

# The Blind Leading the Terrified

By Richard Barr

The author is a lawyer and freelance writer. His mother is a native of Scottsbluff, Neb.; his father, David, also an English lawyer and writer, is a contributor to the magazine.

King's Lynn, England.

We heard the helicopter in the distance. As it came nearer the noise grew louder until, with a frightening roar, it was over our house. Slowly it sank down in our drive, sending dust, dead grass and our two dogs flying in various directions.

The helicopter landed in exactly the same spot where a windmill had gently creaked in the wind less than a hundred years earlier. If it thought anything at all, the ground under which the foundations still lie must have thought it was receiving a visitation from a 20th century windmill.

When I first had the idea of a helicopter landing at our house I very much underestimated the size of the machine. I had no idea that the diameter of its blades was 35 feet—only a few less than the sails of the windmill.

The pilot cut the engine and peace returned to our end of Castle Acre.

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For many years my Uncle Dick had farmed almost single handed in Western Nebraska, USA. He had always been keen on flying machines. He had not been in on the Wright Brothers' first flight but in 1903 he was a founding member of the local gliding club.

Their glider was a rudimentary contraption more like a kite than an airplane. The pilot (no doubt kitted out with goggles and leather helmet) sat on a wooden seat in front of the wings and tried to keep it aloft for as long as possible after it had been forced into the air by a sort of human catapult (four strong men at each end of a length of elastic rope) or by being pulled behind a car.

Needless to say the glider crashed often and sometimes even had to be retrieved by Dick's sister towing it behind her horse.

In time the gliding club became the flying club, and Dick became quite proficient at flying the club's own airplane—an Aeronca (the kind quite literally held together by pieces of wire).

All went well until a club member took the plane out to shoot coyotes. He



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was so intent on covering his prey that he flew into the ground. He was not badly injured but that was the end of the Aeronca and the club. Only the coyote benefitted.

As he approached retirement Dick cherished the idea of spending some of his spare time building an airstrip on the farm, selling some land to buy a plane and taking up where he had left off about 30 years earlier.

But it was not to be. Just then he started to suffer a deterioration in his eyesight which left him with only peripheral vision. It was like having to wear glasses with the lenses blacked out. He could see only out of the sides of his eyes and even then indistinctly.

So ended abruptly his farming career and many things besides—not least the landing strip at his farm.

As a farmer he had learned to accept philosophically the fickle ways of nature, and he has adopted as cheerfully as possible to the limitations now imposed on his way of life. He keeps in touch with friends by cassette tape. Indeed he is our family communications center—tapes sent to him get rebroadcast to the rest of the clan.

By producing—Sherlock Holmes style—a huge magnifying glass he can still read a little, but it is a laborious process. He can still recognize a pretty girl as fast as any man—but he only grins when asked how he does it.

He makes the best of it all, but the only time I have seen him show real

pleasure in recent years was also the most frightening experience of my life.

We were all—Dick and his wife Lenore and my wife Alison and I—in the Black Hills of South Dakota. We had just been to see the faces of the presidents carved in the hillside at Mount Rushmore and had descended to one of those American towns which is the ultimate in tourist traps. There was no way of avoiding its snare and we had to stop.

Parked near the road was a helicopter. Beside it were notices inviting you to see the Mount Rushmore faces from the air. The cost was \$5 each, and Dick in one of his rare moments of acuity had not only read the sign but also produced the money. He would hear no excuses.

Alison and Lenore were very happy because they read that each passenger was insured for \$100,000 and they were already deciding how to spend it. I was quaking in my shoes as the blind led the terrified toward the helicopter.

There followed five of the longest minutes of my life as the pilot put his helicopter through its paces—dive bombing clumps of trees, charging at rock faces and clearing them by inches.

I hardly noticed the stone faces. The only thing I did notice was Dick grinning from ear to ear. The look of absolute bliss on his face lasted long after the flight.

Many times since then he has talked with happy reminiscence on his cassette tapes about those five minutes. When he announced that he and Lenore were

coming to see us in England last summer he also included a special request to have a ride in a helicopter.

In England the tourist industry is not so sophisticated, and helicopter rides are generally confined to airshows. As none was scheduled for the period of his stay I had to dream up an alternative.

What if I could arrange for a helicopter to come to the house and whisk him off for a brief tour of the countryside? How on earth do you do that if your name is not Eddie Rickenbacker?

The solution was to give my secretary (who has a very persuasive voice) the problem, the yellow pages of the telephone directory and free run of the telephone for the day. Several hours and pounds' worth of telephone calls later she came into my room with a very long face:

"It's going to cost at least 300 pounds (close to \$600) to charter a helicopter," she said glumly.

I started to resign myself to the reality that this was an idea which was not going to come to fruition when I realized that she was still talking.

"...will do it for nothing" were the words that shook me from my despondency.

Having tried a number of companies without success, she had contacted the commercial manager of a helicopter charter company—who had also said it was out of the question, but who had then paused and said that if he didn't do it, no one else would; if we wrote in he would see what he could do.

We did, and a few days later the manager telephoned me. Yes, he had had a word with his boss and they would do it for nothing. Would they accept any payment? No. A case of booze? No. Publicity? No need. In short they wanted nothing, which was pretty remarkable considering there could be no benefit to the company from their act of kindness.

So it happened. There was a Hiller UH 12E crop-spraying helicopter (connoisseurs will know about such things) dwarfing our garden, with its blades spinning idly and our dogs having nervous breakdowns behind the bushes.

We had not told Dick a thing, though he claims he began to suspect something when our plans for the day were altered every time the telephone rang.

Once again I was volunteered to accompany Dick. Very smoothly the helicopter lifted off. For about 20 minutes we had spectacular views of our village. We had displays of how to spray crops. We waved grandly at people we knew. Inevitably, we raced up to a copse of trees and swooped over it just at the last minute.

Too soon it was all over, and after pausing only for a cup of coffee, the pilot climbed back in his machine, started up and swept away—convincing the dogs that the world had gone completely mad.

Soon even the noise of the helicopter had vanished. All that remained was the smile on Dick's face.



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