

jack warner

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rescue

The Cotton Mill Fire was probably the biggest story in Atlanta in 1999. Much of the United States watched on live television the rescue of the man trapped in the crane above the flames. I was going through semiannual firearms qualification at the police department where I was a reserve that day, and had no part in the spot coverage. I got the assignment to do the Sunday piece, and it turned out to be one of the best things I ever did. Why, even my editors patted me on the back.

Only God, the young fire-eater said later, could have brought him together with the cool-handed pros and the stony-faced workman in the moment that transfixed the nation.

Perhaps he is right, for no film director with millions to spend could have assembled a better cast than those four men --- the exhausted, adrenaline-driven firefighter eager to risk his life, the steely-eyed veteran fliers just doing what they're paid to do, and a quiet man who didn't flinch when death began licking at his feet.

The day they came together began routinely enough.

Ivers Sims lives in the little Alabama town of Woodland, and to get to work at the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill in Atlanta by 6:30 a.m. he has to get up at 4 a.m.

"I'm gone," he whispered to his wife, Mariland, before dawn Monday. "See ya' later." Mariland, who works nights in Wedowee, merely mumbled at him.

Sims, 49, a slender, medium-sized man with large spectacles and a taciturn demeanor, laughs readily but doesn't talk much.

He's an operating engineer. There isn't a piece of heavy equipment made that he can't handle. For the past six months, he'd been operating a high-rise crane for the Jasper Construction Co. at the renovation project on Boulevard S.E., where the old mill is being turned into loft apartments.

The alarm clock roused Matt Moseley at 4:45 a.m. Monday, but as usual he punched the snooze button. The second alarm got him out of bed at 5. It wasn't easy. He had had friends over Sunday night for hickory-grilled steaks.

He put on the blue fatigues of an Atlanta firefighter and headed for work. It's a long haul from Moseley's house in Locust Grove up I-75 to Station No. 4 on Ellis Street in downtown Atlanta.

Moseley is 30 but he doesn't look it, with blue eyes in an unlined face under a pale blond crew-cut. Out of uniform, he could be mistaken for a young businessman.

He is, in fact, something more than a firefighter. He is a member of Squad 4 --- specialists in hazardous materials and what the department euphemistically calls "heavy rescue." The men

in Squad 4 fight fires alongside other firefighters but also undergo intensive training in their specialties. They are the Navy SEALs, the Army Rangers, of the Atlanta Fire Department. It was still dark when Moseley left home for his 24-hour shift. A chill had come back into the air after the warm weekend, and a stiff wind was blowing.

Deidra Clines got her husband, Boyd, up at 8 a.m. as usual Monday. She has to get up earlier to get to work at Alexander High in Douglasville. It was their first day back at work after a week of vacation; they had returned from Boston Friday.

Boyd Clines is 52, a tall, slender man who towers over his tiny wife. His has piercing eyes, slightly squinted with a pattern of fine wrinkles at the corners. A pilot, he has flown helicopters all his adult life.

He flies them now for the Department of Natural Resources, following stints with Fulton County and Atlanta police and the Army in Vietnam. He seems to live in a cocoon of perpetual calm; his chief betrayal of emotion is a slight elevation of his right eyebrow, frequently followed by a chuckle.

Larry Rogers and his wife, Marsha, drive to work together from their home in Canton. They got a late start Monday, and traffic was tough. The commute to Charlie Brown Airport off Fulton Industrial Boulevard usually takes about an hour. But almost 1 1/2 hours had passed by the time he dropped her off at her office a couple of minutes from the DNR hangar.

When Rogers is on the ground, he is a helicopter mechanic. In the air, he is a crew chief. He spent nine years with the State Patrol's helicopters before coming over to DNR.

A tall, shy man of 43 with thinning blond hair and chubby cheeks, he doesn't have a lot to say until the subject turns to the stuff he works with. His eyes light up when he talks about ropes and carabiners, Billy Pugh baskets and helicopter belly bands.

At Station 4, Moseley opened his locker, hauled out his gear, checked it over and put it next to the Squad 4 truck, known simply as "the squad." He headed to the kitchen, where Jose MacAdams, Monday's designated cook for the Ellis Street Breakfast Club, was whipping up eggs, bacon, and grits.

It was almost done when the alarm bell rang and the eerie, electronically disembodied voice of the dispatcher announced a possible chlorine gas leak on Johnson Ferry Road. Squad 4 went without breakfast.

Moseley is the science officer for Squad 4. As the squad truck raced north through the traffic-clogged streets, he crouched in the back, thumbing through the hazardous materials library. He didn't have to be told that chlorine gas is deadly, but he had to refresh himself on every detail of dealing with it. But there was no chlorine gas, and it was 11 a.m. when the squad backed into the station house.

The sun was just rising when Sims climbed the ladder to the operator's cab in his 220-foot high Paco tower crane. He usually had to take a breather during the trip up, but on Monday he went up without stopping. He was glad he'd buttoned an extra shirt over his normal pullover. The wind indicator in the cab was showing gusts up to 40 mph.

But it was a clear, beautiful morning, and he took time to enjoy the view from his steel aerie. It was cramped, but he'd found room for some groceries, a hot plate, a toaster oven and a

cooler. With a long rope, he hauled, hand-over-hand, a bag of ice up to the cab to keep his Cokes cold.

At Charlie Brown Airport, more properly known as Fulton County Airport, Clines settled down at his desk to catch up on paperwork. He chatted with Maj. Mike Thompson, commander of the DNR air force, and Judy Floyd, their secretary, about his vacation and what he'd missed at work.

Clines didn't have a trip scheduled until Tuesday, taking some Industry & Trade officials down to Albany. Monday looked like a slow day, and as he ate his lunch of leftover chicken, Clines thought he might be able to go home early.

In the hangar, Rogers had his own paperwork and a new shipment of parts and stores to catalog and shelve. But first, he checked the choppers. Every morning Rogers does a standard pre-flight visual check on the DNR helicopters.

Many people are surprised to learn that something as enormous as a tower crane is controlled, for the most part, with a little joystick.

Getting his instructions via radio, Sims can swing the crane around in a 180-degree arc in less than 30 seconds; he can trolley the crane's arm forward and backward, and, of course, he can raise or lower the cable with the enormous hook on the end. It's called "horsing."

On Monday, workmen were removing the gravel-and-tarpaper roof of Mill No. 1. They shoveled gravel into a 4-by-10-foot skid pan. When it was full, they attached the crane's hook to it and Sims guided it to a trash bin.

Sims stayed in the crane for lunch, warming a can of vegetable soup on the hot plate, and went back to hauling skids.

He had hauled five loads and the gravel portion of the roof was almost gone when Sims noticed white smoke billowing out of a 3-foot-square hole in the tarpaper. He watched as the workmen picked up hoses and began squirting water down the hole.

The smoke seemed to get worse. After a few minutes, Sims saw the men were trying to get the hose down the stairwell. Just as the last of them disappeared, he heard a sudden "whoosh."

Flames boiled through the roof. Sims keyed his radio: "Y'all get a fire on top of the building."

There was no answer. Sims decided that it was time to abandon the crane. But when he looked down, he saw his tower enveloped in flames. He had nowhere to go.

At Station 4, it seemed the alarms would never quit. "Sounds like they're sending the whole world out," Moseley remarked to no one in particular.

Finally the disembodied voice began dispatching. It called for three engines and two truck companies, standard for a fire in a big building. But it didn't stop there. "Air 7," the voice intoned. Air 7 is the truck which refills the firefighters' breathing apparatus. "Medical engine," which carries advanced life-saving gear. "Squad."

The men of Squad 4 threw their gear aboard their engine and leapt in. As the engine screamed across the freeway overpass, they saw clouds of smoke surging up between two towering brick smokestacks on Boulevard.

"We got one," the men told each other. "Damn, we really got one."

Workmen were sauntering out of the mill in no particular hurry when Squad 4 ran past

them. One grizzled man in a hard hat warned them about the stairs. "They're rotten," he said. "Watch out for the holes."

Squad 4, with four firemen from other units, reached the fourth floor to find what appeared to be a large trash fire burning in the back of the cavernous, 75- by-50-yard room. It looked manageable, and officers called for a truck to extend its ladder up to the window to provide water.

Moseley walked around to the side of the fire with Lt. Todd Edwards.

"Look up there," Moseley shouted. "It's breaking through the floor!" Burning embers were coming down from a fire raging on the fifth floor.

"Get up there and check it out," Edwards ordered.

Leaning his ax and hook against a wall, Moseley raced back to the stairwell. Lt. Mark Green from Engine 6 joined him. They pounded up the stairs, rounded the corner and took three steps into the room before the heat stopped them.

A cloud of black smoke was surging toward them, obscuring everything from the ceiling to a foot from the old wooden floor. Behind the blackness was an intense orange glow.

Without a word, the two men turned and raced down the stairs. On the fourth floor, they met other firefighters running toward them.

"Get off the floor!" officers were yelling. "Everybody out!"

As they reached the third floor, Moseley heard popping and cracking above him, like the toppling of a row of giant dominos. The fifth floor was coming down.

With no chance of saving the mill, Squad 4 poured into the streets of the Cabbagetown neighborhood, just downwind from the inferno, kicking in back doors of houses that were beginning to burn from blown embers and making sure no one was trapped inside.

Behind one of the houses, Squad 4 kneeled down to regroup. The firefighters had to stay low to keep the heat off their faces. Water on the pavement was steaming. The radio was swamped with orders and warnings. They heard the word "rescue."

Squad 4 picked up its gear and headed for its truck. The firefighters thought they were being sent to an emergency elsewhere in the city, but as they got near the truck, they saw men pointing up at the sky.

Sims' crane had lost its electrical power and the wind whipped it around until it was pointing south. It was getting warm in the cab. Ivers Sims, a religious man, said a small prayer.

His radio crackled. "Ivers," the site superintendent told him. "Just hang on. We're gonna have to get a helicopter to get you down."

"OK," Sims grunted.

Almost an hour after he saw the first puffs of smoke, the cab got too hot for habitation. Sims climbed up several steps to the metal counterdeck above.

At the airport, Clines had just finished his own visual check of the choppers and was on the telephone. George Dukes came out of the DOT hangar and told Rogers somebody was hollering on WSB radio for a helicopter to get a man off a crane. Rogers ran upstairs to get Clines.

DNR owns the only rescue helicopters in the state.

"Get ready," Clines said. He went to a corner of the hangar to pull his flight suit on over his gray and green uniform. Rogers, moving with the ease borne of training, took the back doors

off of 35NR, a Bell Long Ranger L-4.

Rogers loaded up sections of nylon rope capable of lifting thousands of pounds and a Billy Pugh basket used for rescues. He also fitted the rescue bellyband, a broad, heavy-duty strap that runs under the aircraft and connects to itself like a man's belt inside the cabin.

Clines was about to take the Ranger out of the hangar when he heard a muffled cry and a thud behind the door to the stairs. Opening it, he found Judy Floyd in a heap on the floor. Running to get an emergency message to him, she had fallen down the stairs. She didn't respond immediately, giving Clines his worst scare of the day. The DOT officers called an ambulance, and in a few seconds Floyd stirred and looked up at Clines.

"You guys go, do what you need to do," she said weakly. "I'll be all right."
Clines and Rogers were airborne 10 minutes after getting the word.

As soon as Moseley spotted a man peering over the crane's railing, he and Bill Bowes, a tall, lanky member of the squad, put on their harnesses. The heavy gear is like parachute harnesses that belt around each thigh, rise up the front and back of the body and connect like suspenders over the shoulders.

On the crane's counterdeck, Sims' feet, protected only by light boots, were getting hot. He keyed his radio to talk to his superintendent, whose last name he never knew. "Hey, Keith, when's that helicopter coming?"

"They're gonna get it here quick as they can," Keith replied.

The heat was intense, sending Sims away from the edge and onto the pile of concrete counterweights. Lying on his stomach, he decided it was time for another small prayer.

When Sims looked up, he saw three helicopters circling. Two made hesitant runs toward him, then backed away. The third, a news chopper, tried to come close enough for him to climb aboard. But the heat was too fierce; Sims could not bear to even extend his arm over the edge of the concrete weights.

Lying back down, Sims tried to sort through all the construction accidents he'd ever heard of. He could remember none that involved fire and a tower crane. If he stayed flat on the concrete, he probably won't burn, but he had no idea how much heat the tower could take before it melted.

With a sinking heart, Sims faced the possibility that he was about to die. However, he didn't offer any more prayers. Two ought to be enough, and he didn't want to be a bother.

Once in the air, Clines tuned his radio to 123.07 VHF, the common helicopter frequency. "35NR is off from Fulton County headed toward the fire," he reported.

Four minutes later, he was overhead, making a pass over the inferno. Until he saw Sims lying on the concrete pad, Clines had no real idea exactly what was happening.

He circled briefly, testing the turbulence from the fire, gauging the power of the wind. Helicopters are flown, basically, with two sticks, one on either side of the pilot. They are called, rather unhelpfully, the cyclic and the collective. The collective is the throttle. Push it forward and the engine revolutions increase; backward and they decrease. The cyclic controls the pitch of the rotors, which determine the attitude of the aircraft. Push the cyclic forward, and the helicopter dips its nose and moves forward if it is given enough collective. Push the cyclic to the right and the ship banks and turns to the right, and so forth. Increasing the collective while keeping the cyclic on an even keel lifts the chopper straight up; decrease it and

it drops downward.

Achieving a stable hover is not unlike rubbing one's stomach while patting one's head. The cyclic and collective must be played against each other in perfect balance.

Clines brought 35NR down on the grass where firefighters were waving at him. Rogers helped Moseley aboard and gave him a radio headset.

Rogers and Clines had planned to use the basket to get Sims, but firefighters were concerned about Sims' condition.

"If he grabs at the basket and misses, the whole thing'll be over," Moseley said.

"OK, if you wanna take the ride," Clines replied. "Let's go. Time's wasting."

At first, Moseley didn't understand what Clines meant. The firefighter intended to rappel down a rope to reach Sims.

But Rogers tossed the basket out of the chopper, laid out a 50-foot rope and connected it to a 30-foot length with half-inch steel carabiners. One end of the rope was connected to the Long Ranger's belly band, and then to the rescue hook. The other end was hooked to Matt Moseley's harness. The firefighter suddenly understood what kind of ride he was about to take.

He was anxious and getting irritated. Everyone was barking suggestions and ideas at him. His mouth was dry and his tongue was swelling. He was ready.

Seven minutes after landing, Clines lifted off.

On the crane, Sims' radio gave a burst of static.

"Ivers!" Keith radioed. "The helicopter's here!"

"Good," grunted Sims. But he wasn't sure whether to believe it until he looked out at the grassy hill and saw a man laying rope out on the ground.

As the line came taut and lifted Moseley off the ground, Clines felt the slight tug. Helicopters are very sensitive.

Clines rose slowly up beyond 300 feet, until Rogers, leaning out the open back door, attached by straps to his seat, told him he was high enough to clear any obstacle. Clines had to fly as slowly and gingerly as he could to keep Moseley from swinging like a pendulum at the end of the rope.

Once in the air, Moseley's irritation evaporated and a strange kind of peace settled over him.

The view was lovely, the silence refreshing. There was only the mutter of the helicopter and the snap and crackle of the fire. He began to consider how he would handle the situation once he was on the crane.

As they came over the mill, Rogers had to drop his helmet visor to protect his face from the heat. Eighty feet below, Moseley turned his face into his shoulder to protect it.

The Long Ranger moved through the worst of the turbulence before it got over the crane; it wasn't so bad then, and the wind, blowing down the length of the crane, gave the ship some added lift. At that point, Clines could no longer see what he was doing.

Rogers kept a steady stream of conversation, trying to give Clines something more than just instruction, trying to be the pilot's eyes. "Up, up a little more . . . good, good . . . left now, more to the left . . . ah, little too much, come right a bit, right, right . . . good, that's good, lookin' good. . ."

Clines came over the crane sideways and a little high. "Down, down a little more, come on, down a little more," Rogers said in his ear. Below, Moseley had his back to the crane. He twisted around to see it, waving his arm like a man paddling in the water.

"I'm coming to get you," he called to Sims. "Don't try to grab me if I come close to you."

Finally Moseley could grab a cable on top of the crane and get aboard. He had to climb up a railing to reach Sims.

"Be careful," Sims told him.

"He's on the crane, he's on the crane!" Rogers told Clines. "Careful, he's still hooked up."

Clines blinked. He had expected Moseley to unhook himself from the rope while he was preparing Sims. Remaining connected meant Clines had to give him just the right amount of slack to move around, but not enough to get hung up in the crane, and then remain absolutely motionless. If the chopper bounced or lurched before Moseley got Sims hooked to the rope, it would probably pull the victim off the crane and send him into the inferno.

Clines' world was limited to his hands on the sticks --- making constant, tiny adjustments --- the instruments and Rogers' voice. The floor of 35NR could have burst into flames and he wouldn't have noticed it.

Moseley, following his training, cracked a joke about coming up to get Sims off work early. That kind of thing will often soothe a frightened victim on the edge of panic. Sims, however, was closer to death than he was to panic. He didn't respond. Moseley explained that he was going to rig Sims into a harness to lift him off the crane.

"OK," Sims said. He knew all about these harnesses; he used one when he did routine maintenance on his crane. He got into the harness and Moseley attached it to a carabiner above his head. The firefighter looked up at Rogers and gave a thumbs-up.

"They're ready," Rogers called. "Bring 'em now. We got 'em."

Slowly, Clines pulled the Long Ranger up, then began a careful circuit around the fire. Below the chopper, Moseley and Sims could hear the cheers of the crowd.

Clines put them down on the hill like a carton of eggs, then slid off to land the Ranger. Other hands quickly unhooked Sims and rushed him to a stretcher. At the hospital, doctors found him unharmed. He was released quicker than Judy Floyd, who was hospitalized until doctors concluded at midnight that she was only bruised.

Moseley's adrenaline rush faded and his hands began trembling. His tongue seemed to fill his mouth. Hands were pounding his back, but all he wanted was water.

Clines merely raised his right eyebrow and grinned his small, ironic grin when the heromakers descended upon him. Rogers did his best to disappear. Clines tried to tell everyone how smooth it all was, that it was no big deal, not for a man who began his flying career rescuing shot-up Ranger units from hot LZs in Southeast Asian countries where they weren't even supposed to be. Compared to that, Mill No. 1 was a piece of cake.

"Nobody was shooting at me," he explained. -- *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Sunday, March 18, 1999

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