NOVEMBER-THREE-THREE-DELTA:

Watch Over New York

by LOU TIMOLAT

Helicopter Reporter for WCBS Radio

TO: all Producers
FROM: Assistant News Director

According to labor relations, our pilots are under no restrictions in the nature of reporting they may do. That means that in addition to routine traffic reporting, they can describe fires, explosions, sinking ships, crashing airplanes, etc.

Evening rush hour on the Grand Central Parkway.

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1 TRAFFIC BEAT

NOVEMBER-THREE-THREE-DELTA, OR FREQUENTLY "THREE-THREE-DELTA," is an abbreviation of the registration number N6733D on the WCBS traffic helicopter I have flown over New York City for the past six years. The aircraft is about sixteen years old, has been overhauled nine times, and remains completely airworthy. It is an ideal vehicle for observation, with a two-passenger bubble that affords a panoramic view both vertically and horizontally. While I ascribe no romantic personality to Three-Three Delta, one cannot help developing a feeling for her akin to the fondness of a craftsman for his favorite tool or the affection of a horseman for his best mount.

The main purpose of my job is to report the New York traffic and provide the harassed commuter with, at the least, some knowledge of why he is imprisoned in a seemingly endless line of stalled or slow-moving vehicles and, hopefully, enable him to avoid such conditions. Some time ago I began carrying a camera with an 80 to 200 mm lens, and shortly after, obtained another with a wide-angle lens. Through them I have not only attempted to capture the calamities that make news, both on and off the highways, but also to record the great mass of ordinary happenings that compose the total panorama of a metropolitan existence. The photographs are of necessity New York, but aside from specific buildings, bridges and other landmarks, many could be scenes from any urban conglomerate across the nation; composite portraits of what for me is a significant reality in the life of all great American cities.

November-Three-Three-Delta is housed in one of the old Sanitation Department barns under the 59th Street Bridge. When I arrive an hour or so ahead of the 4 pm liftoff from the 60th Street heliport, Frank Bolona, the flight attendant, chats a bit with me over coffee and doughnuts before we roll the ship out and remove its dolly wheels. We both run through a check of all mechanical parts and the oil, fuel and other fluid levels to make sure Three-Three-Delta is airworthy.

When everything seems secure from outside, I get in the cockpit, fire up the engine and go through another series of checks on the instruments and switches, listening all the time to the raw sounds of whirring machinery that tell

November-Three-Three-Delta.

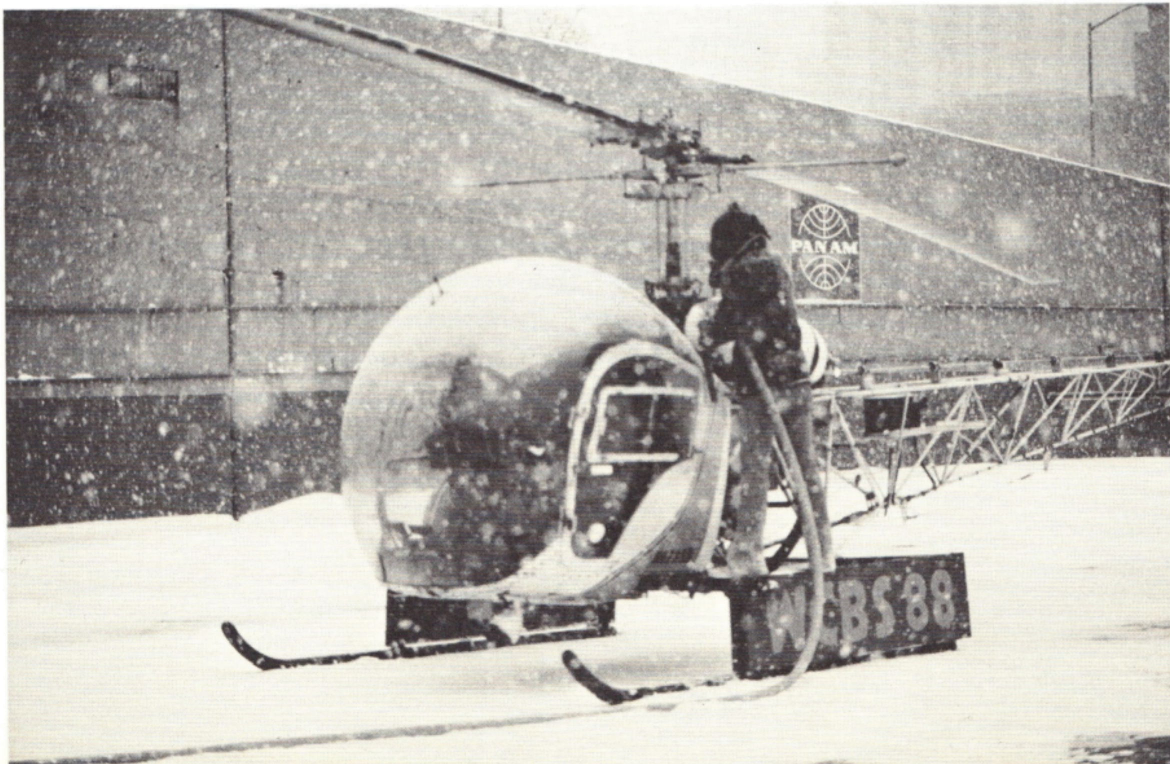
how a helicopter is performing, or more important, not performing. When all instruments read in the green, I put on the radio headset and contact the heliport operations chief for takeoff clearance and advisory. Then, as a last precaution, I lift the aircraft off the deck a few feet, hover briefly, and set her back down. If everything is functioning properly, Three-Three-Delta is ready for final takeoff.

To the uniniated passenger, a helicopter lifting off from a heliport at the edge of the East River appears ready to plunge nose first into the rushing water. But the bath never comes. The ship shudders into foreward flight, gains altitude and speed, and is soon at cruising level above the river. At this point I contact La Guardia TCA (Terminal Control Area) for clearance to the Triborough and George Washington Bridges and then sign on with the WCBS base station where the newsroom desk assistant briefs me on any unusual happenings that need immediate coverage. Minutes later I am on the air with the first traffic report.

Abstractly, it is hard to imagine the task of entering and leaving a city as being of such demanding intensity that a blood penalty is a routine price for error enroute. To many people, a traffic fatality means the high speed crash of a single car; an anonymous individual racing home too fast on some remote road nods asleep or loses control on a curve. The accident is unseen and unheard, and often is discovered too long after the fact.

What a grim contrast this is to the reality I observe daily. Week by week accidents, their location and their severity are predictable and apparently irresistible. Witnessing this chaos is an experience hard to accept, even for one who is now more or less accustomed to the probability of violence. Regiments of motorists seem to move below me like enormous armies and must inevitably give up some of their number as casualties of wrenching conflicts. The scars and fresh wounds of these conflicts are visible daily, and as I see the worst of them, I feel disgust, anger and helplessness.

But piloting an aircraft over this urban melee has not led to rejection and detachment; instead, it has provided the opportunity to achieve a great sense of familiarity. One begins to feel the magnetism of neighborhoods and communities, to see the past and watch the future unfold. As for the present, from overhead there is little sense of it. Things are either about to happen or have happened, even on the roads. The stalled car of yesterday is a stripped wreck next morning. Hours are swiftly transformed into days or months, for all the eyes can tell. Speed, violence and change are part of the quality of life. Things become done and undone in equally abrupt bursts. My eyes grapple for the



basic landmarks that are truly constant, not just for emotional stability, but because when the weather closes me in, these constants are my lifelines, my pathmarks to a safe haven.

Covering metropolitan New York traffic means serving three masters; the commuters from Long Island, Westchester and New Jersey, all at the same time. This is a difficult proposition because nobody is happy at hearing the other person's problems. The Long Islander headed through Queens wants immediate word on the BQE or the Belt Parkway while the commuter on New Jersey's Route 22, a chronically bad road, is always bitter at the air time given to other areas. Probably no driver could be completely satisfied unless his entire route was charted, including the final turnoff to his home street and into his garage.

Nevertheless, all of us who fly traffic beats try to give the broadest possible coverage, chase down the most serious tie-ups and patch together ways around the obstacles. Often there is no alternative except patience for the motorist who is already trapped, but simply knowing what is happening on the road ahead may bring some peace of mind.

An initial sweep up the East River, over the Triborough Bridge and across to the George Washington Bridge affords a view of both the east side of Manhattan and well out into mid-Queens, then the lower Bronx, west into New Jersey and, of course, the bridges themselves. The main arteries included in this first leg are used by about seventy-five percent of the commuters and are responsible for an even larger percentage of the predictable tie-ups. Thus the first evening report at 4:15, known as the "teaser," is a brief glimpse of this whole area with emphasis on any overwhelming problem, should there be one. The next legs of the usual flight pattern include a look at the Jersey Meadows, Jersey City and Newark as well as the West Side Highway; then south along the Hudson and around lower Manhattan for the Brooklyn picture.

My usual traffic watch is the afternoon shift, a two-and-a-half hour period from 4:00 to 6:30 pm with one landing for refueling, while my counterpart at WCBS, Neil Busch, flies the morning rounds. When one of us is ill or on vacation, however, the other takes both shifts. The two flight periods are much more different than merely night and day. In the evening rush hour, traffic begins to flow from a central point at the same time; a predictable outpouring of cars that is easy to follow at the start. But as more and more vehicles disperse farther and farther out through a radius of almost 360 degrees, it becomes

Homeward bound.

increasingly difficult to keep track of everything until, all of a sudden, there is no more traffic and rush-hour is over.

Conversely, in the morning the day begins out of control. Tie-ups occur at random, twenty miles apart, and it is necessary to scurry about trying to keep on top of them. Then, gradually cars begin to flow into a central point and, as the

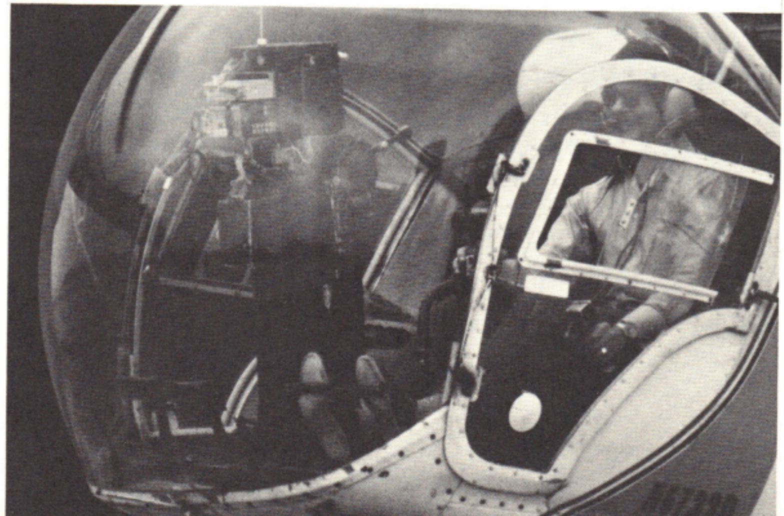
density of the mad scramble increases, the reporter's job becomes more comprehensible and controllable.

In a recent *Scientific American* article an engineer treated traffic on highways as a fluid, comparing it in a computer program to the flow of liquid through pipes. Thus, a column of cars moving through a series of curves, or encountering resistance such as a dog running across the road, sets up a shock wave that pulsates back and forth. From this evidence, he predicted that the seventh vehicle in the column was the one most likely to trigger an accident.

At five to six hundred feet above a major highway, this ebb and flow of liquid traffic becomes clearly visible. Shock waves are set in motion each time a car pulls off an approach ramp into a swiftly moving stream. Similarly, drivers who travel too slowly and those who speed in and out of lanes are equally guilty of setting waves into motion. The more violent the wave action, the more likely there is to be an accident. From this the airborne observer frequently can anticipate both the impending crash and its severity, but is frustratingly helpless to prevent it. Such a cue enabled me to photograph a collision at the instant of its happening.

In contrast to the predictability of traffic, however, I have found the foul weather of metropolitan New York to be highly unpredictable. Visibility and turbulence are complicated and aggravated by the enormous buildings, bodies of water and the smoke and haze from industrial facilities. One must fly "outside" the cockpit, relying on a visual sense of location rather than on the many instruments used by other commercial pilots. In this sort of pilotage, the sense of freedom is exhilarating, even though the total responsibility has its anxious moments. Skimming over a narrow waterway surrounded by looming bridges, towering buildings and belching smokestacks, with fog and haze closing in is an intensely demanding experience when one is alone in the cockpit.

Both Neil Busch and I rely heavily on the extraordinary intuition and skill of WCBS meteorologist Gordon Barnes to give us weather predictions. When Gordon says a thunder storm is due to pass through the area at ten past five, sure enough, like a freight train, the storm comes along on his precise schedule.



Neil Busch.

The hazards of low-level flying.

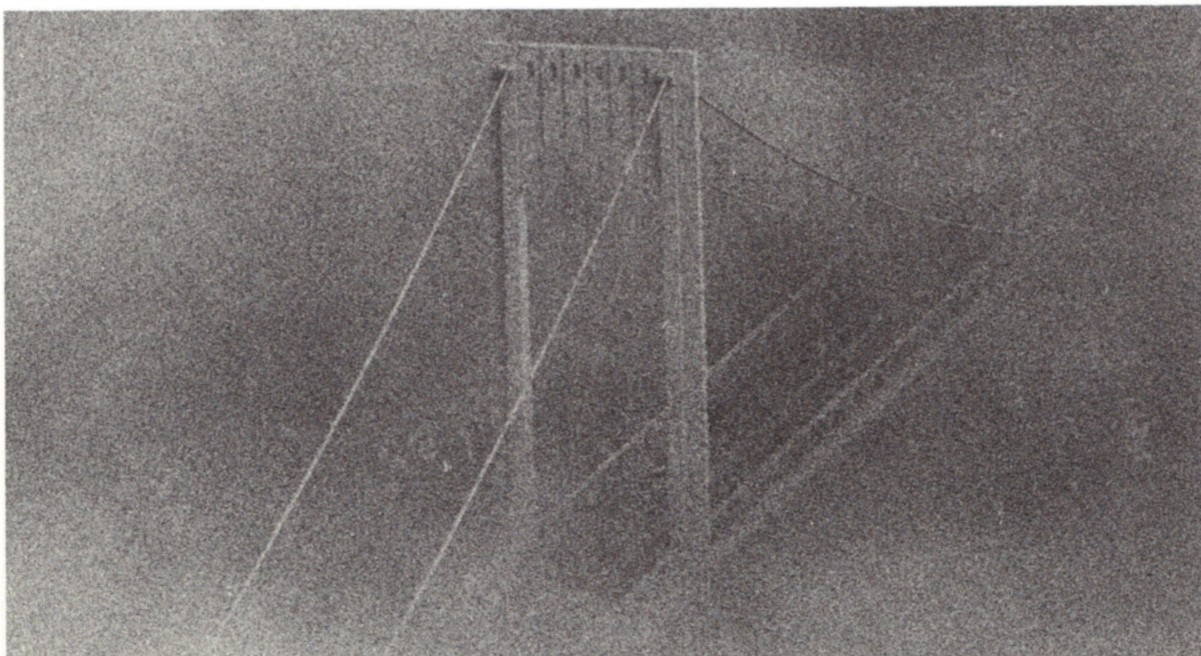
While the decision to fly or remain on the ground because of adverse weather is ours, Gordon deserves much of the credit for the excellent record of completed flight schedules we have maintained.

During clear weather when flying conditions are at their best, the airborne traffic observer is in a much safer position than the motorists below. But when

fog, snow, sleet or heavy rains close in, the job becomes hard work. At this point, I am actively handling five flight controls, two microphones and earphones, three radio receivers and two transmitters, plus, at times, a radar transponder. Often I feel as a juggler might if he were to perform his act while tapdancing on a basketball. Then, in addition to watching the roads, comes the added complication of watching for ground obstacles. I am aware of buildings, bridges, towers and smokestacks; reading the surroundings by interpreting changes in contrast becomes a substitute for seeing, while familiarity with distorted images makes sense out of a ghostly panorama. My real enemy is the here-today-gone-tomorrow, 500-foot construction crane; an uncharted and unlighted pinnacle of metal in an otherwise well-known sea.

The commuter fighting his way to or from work and listening to all the bad news coming from a traffic reporter, to say nothing of the stories from other local, national and international sources, believes that our job deals with the worst of all worlds — coping with bad weather, ground obstacles and a constant flow of air traffic; all in three dimensions. Friends ask about the difficulties; am I crazy to spend two-and-a-half hours a day and sometimes twice that time alone in a helicopter?

But they rarely ask about the pleasures. What of the raging sunsets or the brittle sunrises on breathlessly cold, mid-winter mornings when the first light abruptly wipes away darkness and in minutes the endless blue sky ignites the city? What of the small details of life: the children skating on a pond or playing stickball in a Harlem street; the rooftops with sunbathers, or the ships plying the harbor? Accidents, fires and other catastrophies make news, but only when one sees the total picture can he come to grips with the undauntable city that is New York.



NOVEMBER-THREE-THREE-DELTA

Photo by John Hinshaw

is the FAA call designation for the WCBS Radio news helicopter from which Lou Timolat broadcasts daily while flying above the boroughs of New York City and nearby New Jersey. From his solitary patrol, the vast metropolitan spread beneath him appears awesome, mysterious, beautiful and often ridiculous.

While his camera captures the massive commuter traffic jams, fires, collapsing buildings and other catastrophes about which he reports on the air, these calamities reflect only a small part of what he observes and what he feels. In this book he combines a newsman's sense of involvement with a photographer's artful eye to bring us a far deeper impression of the complex and logically impossible city over which he has watched for six years.

Changing weather and the seasons render the cityscape as a menacing, ethereal or glorious stage on which the daily life of millions is played out in a tumultuous performance. Within this environment, Timolat shares with us his reactions to small neighborhoods and great skyscrapers. He shows us kids playing on rooftops, lovers in the park and delirious Mets fans at Shea Stadium. We see landmarks and junkyards, the grime of back alleys, the grand purity of sunset and always the ubiquitous struggle of the automobile.

Here is one man's unique view of a legendary American city from a startling new perspective; a vibrant portrait in which a sense of the quality of life common to all cities is powerfully revealed.

LOU TIMOLAT

is a professional pilot whose career has included helicopter duty in Vietnam, a post as ROTC Flight Instructor at Tulsa University, and flying the U.S. mail by night. Prior to his present position as an airborne reporter for WCBS Radio, he was chief pilot for a charter service and flight school. Now thirty-one years old, Mr. Timolat has been flying since the age of nineteen and has logged over nine thousand hours in the air. He shares an east-side Manhattan apartment with his wife, Carol, and walks each day a mile to the heliport where November-Three-Three-Delta is housed.

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