

EARLY LAST JUNE, Sean Kroll, 2½, edged quietly into the bathroom where his mother was busy drying her hair. Pointing toward the kitchen, he mumbled, "Jennifer . . . in the water." *She has probably squirted water on the floor from the drinking-water dispenser again*, thought Tammy Kroll, annoyed by the possibility of another mopping up.

Hurrying into the kitchen, she noticed the back door was open. One-year-old Jennifer was nowhere in sight. *What's going on?* she wondered. Sean had never unlocked a door before.

Panic began to grip her as she ran out onto the deck leading to an above-ground pool. No Jennifer—anywhere. *My God! The pool*, Tammy thought. The water was only four feet deep, but it was dirty from the long winter and she could see nothing below

ILLUSTRATION: TRICIA ZIMIC

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Drama in Real Life®

"Don't Let My Baby Die"

James Patridge can't explain what happened that morning. Maybe no human can

BY SAMUEL A. SCHREINER, JR.



"DON'T LET MY BABY DIE"

the murky surface. Without thinking, Tammy plunged into the ice-cold water. To her horror, a tiny body in a red dress floated up. It was Jennifer.

Tammy grabbed the lifeless form and clambered out of the pool. She felt for Jennifer's pulse. None. She checked for breathing. None. Jennifer's fingers and lips were blue; her arms flopped like a rag doll's. "Jennifer, baby!"

With the limp child in her arms, Tammy ran to the kitchen, picked up the wall phone just inside the door and punched "O" for operator. The phone rang and rang. *C'mon, c'mon!* she pleaded. More ringing. Finally, a crisp recorded voice came on the line: "Due to a work stoppage, we are unable to handle your call immediately. . . ." Tammy slammed down the receiver.

CPR, she thought, laying Jennifer out on the kitchen deck. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation. *Gotta get oxygen into Jennifer!* From her high-school CPR instructor, Tammy knew every second counted. She clamped her mouth over her daughter's tiny nose and mouth. *Blow. Pause. Blow. Pause.* Then, lifting her head, Tammy screamed for help.

ON THE STREET behind the Krolls' suburban Chicago house, James Patridge, a blond, bearded 38-year-old, drew a deep breath in the brisk morning air. It was good to be alive—he was always thankful for

that. Twenty years before, in Vietnam, both of his legs had been blown off just above the knee. He was also left blind in one eye, and nearly blind in the other.

Reaching for a garbage bag to haul out to the street on the footrest of his wheelchair, James heard a faint scream. He squinted toward the distant sound, then dropped the bag and raced his wheelchair down the driveway. He wheeled across the road and onto the bumpy surface of an open lot. There he paused and listened. This time the woman's cry, almost a death wail, seemed closer. It went through him like a current.

Just like the screams on that day in Vietnam: March 31, 1966, somewhere near Da Nang. James was point man as his Marine platoon headed across a grassy field. Suddenly, a booby trap exploded, mortally wounding the men just behind him. The force sent him flying into the air. Somewhere close by, a buddy was screaming, "Don't let me die."

A Determined Man. Legless and legally blind, James Patridge now lived on his full-disability support from the Veterans Administration. Two sons from his first marriage resided nearby with their mother. In 1981 he had married Sue Fowler and adopted her young son. James spent most of his time working at occasional odd jobs and playing with his boys.

"James . . . James!" It was Sue, calling from behind. Her voice was

getting closer. He didn't pause to look back. James pushed harder at the wheels. Small rocks and sticks slowed him down. Despite the morning chill, sweat streamed down his forehead and chest.

"Where are you?" he yelled to the woman's voice ahead. "Tell me where you are!"

The screaming stopped. "Over here! This way!"

Now Sue was beside him.

"Can you see anything?" James asked her.

"No, there's a hedge up ahead—small trees so close you can't see through them." Sue was terrified. The screams were garbled, and she thought she heard "Don't rape me!" That could mean a gun or a knife.

But Sue knew nothing would

stop James. There was little he couldn't or wouldn't do, when he put his mind to it. Fix the car. Mow the lawn. Wrestle his sons to the floor. He had covered the 80 yards across the lot in only minutes.

James had learned determination early. Growing up on a farm near Clay City in southern Illinois, he was the youngest of six children who worked hard for everything they got. In high school, James decided to be a Marine—and that was it. He graduated on a Friday in May 1965 and was in boot camp in San Diego the following Monday.

Race Against Death. As another scream tore the air, James rolled out of his wheelchair onto the ground, squirmed through four to five feet of tangled brush and hoisted him-

self onto his hands. Then, swinging his body through his arms, he raced forward on his hands toward the house. *Gotta get there quick!* he thought, taking longer, faster strides with each arm.

It was 75 feet from the brush to the Krolls' house. Sue bounded up the eight wooden steps from the lawn to the kitchen deck.

Pushing with his stumps and heaving with his hands, James scrambled up the steps.

"Don't let my baby die," Tammy screamed.

Die of what? James wondered. *What's going on?*

Looking up, Tammy saw a woman running toward her across the deck. "Call an ambulance!" she pleaded. To Sue the child looked

dead. She was blue all over. Her eyes were rolled back. Sue felt sick.

"James, should I dial O or 911?"

"Better try 911," James said. His voice was calm as he came sliding across the deck. He moved to Tammy's side so quickly that she didn't notice he had no legs.

James felt for a pulse in the baby's neck. There was none. He touched her skin. It held an icy chill that he had learned to recognize on the battlefield—the cold touch of death. *How long has she been dead?* he thought. He realized that even if she were revived, every second without oxygen increased the chances of brain damage.

Fight for Life. As he squinted close-up, James could now see that Tammy was doing the CPR

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wrong. Ten years before, he had taken a CPR course. It was only a way of passing time. After all, how often would a legless man have to save someone's life? James remembered the first rule of resuscitation: open the airways. James took the child from Tammy and, tilting her head back, checked for breathing. Finding none, he attempted unsuccessfully to breathe air into her. To clear the blocked air passages, he gently pressed her stomach. Water spouted from the baby's mouth and nose. He placed the child on her back and began the rhythmic breathe-press technique of CPR.

Between breaths, James talked softly to Jennifer, urging the child back to life. Then, far off, he heard sirens, but only because he had been listening for them and had inwardly been praying for them. Now he knew help was coming. At last. *Breathe, push-count . . . breathe, push-count . . .*

As the sirens grew louder, James suddenly felt a slight quiver, a gasp for air. "She's trying to breathe," he told Tammy. "I've got a heart-beat!" The beats, however, were irregular and faint. So James continued the CPR, ignoring everything but the wispy flutter of life in his hands. Then suddenly he was aware of people rushing up and kneeling beside him and the baby.

The first to arrive were Capt. William Enders and firefighter Peter Daly, emergency medical technicians with the Winfield Fire Protection District. They suctioned the

baby's air passages and held a mask attached to an oxygen bottle over her tiny face. Jennifer *was* breathing!

Shortly, paramedics Michael Turner and Kelly Kindelin of the Leonard Ambulance Service came running onto the deck. They checked the baby's pulse. It was only 50 beats a minute, compared with an infant's normal rate of 100. When Turner tried to insert an intravenous tube, Jennifer cried out.

James felt the tension break. "She's okay; she's going to make it," Sue said to him quietly.

After the ambulance left, James slowly slid himself over to the steps and eased down them one at a time. Then, hoisting himself once more onto his hands, he swung his tired body into his wheelchair. Minutes later, he was back in his garage, loading garbage bags. It promised to be a good day.

At the Central Du Page Hospital, Jennifer made a rapid recovery. The cold pool water had protected her from brain damage. James Patridge's CPR had done the rest.

A Greater Presence. After Tammy Kroll and her husband, Michael, told the story of how their neighbor had saved Jennifer's life, newspapers and television stations all over the country turned James Patridge into a national hero. Phone calls poured into his home from well-wishers. Many were from fellow Vietnam veterans who took understandable pride in what he had done. One call came from

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organizers of a Vietnam veterans march scheduled for Flag Day celebrations. They wanted James to serve as an honorary marshal of the parade and to lead the march through the streets of Chicago.

A private man, James tends to shun organizations. But he agreed to join the march because, he said, he still believes in the cause for which he lost his legs and most of his sight in Vietnam. But he turned down many other honors, gifts and requests for appearances; he wanted to get back to the quiet life he had enjoyed before.

Two days after Jennifer's near-drowning, a grateful Michael and Tammy Kroll stopped by James Patridge's house. The couple were

bringing Jennifer home. Gently Michael placed Jennifer in James's arms. He cradled her close, talking softly to her.

Something happened that morning of the rescue that James Patridge still has trouble explaining. "Let me put it this way," he says. "When a human being dies—and Jennifer *was* dead—a mortal man like myself can do nothing." Even though he does not consider himself a religious man, James feels he was an instrument for a greater presence. All the Krolls know is that they had lost their infant daughter that morning—and James Patridge was there to bring her back to life. For them, that is explanation enough.

