

Life, Flight and Liberty - Part 1

An Essay by Henry Nicolle



Back in March of this year, I had an opportunity to fly on a helicopter. It was a fairly new Bell Helicopter Model 407. This bird was very clean and appeared to be very excellently maintained. This particular model helicopter has a nominal value of about \$2.6 million dollars. The operating cost is nominally \$6,000-\$7,000 per hour, exclusive of specialized crew and equipment. As I recall, the flight crew consisted of pilot, copilot and medical attendant. Last year, the crew had visited our Chamber of Commerce luncheon to give a presentation covering the purpose and prospects of their new operation here in Rawlins, Wyoming. During the presentation again as I recall, I believe I heard that the operating cost of this helicopter was \$7500 per hour. That would make sense, because it is a specialized aircraft configuration with a medically competent, trained crew.

Our flight that day from Rollins to Casper in Wyoming was an unexpected adventure on my part. For the flight crew, I suspect it was fairly routine. It was a smooth and very comfortable flight from the helicopter pad at the Rawlins Memorial Hospital to the Wyoming Medical Center pad in Casper. I spent the flight mostly dozing for the hour or so, strapped in the helicopter basket. It was a smooth and comfortable 90 mile journey. My bill for being dollied from the hospital in Rawlins to the helicopter pad, then flown to the helicopter pad in Casper was \$24,000. "Air Mileage" was an additional \$24,000 and change. That is an observation, not a complaint, (as I will explain as we continue.)

I had awoken about 2:30 AM that morning with a dull ache creeping across my chest. By 5:00 AM the ache had stabilized and was very uncomfortable, but no actual "pain". It seemed pointless to stay in bed with an aching chest so I arose, got dressed and went to my office. For the next few hours I did all my normal office stuff; invoices, shipping documents, parts ordering, planning and etc. as were needed for that day. By midmorning, I had become very weak and cognitively, I had begun "spacing out". I suspected that I had a problem that deserved medical attention.

Coincidentally, a couple weeks before, I had ordered a really good new office chair. When I checked FedEx that morning, I found the chair was scheduled to be delivered during the afternoon. I WANTED my chair and I decided to wait until FedEx arrived. FedEx arrived about 1:30 in the afternoon. I simply had the driver place the package in my front office, explaining that I had to leave immediately to find out if I was having a heart attack. He gave me a deliberately goofy look, acknowledging my poor choice of priorities. Waiting for my new chair had been, perhaps, a foolish decision, but I HAD my chair!

I locked up my office, loaded my outgoing mail and packages in my car and departed for the hospital. I made it to the post office without any undue confusion, but on my way from the post office to the hospital I began to "space-out" again. I pulled off the road and waited for a few minutes while the problem dissipated and then continued to the hospital.

At the hospital, I parked in the reception parking lot area, staggered through the front door into the reception area and more or less collapsed with great relief on the reception couch. That short walk of only 40 or 50 steps from the parking lot to the reception couch had been truly exhausting. Less than a minute after I had plopped myself down on the couch, one of the ladies at the reception desk asked me "Sir, are you all right?" I replied "I don't know, but I guess you're going to tell me."

Their response immediately initiated my unexpected and exciting trip on our new helicopter! Of course, there were 10 or 15 minutes of minor drama between the reception couch and the emergency room. During that period, three nurses worked to install an IV in my right arm and a brief examination and electrocardiograph were performed. By the time that initial processing was complete, the helicopter crew arrived and stuck me in a basket suitable for transport on the helicopter. Except for being a little tired, I enjoyed my conversations with the hospital staff and the helicopter crew. Still only an aching in my chest and no pain.

Upon arriving in Casper, the helicopter crew unloaded me and with the aid of the hospital staff rolled me to my next exciting experience. The first stop at Wyoming Medical Center was to the catheterization ward.

The staff there immediately prepared me for catheterization and installed a manual pacemaker catheter from my groin to my

heart, followed by another catheter through my right wrist to my heart which would be soon utilized to install a stent in one of my heart arteries.

The surgeon and assisting nurses were in my opinion exceptionally efficient and competent. From my perspective we had several ongoing conversations germane to numerous subjects, some as mundane as bladder content. All in all, it was a very interesting experience. I was fully conscious for the entire period and from my limited perspective flat on my back with everybody working around at waist level or away from my gurney, I was able to be a fly on the wall for the entire process. I learned a lot just by observation and listening to the conversations around me.

The entire process was 100% pain and anxiety free. I'm not sure exactly how that was done. Presumably, there is some sort of chemistry involved. However, the experience was remarkably free of any traumatic thoughts or sensations. For that, I will make the personal estimation that everyone involved knew what they were about and were skilled in the processes.

After the stent was installed, I had a few more minutes of conversation with two of the nurses, just casual conversation. Then, bidding farewell to my new friends, I was trundled off to the post-operative ward.

Post-op and my return to Rawlins a few days later made an interesting but anti-climatic tale. The short version is that I met some exceptional people and with their assistance, I am still alive to write about it.

This introduction is actually a lead-in to more serious discussions about professionalism, profitability in competition with ethics, individual pragmatism in competition with corporate and government policies and the ever-present challenges that mutual antagonism of Liberty and communitarian decision-making.