

Monday, January 8, 1968 dawned in Philadelphia clear and bitter cold. Nine degrees. In hangar I 33 at International Airport two men gulped down the last of their coffee and pulled on heavy parkas to keep out the icy morning. Conversation was at a minimum. The weekend had been too short. The week ahead was loaded with long days. Clip board, stop watch, mike, camera, the all important coffee thermos-- they were ready. Then outside--on to the helicopter pad where the fragile, unlikely looking flying vehicle waited. The men--Dick Scholfield, helicopter pilot and John Carlton, traffic reporter were members of Atlantic Refining's famed Go Patrol--a traffic reporting service broadcast on 13 radio stations in the Philadelphia area.

The nine degrees quickly seeped through the heavy parkas.

Mondays, Ugh!

The match fell from the trembling hands into a discarded heap of Sunday papers.

The 280 horsepower engine thundered to life.

Where was that match? Age dimmed eyes missed it in the crumpled comics.

The mass of pipes, plastic and whirling blades lifted gracefully off the ice covered pad.

The papers began to smolder. The hands trembled even more now. At one corner, near the chair, a tiny tongue of flame licked up.

100, 200, 300 feet. The helicopter skimmed over the automobile laden Penrose Bridge.

Even old eyes could see the flames now. Water. Got to put it out before it burns the rug. The club would be angry. A glass in the bathroom. The chair's smoking. More glasses of water.

The helicopter hummed north on the Schulykill Expressway toward Philadelphia's 30th Street Railroad Station. The voice from the Go Patrol control room briefly and sleepily had little information to give Carlton. Mondays were always like this.

The glasses of water weren't enough. The chair was burning.

The stop watch ticked off the seconds. Lights blinked on in 13 radio stations. It was time for the first report.

The drapes----in flames. Smoke. Can't stop it. Better get help. Tell the elevator operator.

The first report out of the way only 8 more, and two hours of cramped, cold flying to go.

"Fire call----36th and Chestnut. Copter I--what is your location?" It was Walt MacDonald from the ground control room.

"30th and Chestnut."

"Fire board says it's the Normandie."

There is always useless information filed in the back of a good reporter's head. The Normandie Hotel. It had at one time been fashionable. It was now a retirement club. All of the residents were elderly. This could be a mess.

"First company arriving on the scene reports smoke from windows on second floor. Where are you, John?"

"We're there, Walt." Carlton had had a knack of being "There"--- where things were happening during his 7 years as voice of the Go Patrol.

"The first alarm has been sounded."

The helicopter circled the seven story building. Smoke was pouring out of several second story windows. It seeped up the stair case and elevator shaft, silently bumped the ceiling and pushed down pushing the oxygen out. The smoke stealthily crept from floor to floor slipping under the doors of its sleeping, intended victims.

"Second Alarm, they're going to evacuate."

Only a handful of firemen had arrived on the scene. The first hose line was yet to be unrolled.

Somewhere flames burned through an electric cable. Blue white sparks flashed and hall lights went out.

"They don't know whether they can pass the second floor." The sleep had disappeared from Walt's voice.

"Dick, can you land on the roof?"

"I think so, why?"

Carlton told him.

"God! We'll give it a try."

Well, if anyone could put it down on that ice covered roof Dick could. When he flew he became one with the helicopter----a beautifully coordinated combination of man and machine. He was a hell of a pilot.

"Walt, tell the fire board we'll start evacuating from the roof. We're going in."

"Watch for wires." Dick's voice.

"Third alarm just went in."

The helicopter very gently, tested the roof surface. Would it hold. A little more weight----steady----feels good. Bump.

"We're down."

"Fire radio says it has no way to tell residents to go to the roof. They're all asleep."

Oh, Christ, that's right.

Carlton. "All right. I'll wake em up. I'm going down stairs. You take the reports."

"Fourth Alarm."

Better hurry.

Carlton was out of the ship---running across the icy roof toward the elevator and staircase housing.

Should stay with the ship. He can't go down there alone. The ship won't go anywhere. Oh, what the hell.

"John----wait."

Carlton had already tried one door. It turned out to be the elevator machinery which seemed to still be working. The second try proved to be the right one. As he started down the stairs the smoke rushed up to meet him. It was dark and silent except for Dick's foot steps behind him.

The radio in the empty helicopter crackled.

"Fifth and Sixth Alarms have been sounded. John, do you receive me?"

There was no reply.

Carlton and Scholfield were on the seventh floor of the Normandie.

And so it began. Forty minutes of high adventure, of living hell, of personal sacrifice and heroism. Forty minutes of looking into the face of death--through thick smoke.

Who were these men who with so little thought for their own safety laid their lives on the line for other people, who involved themselves in an age when it was outmoded to become involved.

Dick Scholfield, 28, from Pleasantville, N. Y., tall, wiry, with wispy brown hair is a highly trained and skilled helicopter and fixed wing pilot. He always loved flying but made up his mind on careers rather rapidly when caught on the deck of a submerging submarine. He wanted up--not down. You can't work at much else and seriously try to get a pilot's license. Lack of money made it difficult. But somehow he made it.

Then the commercial license. It wasn't enough. Helicopters. The aircraft of the future. A fixed wing flys itself. A helicopter requires talent. Civilians don't learn to fly helicopters. It's too expensive. You learn in the military. That was out.

The endless cargo flights helped. Passengers going here and there. Working around hangars.

And how many times had he said--"Let me go along. I can spell you at the stick." Friendly chopper pilots, long dull hours in fixed wings. A little conning now and then, and a lot of book work and he had it--his helicopter license----the hard way.

But who's going to hire an inexperienced pilot. Insurance companies won't cover you. More relieving the old pros at the stick. More hours in the log book. Then the commercial license.

Work for a little company here, another there. California, Colorado, New York. A little more money at each job. The flight time was building up.

Finally Philadelphia and the Go Patrol. It had been worth it.

A good pilot is well trained, self disciplined, fast thinking and acting, cool in a crisis. Dick Scholfield is a good pilot. And he was about to use these talents not up in the nice clean air but going down where there was no air. Almost like the water coming up over the deck of the sub.

The make-up of John Carlton on the other hand is not as clearly cut.

His life is a series of contrasts. Pushing 40, he is a man of slight build with a shock of unruly tarnished blonde hair and the face of a world weary choir boy. A veteran of some twenty-five years of broadcasting and telecasting, his career has taken him from The Cleveland Playhouse and New England Summer Theatres to radio and television stations in Nigara Falls, Erie, Philadelphia, Trenton, New York and back to Philadelphia.

He has at one time or another done just about everything in television and radio. Rock and roll DJ, talk shows, kids shows, news, farm reports, and network commercials.

In Philadelphia he is known for his relaxed, sincere, commercial delivery. Several times he has enjoyed mild success, but his job with the Go Patrol has made his name a household word in the nation's fourth city. It's hard to escape the Go Patrol and John Carlton. Practically every station in the city carries his traffic reports.

Carlton is accustomed to danger. In his special field of traffic reporting from helicopters, the mortality rate, since the inception of the idea, has been almost 50%. John has walked calmly away from three serious helicopter crashes and three not so serious.

One of the bad ones happened in the middle of a broadcast. Four million listeners moved to the edges of the vinyl upholstered car seats as John quietly told them the engine had quit and he was about to make an emergency landing in a city park--if some trees didn't get in the way. Listeners then heard plane and earth collide and the familiar voice reassured them he and his crew were alright and that helicopters were safer than bicycles. Four million people breathed a sigh of relief. They took the helicopter back to the airport in small pieces.

Another time the tail rotor stopped. The tail rotor keeps the ship from spinning with the main propeller. The ship began spinning, but fast action by the pilot saved their lives. The pilot put the ship into auto rotation or the equivalent of neutral in a car. The spinning stopped and the ship plummeted towards a factory parking lot. Six feet above the earth the pilot reversed the angle of the blades. The ship began spinning again and smashed into the blacktop. Most of the force had been taken out of the crash. The ship was badly damaged but the radio was still intact. Carlton ordered another helicopter to pick him up so he could finish the traffic patrol. If he hadn't, he said later, he never would have flown again.

Still another time--a truck loaded with explosive chemicals overturned and the cab caught fire. Carlton and his pilot hovered over the burning wreck in such a manner that the down draft from the propeller kept the fire from spreading to the back of the truck and the explosives, allowing firemen to move in and extinguish the flames.

A young man attempting suicide stood on the highest arch of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge ready to leap into the Delaware River 200 feet below. Police had not been able to reach him. Carlton ordered his Go Patrol helicopter to hover nearby. Then he had the pilot move the ship closer until the would-be suicide was driven off his perch by the whirling blades and into the arms of waiting police.

Carlton and his pilots have lead police to car thieves, tracked bandits, found bodies in the river, searched for escaped prisoners and lost children, and removed accident victims from the highway to nearby hospitals.

One August morning his helicopter was almost blown out of the sky by sewer explosion that roared 600 feet into the air. Once again Carlton was there. Although he couldn't be of much help, his ad lib coverage of the disaster, that took five lives, captured the attention of practically everyone in Philadelphia. His almost tearful and highly dramatic account of the reunion of a young wife and her sand hog husband, thought killed in the explosion, earned him an award from United Press International.

The other quality that has endeared him to his millions of listeners is his sly sense of humor. John Carlton has never been known to pass up a chance to pun. When the hood off a car flew off nearly causing an accident--he commented, this rarely happened--"It was an unlikely hood." When a macaroni truck broke down and caused a tie up he observed that once "Pasta" the truck traffic moved well.

His phrases are now used by everyone---trafficulties, and gapper block are part of every Philadelphian's vocabulary.

But there are a couple of other John Carltons. Not nearly well enough paid for the risks he takes, he spends his time between flights doing commercials for WKBS-TV. This helps him indulge himself in more pleasurable pursuits--His first love, a beautiful ex-model, now television personality and fashion commentator, Gen March--his wife; and their endless task of restoring a 200 year old farm house located an hour from Philadelphia; and in thick steaks and good wine. Carlton's work day is a long affair, beginning at 4:30 A.M. when he gets up and ending at 7:30 or 8 when he slips into a dry martini amidst his open beams and antiques.

On weekends, the only real time John and Gen, have any time to spend together, he plays the part of the country gentleman on their 18 acres of rolling hills and once decaying rambling farm house.

Somehow the Carltons manage to work together; now and then, on fashion shows. John has become quite an expert at everything from a misplaced eyelash to a stuck zipper and readily admits that he loves being surrounded by his wife's beautiful models.

No beautiful girls now, and that farm house on the hill, surrounded by the white pines, is a million miles away. So is Gen with her smile like a splash of sunshine.

A few minutes ago this was a cocoon for some 350 elderly citizen. Now its a hell.

Carlton and Scholfield rushed down the stairs, through the smoke. The lights in the hall were out. At the foot of the stairs a square of light slid into view. It was an elevator complete with a wrinkled 70 year old operator.

"Can you get all the way down?"

"Yeah. If I can get by the second floor."

"Stay here. We'll send em out."

"You go left. I'll go right," Carlton shouted, "We'll meet at the elevator."

On the roof the unheard radio reported the ninth alarm.

The old people didn't understand and were reluctant to open their doors. They were still half asleep.

Carlton waited a few seconds after pounding on the first door. The smoke was getting thicker. No answer.

How do they do it on TV? Slam a shoulder into the door. It didn't budge and the pain shot all the way to the back bone. Television doors must be made of cardboard. Kick it in. It worked.

The old lady, still in bed, was petrified.

"Mam, the building is on fire. You will have to leave."

"But."

Carlton had reached in the closet and pulled out a coat.

"Here. Put this on. There isn't time to dress. Go to the elevator."

She did.

The next door was already open and an old gentleman after being told of the situation shuffled off to the elevator without a word.

Most of the residents would not open their doors and they had to be kicked in.

If old folks could make ^{it} themselves---great. If not Carlton and Scholfield lead them, sometimes four or five a time, holding hands, through the ever thickening smoke to the elevator. Then all was quiet, except for a radio blarring the news that John and Dick were inside the burning building and that radio contact had been lost.

I'll say.

Finally they met at the elevator.

"All clear?"

"Yeah"

"Lets go down"

The sixth floor was worse. The heat was becomming intense. It was impossible to see. Breathing was painful.

They repeated their actions. This time feeling their way from door to door.

Two policemen arrived and the boys sent them along the opposite walls.

After clearing the first room, one of the policemen gave John a wet towel to hold over his face. It helped for a few minutes but the smoke was impossible.

After telling a resident to crawl along the floor, where the air was better, he tried to open a window. His strength was going. He smashed it with his elbow. That heavy parka served some use after all.

'This section clear. Which way to the elevator? Can't see. Can't breathe. Maybe Dick is at the elevator.

"Dick"

"Over here, John."

He followed the voice with three of the residents hanging on.

"Gotta check the copter. Lets get some air."

"Rite"

Outside on the roof the fresh air was like perfume. They took deep drafts of it. Before realizing it the wet towels over their faces were frozen to their skin and they were shivering.

"Lets go."

Again Carlton and Scholfield descended into the burning building. This time down to the fifth floor. The smoke was worse. The heat intense. The parkas-heavier and heavier.

Two firemen had just arrived on the fifth.

They need^{ed} all the help they could get.

They had to stop now at every window for air. Their eyes felt like there was sandpaper in the sockets. Every breath hurt. The pains were so great in the chest that their bodies automatically coughed gasping for air that wasn't there.

They led the occupants to the elevator on their hands and knees.

Dam good thing the firemen and cops made it through.

An officer from the fire department arrived.

"Is everything clear above?"

"Yes, Sir."

"All right. Everybody down! "

"We're going up."

"What in hell-----"

"Our airplane's on the roof! "

"Oh" His look was, to say the least, quizzical as he disappeared in the smoke.

The boys started up the stairs.

"How do we know we hit every room." Dick stopped we better double check.

And so they circled the fifth, sixth, and seventh floors, slowly painfully until every room, bathroom and closet had been checked.

They stayed together on the last two floors for fear one would pass out.

Every breath now was agony. The heat tremendous.

They crawled up the stairs to the roof! Cold as the air was ---- it was clean.

The helicopter was still there--humming noisily as it waited.

John and Dick dragged themselves to the ship. The radio barked "They have to get out of there. The sixth floor is burning."

"OK, Walt, were back on the air."

"Get out of there."

"Yeah."

They waited a few more minutes to clear their eyes and minds.

"OK. We're airborne."

In spite of the pain in their lungs and the sick feeling in their stomachs they flew two more hours advising firemen and giving traffic reports.

It was the worst fire in the history of Philadelphia. But 367 people, half asleep and all over 65 had been successfully evacuated. It might have been the greatest tragedy in the city's history except for the brilliant work and extraordinary bravery of the Philadelphia Fire Department and Police Department. And the heroism and guts of two guys from the Go Patrol who weren't afraid to get involved. IT WAS A MIRACLE ON 36TH STREET.

"OK, Walt, we've done all we can. Were going home. Why can't we start the week on Tuesday?"

From the Broadcast Pioneers of Philadelphia Archives