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# Reader's Digest

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57th year: Over 30 million copies bought monthly in 13 languages

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*In an isolated Texas ravine, the lives of three critically injured airmen depended on the cool presence of one young rancher*

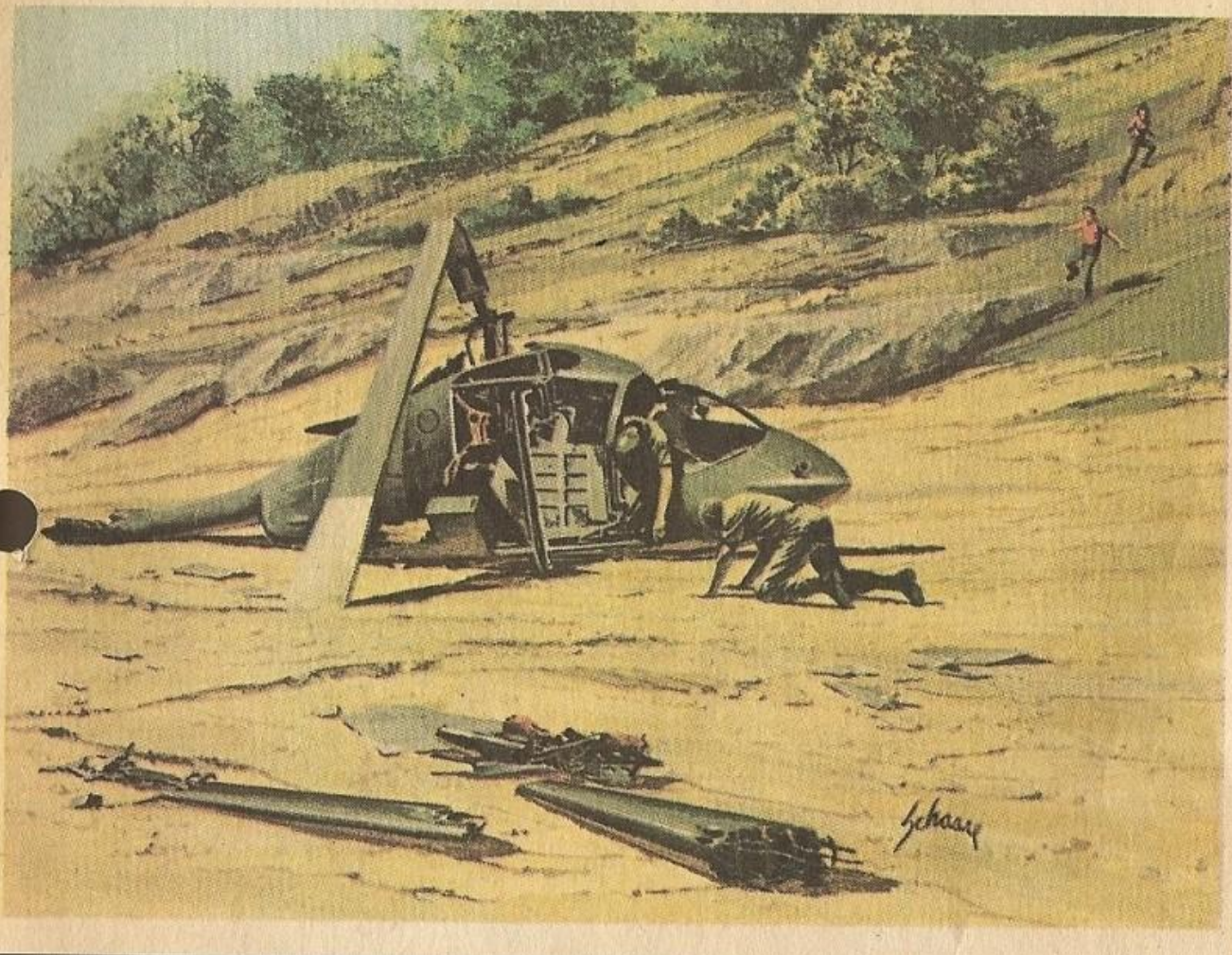
Drama in Real Life®

BY NILAH RODGERS

# Rescue on the Pedernales

SITTING ON THE PORCH of his ranch home near Johnson City, Texas, Bobby Wilson removed his Stetson to mop his brow. It was a little after 7 p.m. on June 28, 1976, and very hot. He spotted a dab of olive against the blue sky—a helicopter. It was skirting low along the Pedernales River Gorge, the sound of it obscured by the hum of the vacuum cleaner his wife, Barbara, was using.

Bobby watched the aircraft as it dropped out of his view. Walking into the house, he thought, *Hope the pilot sees those telephone lines.* Fishing the day before, Bobby had noticed that the lines were almost invisible against the canyon walls, and the poles totally hidden in live-oak trees.



Moments later, Bobby's mother, who lives 100 yards away, appeared at the door. Sensing her alarm, Barbara switched off the vacuum cleaner.

"Come quick!" her mother-in-law shouted. "Something awful's happened. I heard a terrible noise!"

As Bobby raced to his pickup truck with his wife, he feared the worst. He jammed his foot on the accelerator and sped over the rocky trail until he reached the spot where the telephone lines cross the river. Braking to a skidding stop, he leaped out and ran to the bluff's edge.

The chopper had hit the lines. On a sandbar 200 feet below lay the wreckage. The waters of the Pedernales swept dangerously close to the helicopter. Later, Bobby surmised that everyone aboard surely would have been drowned or dashed to bits had the chopper not fallen where it did.

The aircraft's jet engine had continued to run after impact, and its high-pitched whine echoed deafeningly from below, assaulting the Wilsons' ears. They ran down the hillside. As Bobby neared the sandbar, he saw a man dragging himself toward the wreckage and two others motionless in the caved-in cockpit.

Pieces of metal and plexiglass were strewn everywhere. (The severed tail of the OH-58 Kiowa helicopter had been thrown 100 yards.) The doors had been ripped off, and the landing skids were twisted and partly buried in the sand. The pungent odor of jet fuel filled the air.

When he reached the crawling

figure, Bobby saw that he wore a name tag: Lt. Col. Charles F. Densford. "Got to cut off the fuel before this thing blows," Densford gasped, obviously in great pain, trying desperately to get to the cockpit. "Get them out!" he yelled, indicating the pilot and co-pilot, who were still strapped in their seats, dead or unconscious.

Momentarily, Bobby froze, riveted by the thought of the chopper exploding. Then he remembered his wife. Whirling, he yelled, "Barbara, go back! Get help."

BOBBY WATCHED her start toward the pickup before he turned again to the injured men. (It was five miles of twisting, rocky roads to his nearest neighbor, 27 miles to Johnson City, the closest town with a doctor and ambulance service.) *Good God!* he thought. He was just a rancher in remote Texas hill country—and suddenly he needed the knowledge and skills of a mobile hospital unit.

Desperately, he tried to remember first-aid procedure. He knew how to turn a breech calf before birth or doctor a lamb cut by shearers, but what to do to help these downed airmen? The only rule he could remember insisted: Don't move an injured person. But his common sense told him that these men had to be moved—and fast. He remembered one of his dad's sayings: *Son, believe in your own judgment.*

The co-pilot groaned as Bobby released his harness and eased him out of the cockpit. The name Bruce

Palmer was stenciled above his shirt pocket, and he wore captain's insignia.

"Captain, how do you kill the engine?" Bobby yelled, trying to make himself heard above the ear-splitting whine. He bent over to catch the answer, but the co-pilot's face was ashen and his eyes stared without blinking. *Is he dead?* Bobby thought. *Did I kill him by moving him?*

Running back to pull the pilot out, Bobby found the stricken Densford still trying to find the chopper's fuel shut-off valve, beating on the instrument panel in his frustration. "Get out of here," Bobby ordered Densford. "Move, move, before she blows!" He motioned to the sheltering ravine wall, then ran to the other side of the helicopter.

He unlocked the pilot's harness, and before Bobby could catch him he pitched out onto the sand. Bobby put his ear to the man's mouth and heard deep, labored breathing. He was alive. His name tag identified him as Capt. Thomas Nollner.

Hoping desperately that he was doing the right thing, Bobby started to drag Nollner to safety. After a few feet, the pilot screamed. Bobby stopped short—and noticed a fist-sized bulge under the captain's shirt in the middle of his back. A broken back! If he moved Nollner, it could kill or paralyze him. But if he left him and the chopper exploded. . . .

A door, ripped from the plane, lay nearby. It would make a good stretcher. That moment, as Bobby weighed what to do, the engine

whine surged in a crescendo of sound. He waited, rigid, expecting the inevitable explosion. But the high-pitched, nerve-shattering noise nose-dived to a teakettle whisper. Then the engine died, apparently its fuel finally exhausted.

LIMP WITH RELIEF, Bobby looked about him. Everything was going to be all right now, he tried to assure himself. Surely, experienced help would arrive any minute. (But with the phone lines down to his house, Barbara would have to drive miles to their neighbor's place to call for help.) He glanced at his watch: 7:55.

With the danger of an explosion passed, Bobby set about doing what he could for the injured men. *Perhaps Densford knows first aid*, Bobby thought, *and can tell me what to do*. But the colonel lay staring blankly ahead, in a twilight zone between consciousness and unconsciousness, his breathing shallow and irregular.

"My back hurts," Densford half gasped, half sobbed. Only now did Bobby realize that the man couldn't walk, that he had been crawling and dragging himself all the while. The helicopter's sudden plunge to the ground—the equivalent of falling 16 stories—must have compacted the colonel's back, and likely those of the other two, Bobby figured.

Gently, Bobby eased Densford into a more comfortable position. Then he ran to the chopper and tore out seat padding to pillow the colonel's back and head. "Lie still, you hear? I'll be right back."

Answering Palmer's piercing screams, Bobby found the co-pilot struggling to breathe. Carefully Bobby removed Palmer's head gear, hoping it would make it easier for him to get air. Palmer choked. Blood oozed from his mouth. With a thumb and two fingers, the captain reached up and pulled pieces of his teeth from his mouth. With trembling hands, Bobby flicked out remaining bits.

"Move me, please, somebody!" Palmer screamed. Bobby again ran to the helicopter and tore at the insulation. He rolled some of the soundproofing batting into a cushion and eased it under Palmer to support his spine. He tore off two more strips and folded them to cradle his sides.

Palmer vomited blood. Bobby hesitated, trying to force first-aid knowledge to surface. He suspected that Palmer's back or neck was broken—and that any movement would increase the chance of paralysis. But, as it was, Palmer would choke to death on his own blood. Without lifting the co-pilot's head, Bobby moved it ever so gently to one side. Every few seconds, he kept assuring Palmer all was well.

8:25. An hour and ten minutes since the crash, and still no sign of help. The setting sun cast long shadows across the sand. Could rescuers find them in the dark?

For what seemed an interminable time, Bobby talked to the injured men—vague words of encouragement. Periodically Palmer's screams

pierced the lonely ravine. Bobby did what he could to ease the pain.

8:45. The ravine was pitch-black. If help did not come soon, Bobby knew these men would die. With each tick of his watch, their lives were leaking away.

9:00. High up on the bluff, a light appeared and moved slowly toward him. Then, *thank God*, Barbara was standing beside him with a flashlight and blankets. The ambulance from Johnson City and an Army MEDEVAC helicopter from Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio were on the way.

9:15. A dozen volunteer rescuers made their way down to the wreck. A doctor bent over the injured men, injecting pain killer. Again Palmer vomited blood; plasma was started. A volunteer bent to lift Palmer onto a stretcher. "Don't touch him!" Bobby shouted. "Wait for the MEDEVAC chopper!"

Minutes later, the rescue craft, guided by the ambulance's flashing red light and the headlights of the rescuers' cars, was overhead. With its own searchlights piercing the ravine's darkness, it set down behind a grove of oaks. That wouldn't do. The chopper *must* land on the sandbar. Bobby bounded toward the helicopter and yelled, "The wires are already down. There's no way you can get those men with broken backs over here without killing them. Land by the river!" The craft rose again, and set down by the crash. The authoritative commands of Army medics were music to Bobby's ears.

Three hours after the crash, the

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injured airmen were being flown to Brooke Army Medical Center. Only then did Bobby realize that he ached with fatigue—and worry over whether he had helped or hurt the injured men.

SIX WEEKS LATER, Bobby received a letter signed by Lt. Gen. Robert M. Shoemaker, commanding officer of nearby Fort Hood (the helicopter's base), commending him for his life-saving actions. All three officers had survived, but recovery was going to be slow.

Densford had a crushed lumbar vertebra and several broken bones in both feet. Nollner had multiple back fractures and a severe concussion. In addition to three broken vertebrae and damage to his spinal column, Palmer had a crushed chest, eight broken ribs, lung punctures, a broken ankle, and nerve damage to legs and lower body. Without Bobby's careful attention, Palmer's spine would probably have been so seri-

ously damaged that he would have lost the use of his legs.

On February 14, 1977, while Bobby Wilson was napping and Barbara was washing the pickup, a car pulled into the yard. Two men got out slowly; they were encased from necks to hips in body casts. Still, when Bobby was called, he recognized them immediately: Palmer and Nollner.

They walked toward him haltingly, stiffly, their arms outstretched. Each clasped one of Bobby's hands in theirs. Bobby could barely swallow for the lump in his throat.

"If it hadn't been for you," Nollner said, "we'd have died. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You made the right decisions under pressure," Palmer said. "We'll never forget you."

Bobby Wilson could lay his worries to rest. In all his 32 years, it was the nicest Valentine he had ever got.



### *Revised Versions*

SIGN ON DESK in lobby of high-rise apartment: "Do Over Others As You Would Have Them Do Over You."

—Contributed by James D. Cieslik

TODAY'S MOTTO seems to be: "Marry in haste, repeat at leisure."

—Phil Pastoret, Newspaper Enterprise Assn.

A SIMPLE FORMULA for success on Wall Street: "Nothing debentured, nothing gained."

—Contributed by David Crosson

CELEBRITY LAWYERS take the following oath: "It's not important if we win or lose, but whether we are covered on the six-o'clock news."

—Mark Russell, Los Angeles Times Syndicate