



After the crash every minute was critical.
Two lives hung in the balance. A rescue
helicopter could tip the scales.

PASSING OF A METAL HAND

by Sgt. DAVE COLE

Time is relative. TICK. Often minutes or hours or days can pass unnoticed, unheralded, unimportant. TICK. But, at the scene of an accident—when human lives rest on the balance of time, a minute can be an eternity . . . TICK. A movement of a dial . . . TICK . . . or the passing of a metal hand across a painted face . . . TICK . . . can mean the difference between life or . . . TICK . . . death.

Occasionally, time, an impersonal master, is on your side. Sometimes it isn't.

On Friday, April 9, 1971, Mrs. Mary Lou Fuller backed the family car from the driveway of her home



in Yuma, Ariz. Time was not important. She slowly turned the auto, straightened the wheel and started down Fern St. The tassel-topped palm tree in her front yard swayed ever so slightly in the still just-warm Arizona morning.

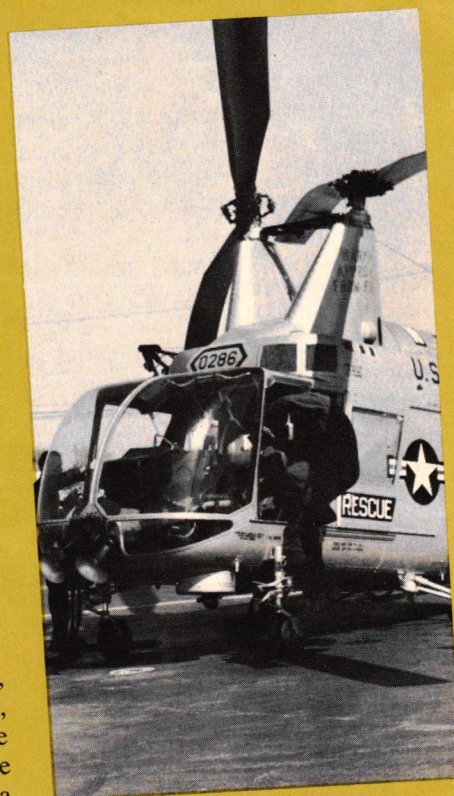
Slowing to a stop at the big red sign on Fern St., she glanced at her sandy-haired, six-year-old daughter, Laurie, sitting in the front seat. "I won't move another foot until you fasten your seat belt," she cautioned. Reluctantly, Laurie strapped the belt across her waist. TICK.

Easing the big, yellow station wagon around the corner, Mrs. Fuller drove four blocks down 28th

St. and turned onto Interstate 8. Highway 8—a long, black, asphalt ribbon slashing through the barren, sun-baked Arizona countryside—connects the Fullers' hometown of Yuma with Phoenix.

An elementary school teacher, Mrs. Fuller planned to attend a professional conference on mentally retarded children later that day in Phoenix. After the meeting she and her children would spend a few days with relatives.

But Mrs. Fuller and her children, Laurie, Jeanette, 12, and Kenneth, 11, would not make the conference in Phoenix, nor go on their little vacation. In fact, if it weren't for a



helicopter crew from Detachment 15, 42d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq, the staff of two hospitals, the Arizona Highway Patrol, and time—the unfeeling director—the Fuller family would not be going anywhere again—ever. They would probably now be dead. TICK.

Miles ahead of the Fullers, Hector Garcia Rascon was also traveling Highway 8. About seven miles west of Sentinel, Ariz., he pulled his big, white, stake-bed truck to the side of the road. He was having trouble with his rig, so he pulled off to check out the difficulty.

Hector Garcia Rascon and the Fuller family were not acquainted. They had never even seen each other, but on that sunny day in April they would meet. Not intentionally. Not planned. The common denominator would be Highway 8.

As the Fuller family began traveling the asphalt ribbon through the desert from Yuma, Kenneth would pretend he was the copilot plotting directions and reading road signs like timehacks for a fighter jock. Trying to beat the monotony of the long drive, Mom and the kids played word games. "Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?" they questioned.

The family had driven for approximately an hour and a half when time ran out. Neither Mrs. Fuller, Laurie, Jeanette or Kenneth remember much of what happened. The next few minutes of their lives seem to have been mercifully erased from their minds.

No one really knows what happened during the next few minutes. They can only assess the steel-cold results. The Fuller auto, traveling at approximately 60 miles an hour, had slammed into the rear of Rascon's truck. The car, battered to a useless hunk of scrap metal, had careened off the highway.

Hector Rascon, standing in front of his truck, had been hit by his own rig as it was forced from the highway by the impact. He, too, would not remember what had happened.

The Fullers' seat belts, the one Laurie didn't want to wear, had probably saved their lives.

Time—the unyielding overseer—had now become the master . . . five



lives resting on the tilting balances.

TICK. 2:39 p.m. An Arizona Highway Patrol car, red warning lights flashing wildly, sped down Highway 8. Just east of Spot Rd., near Sentinel at milepost 81, the cruiser came to a screeching halt.

The officer, trained in traffic, assessed the situation. Five injured. Two critically. Because of the location of the accident, it would take approximately an hour and a half for an ambulance from Phoenix or Yuma to reach the site. The officer made a decision: Call a helicopter.

TICK. 2:55 p.m. The emergency

command-post phone in the alert shack of Det 15 jangled.

Majs. Ronald L. Gaede and Donald J. Waterman, TSgt. Gregory Sutherland and SSgt. Jesse C. Spruiell were ready when the alarm sounded.

Jumping for the phone, Major Gaede grabbed the receiver.

The crew was alerted for a mission to Sentinel, Ariz. Rushing to the map, Majors Gaede and Waterman plotted their course.

TICK. 2:57 p.m. Outside on the shimmering-hot flight line, the crew prepared their HH-43B. Hooking the powercart to the aircraft, they waited for the pilots to run from the alert room out to the pad.

Back inside, the pilots finished plotting their course and began the 25-yard run to their bird. They had all the necessary information on the

flight and were prepared to meet the emergency.

TICK. 3:00 p.m. Five minutes after the alert phone had rung, the chopper was airborne, slashing its way through the hot, afternoon air toward Sentinel.

Enroute, the crew was briefed by Major Gaede, the aircraft commander. He explained the seriousness of the victims' injuries and what they could expect upon landing. He was also in constant contact with the Arizona Highway Patrol. As the chopper followed Highway 8 through the desert, the pilots con-

tinued flight planning, charting the best routes to the nearest hospital, navigating to the scene and alerting local flight-control facilities on their position and mission.

TICK. 3:46 p.m. The landing gear of the chopper touched the searing-hot asphalt of Highway 8. Sergeant Sutherland, the med-tech, rushed from the bird, consulted quickly with the patrolman on the scene and ran to assist the victims. Sergeant Spruiell and Major Waterman also ran from the bird to the scene of the accident.

TICK. 3:55 p.m. Major Waterman and Sergeants Spruiell and Sutherland loaded the two most seriously injured—Mrs. Fuller and her son Kenneth—into the *Pedro*. With the whirling slash of rotors, the chopper leaped into the blazing sky and turned toward Phoenix and Good Samaritan Hospital. On the way, Sergeant Sutherland continued to treat Mrs. Fuller and her son, while the pilots radioed the hospital to get ready to receive their precious human cargo.

TICK: 4:45 p.m. The *Pedro*, its crew and injured passengers landed on the roof of a parking deck near the hospital. A team of medical personnel waited on the rooftop.

TICK. 4:59 p.m. Mrs. Fuller and Kenneth were wheeled into the emergency room and a team of doctors—later to include a neurosurgeon and a plastic surgeon—began the delicate task of keeping ebbing life in the shattered bodies.

Hector Rascon and Mrs. Fuller's two other children—the least injured of the five—were taken to Parkview Hospital in Yuma by ambulance.

In the case of the two most seriously injured, time had been a very important factor. The difference between life and death. Both Mrs. Fuller and her son were in deep shock. If they had had to wait for an ambulance, in the burning Arizona sun and without medical facilities, the outcome almost undoubtedly would have been much different. Although complete recovery is probably a long way off, all five persons are alive today.

TICK: 5:05 p.m. The crew of the

Pedro returned to their pad at Luke AFB. They had made a "save." Two unknown people—people they will likely never see again—were drawing breath because of their efforts and a program of military and civilian cooperation known as MAST.

MAST—Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic—is a joint test program conducted by the Departments of Defense, Transportation, and Health, Education and Welfare. The evaluation is being conducted to determine just how significant a contribution helicopters can make toward saving lives after traffic accidents.

Det 15, of Military Airlift Command's 42d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Sq at Luke, was the first Air Force unit to work with the program. Only eight days after its start, Det 15 crews flew to the aid of 13 persons endangered by a flash flood in the Phoenix area. Since that time, crews from Luke and Mountain Home AFB, Idaho—the second MAST participant—have tallied more than 40 "saves."

But statistics don't speak. Doctors, pilots, crewmen and, especially, accident victims themselves do. Articulate.

A pilot: "Very effective and very rewarding," explains Major Waterman, sitting in the alert room awaiting another mission he really hopes he doesn't have to fly. "We don't want accidents—but, should an emergency arise, our aircraft can meet the mission."

Major Waterman, copilot on the flight to Sentinel, explains the cooperation between civilian agencies and rescue crews is "outstanding."

"Phoenix approach control is a real professional operation," he says. "They have us vectored into any hospital in the area and give us precise, professional radar direction. Cooperation is a keynote in the success of the program."

MAST—the rescue mission of the men from MAC—is not an easy job. It calls for long hours of alert, a positive, total professional commitment to the job of air rescue and the complete dedication and know-how of the chopper crews. It *isn't* an ordinary or easy job.

"For every minute we spend on a rescue mission, we have spent hour upon countless hour training," explains Major Waterman. "No one in that aircraft is a rookie. You can't be when the chips are down. The amount of critical coordination necessary for a successful mission is phenomenal," he explains.

"The local police, the base, each crew, the hospital, the local air traffic control centers all play an important role in the completion of a mission. It's a joint effort aimed at saving a critical resource . . . lives."

Behind the major, hung high and proudly on the wall of the squadron's alert shack, is the emblem of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. Under the angel of mercy a legend reads: "THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE."

The doctor: "Hell, yes, it works," Dr. Wallace C. Fisher, attending physician on April 9, comments. "Time is always a significant factor in an emergency situation."

"If an ambulance had been dispatched on this case—or many, many like it—the time element would have been greatly increased. Also, it is important to take a critically injured patient to the most well-equipped facility possible. There is no question in my mind that MAST does play a significant role."

What about the *people who profit most* from the aerial ambulances and their crews?

"If you have ever received the benefit of such a service," explains Mrs. Fuller, now recovering from her accident on Highway 8, "you become so emotional it's hard not to sound like you are trying to overstate the operation."

"We owe our lives to the Air Force men who rescued my son and me," she explains. "We were very, very lucky."

"Although I cannot remember much about the accident or the ride in the helicopter, I do remember how kind the medic was to me. I guess words just aren't adequate to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to the crew and to the people who made the rescue possible."

Time—and MAST—had been on her side.

