy

BY ROBERT C. YEAGER

JACK BAHR knew they were in trouble. Seated behind the pilot, the 28-year-old youth counselor and Sunday-school teacher stared into a raging snowstorm as the twin-engine mercy plane cut into the clouds. A terrifying shudder vibrated through the craft.

Jack looked at his sleeping daughter. Strapped to a gurney and hooked to I.V. tubes and monitoring lines, two-year-old Samantha was being rushed to Children's Hospital in Denver for a lifesaving operation.

Thousands of feet below, Patty Bahr, 29, peered out through a snow-blasted window of a car crawling at 20 miles an hour on Interstate 70.

Her mind raced. For nearly seven months, she and Jack had fretted over their daughter's chronic cough and failure to gain weight. Tests had ruled out everything from blood disease to growth-hormone deficiencies. Finally, X rays revealed the startling truth: a coin had become embedded in tissues between her esophagus and windpipe.

Samimi had swallowed

the coin about nine months earlier, doctors estimated. As it eroded, it threatened a deadly heart or lung infection. "That's got to come out—now," the doctor said.

An operation to remove the coin was scheduled for February 12, 1992, at a hospital in their hometown, Grand Junction, Colo. But the attempt was unsuccessful, and when Sammi's temperature soared to a life-endangering 105 degrees the next day, doctors insisted she be flown to Children's at once.

"In this weather?" Jack asked.

"We don't have a choice," one physician said. The coin inside Samantha, he explained, was creating a dangerous infection that could spread throughout her body.

At 7:50 p.m., Jack and Sammi boarded the Swearingen Merlin, a luxury executive plane refitted as an air ambulance. Besides the pilot, a paramedic and a nurse joined them on the 200-mile, hour-long flight. Since only one parent was allowed to fly with Sammi, Patty, who was afraid to fly, traveled by car.

ABOUT 25 MINUTES into the flight, the probe clipped to Sammi's right index finger showed a high heart rate and low oxygen levels. Nurse Teresa Bagshaw sighed. *This is a very sick child.*

When paramedic Brad Brown noticed the plane making a left turn, he conferred with the pilot, then leaned toward Teresa. "Engine trouble," he said calmly, trying not to alarm Jack. "We have to turn back."

Rick Fowler, who'd logged many

flight hours over the Rockies, was normally a relaxed pilot. But now his eyes burned into the instrument panel. The right engine had suddenly slowed to a point where its propeller created more drag than thrust. He "feathered" the propeller blades edge-on to the wind to cut the drag. Now useless, the right engine automatically shut off, leaving the Merlin with only half its power. Rick got clearance to land at nearby Rifle airport. Wind buffeted the aircraft as it continued to descend through the clouds. He saw the lights on Rifle's runway, but suddenly his view was totally obscured by snow.

As he descended through 7000 feet with the lights still not visible, Rick knew he'd have to abort the attempt. He advanced the throttle on the one operating engine and put the plane into a sharp climb. After going in and out of clouds for about three minutes, he suddenly saw a mountain ridge about five miles away. Trading airspeed for altitude, Rick gradually raised the nose further. When it reached the critical point at which airflow over the wings was disturbed, the plane shuddered, signaling it was about to "stall," or abruptly drop.

Rick lowered the nose slightly to control the shudder and continued trying to regain altitude. He knew he had to get high enough to clear the mountains.

Sammi stirred in her sleep. "Don't worry, baby," Jack whispered.

Then, *WHAM!* Something smacked the bottom of the plane. Brad looked out the window and saw snow-caked trees frighteningly close below. They'd

hit a treetop! Then, abruptly, the ridge vanished and they were still flying.

"We made it!" Brad said. But then he froze. Through the clouds just ahead loomed another ridge.

BAM-BAM-BAM! The cabin rang with deafening blasts as the plane smashed into tree after tree. They felt the fuselage roll to the right, skid with an earsplitting scraping sound, and finally come to a halt. The last thing Jack remembered was the cabin filling with the pink glow of wing lights reflecting from the snow. He smelled jet fuel.

PHYSICALLY and emotionally exhausted, Patty arrived at Children's Hospital at 2:30 a.m. As a dark-haired woman approached her, Patty grew tense. "I'm Chaplain Jane Keener," the woman said, leaning closer. "Your family's not here yet and we don't know where they are." Patty knew it meant the plane might have crashed.

INSIDE THE PLANE, Jack opened his eyes. As they adjusted to the darkness, he saw jumbled chaos and felt blood seeping from a cut on his head. The craft had come to rest on its right side. Its walls were punched full of holes, and the left wing was almost completely torn off, leaving a gaping hole overhead.

Brad, too, opened his eyes, and saw Sammi lying halfway out of the gurney and partially against his legs. He untangled the I.V. lines and rolled her up in a blanket. Her dazed eyes fluttered open. "Da-da," she whined weakly.

"Your daddy's right here," Brad

said, nestling her against her father.

Teresa was unconscious and still belted in her twisted seat. Her upper body was doubled over, with her head wedged against one side of the gurney and her chin stuck against her chest. *She'll choke like that*, Brad thought. As he reached out and carefully lifted the nurse's upper body and leaned her head back, pain jabbed him below the chest. *Broken ribs*, he thought. But he could see Teresa was breathing.

The front bulkhead, dislodged and buckled, prevented access to the cockpit, where Rick lay hidden from view. Brad crawled to the emergency exit, grabbed the handle and yanked. Sub-zero air smacked his skin. In the near darkness he could see they were perched on a steep slope. The right wing had been completely sheared off.

Brad struggled through the snow to the cockpit's shattered windshield. Peering inside, he saw a bloodied head slumped over. "Wha... what happened?" Rick moaned as blood trickled from his forehead.

"We crashed, but everyone made it."

"What happened?" Rick asked again.

The repetition alarmed Brad—it signified a head injury. Still, it was a miracle that so far everyone was alive.

Brad dragged Rick back to the cabin, where Teresa was awakening. A trail of pain ran from her neck to her temples, and her right arm wouldn't move.

As Brad wrapped gauze around Jack's head, Teresa, too, smelled fuel. "Shouldn't we turn off the electrical stuff?" she asked.

Both saw the dilemma. Although the I.V. and oxygen pumps were now fire hazards, shutting them down might endanger Sammi. Still, the I.V. tubing was exposed to cold air, and flooding the girl's veins with icy liquids could freeze her from the inside. It would be better to give fluids orally. As for the oxygen, only one full bottle remained. Sammi might need it more urgently later.

"She's holding her own at the moment," Teresa reasoned. "It's a gamble we've got to take."

Brad nodded. He switched off the pumps, then turned to Rick. "Where's the ELT?" he asked. An Emergency Locator Transmitter, designed to draw rescuers to an accident scene, is supposed to trigger a radio signal automatically in a crash. But to make sure it's working, someone needs to flip on the manual switch.

The pilot mumbled, "I th-think it might be in the tail."

Crawling back into the tail, Brad found the hand-held device, turned it on and scooted back to his seat.

"Shelter first, then signal," Teresa said, recalling her survival training.

Brad agreed. "Tonight we concentrate on staying warm," he said.

He and Jack stuffed debris into the holes of the fuselage and spread blankets on the floor. Racked with pain and shivering in fierce cold, they rested fitfully.

JUST BEFORE DAYBREAK, a search plane flew above the mountains west of Aspen, shrouded in thick clouds. Pilot Dave Hayes switched off his radio's squelch

control and soon heard a faint electronic warble: *Weeoooh-weeoooh-weeoooh*.

"That's it!" his co-pilot shouted. But detecting the sound was only the first step in finding the missing plane—they did not know exactly how far away it lay, or in what direction.

AS DAYLIGHT CAME to the cabin, Teresa got a better look at Sammi. She could no longer monitor the girl's vital signs electronically, but the bluish tinge around Sammi's lips worried her. *Low blood-oxygen level*, she thought.

Pondering a foot-square piece of fabric in the cabin wall, Brad pulled the square down and flipped it over. Shiny aluminum beamed into his face. "This stuff will make a perfect reflector when they get close," he said.

Brad looked up at the brightening sky and said to Jack, "Let's go outside. Maybe we can set a tree on fire farther up the slope to attract attention."

When Brad stood at the emergency exit, however, his spirits sank. Fog reduced visibility to 20 feet. *Nobody could spot us through this*, he thought. Jumping out, he found himself in deep drifts of snow that suddenly closed over his head. Soon Jack, too, tumbled into the drift. When they finally pulled themselves up, Brad said sadly, "We can't do the fire. It's just not feasible." They climbed back inside, now soaking wet and colder than ever.

IN A SMALL ROOM at Children's Hospital, Patty knelt and prayed, "Please bring them back." Trying to sleep

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on a sofa, she pictured the crash: the plane splintering against a mountainside ... Sammi and Jack hurt ...

"Mrs. Bahr." It was Julie Coy, the hospital's nurse supervisor. "They've picked up a signal near Glenwood Springs. They believe it's your family's plane. They're searching."

Emotionally drained, Patty stepped outside the room across from the pediatric ICU, where babies' wails filled the hall. *Dear God*, she thought, *I'd give anything to hear Sammi cry.*

A THUMPING SOUND filled the sky. "Helicopter!" Brad said. "Teresa, hand me the ELT. Jack, let's get outside."

"Hold on," Rick said. With fingers stiff from the cold, he disconnected the microphone from the instrument panel. "Over short distances, you can plug this into the ELT and talk into it like a radio." The device would transmit but not receive.

Brad grabbed the mike and clambered outside with Jack. The engine noise grew louder, but dense clouds concealed the chopper. "Helicopter searching for 26 Juliet Bravo, we're at 8600 feet, due east of you," he said, citing the figures frozen on their altimeter and compass.

The chopper blades roared deafeningly overhead. Then, slowly, the sound began to fade.

"You're going away from us!" Brad barked into the microphone. "Reverse your heading!" But the noise only grew fainter and finally disappeared.

"STEPHANIE, we're getting good hits," said sheriff's deputy Norm Brown,

listening to beeps on his hand-held ELT locator. "Let's keep heading in the same direction."

In the driver's seat of the Chevy Suburban, emergency medical technician Stephanie Heim turned up South Canyon Road. When the beeping grew stronger, she braked to a stop. Holding the locator, Norm jumped down from the vehicle and turned in a slow circle. "Look at this," he said.

The locator's needle pointed straight up South Canyon. "I think we've got something," Norm said.

"WE HAVE TO brush the snow off this plane or they'll never see us," Brad said.

Jack pushed himself through a hole where the left wing had been and used a seat cushion to clear snow from the fuselage, wing and windows. He draped two brightly colored medical bags over the aircraft, then slid back inside the cabin.

There, Brad was holding Sammi and counting her short, rapid breaths—more than 60 a minute. *Anything over 40 is hyperventilation*, he reminded himself. *If we don't get out soon, she's not going to make it.* "Sammi, you've got to pull through—for all of us," he said softly.

Brad lifted his eyes and saw that Jack was watching him. Jack knew



Sammi Bahr

that time was running out for his daughter.

By 8 A.M., 150 volunteers were trying to find the missing craft. Armed with data the others had gathered, pilot Rick Deane, accompanied by volunteer Jim Wingers, flew Deane's Cessna 180 into South Canyon. If they could get close enough, a needle on the ELT direction finder would give left-right indications of the downed plane's location.

Shortly before 1 p.m., on the sixth trip into the canyon, Deane saw the direction finder's needle flip-flop. There was only one explanation: they'd flown directly over the crash site.

TERESA HEARD a steady hum of aircraft. Then, as if a curtain had lifted, light flooded the cabin. "The sun's out!" she yelled.

Brad tore a fresh piece of fabric from the cabin wall and flipped it over to reveal the shiny aluminum. He jumped out onto the plane. Jack followed with a green blanket.

An aircraft moved slowly above them. Jack waved the blanket frantically, but the plane was flying away.

"Make a circle!" Brad screamed at the plane. "Are you blind?"

As if on command, Deane's Cessna began a slow turn. Brad tilted the aluminum, caught the sun and moved the reflection into the Cessna's cockpit. "Acknowledge us! C'mon!" Brad shouted. He flapped his arms.

Suddenly the airplane rocked side to side and swooped low overhead.

"They see us!" Brad shouted. "We're outta here!"

An instant later, the survivors heard the whistle of a twin-engine helicopter heading up the canyon. "That's our bird!" Brad yelled.

At 4 P.M., as the rescue copter containing the survivors lifted off, Jack looked back at the ridge that had nearly claimed their lives. A cascade of snow clouds spun down the slope, blotting out every detail of the crash site. They'd escaped in the nick of time.

When they landed at Grand Junction, the adult victims were briefly hospitalized—Rick with a severe concussion, Teresa with fractures of the skull and right arm, Jack with a fractured shoulder blade, a laceration on his head and a broken cheekbone, and Brad with cracked ribs and a twisted ankle.

Sammi was put on another plane and flown to Denver, where surgeons extracted the coin. Today she's a lively five-year-old, who last October celebrated her sister Kimberlin's first birthday.

Jack attributes the survival of those aboard the downed plane to divine intervention. But he and the others also believe that they owe much to one another. As Teresa says, "We knew there was only one way to survive: to become a team."



The best way to cope with change is to help create it.

—Sen. Robert Dole