

'It's amazing what Calstar pilots, personnel do'

South Shore woman credits air ambulance with saving her life

By Laura Kaufman

Living in Christmas Valley, Billie Jo and Paul McAfee are used to a fairly self-sufficient life. The valley is 1,000 feet down, tucked into the mountains along Highway 89 on the South Shore. Paul McAfee, a former Marine and a heavy equipment mechanic for the city of South Lake Tahoe, is also a HAM radio operator. Billie Jo McAfee, a retired California Tahoe Conservancy secretary, says, "Due to the isolated area, we have been Calstar members for years."

Billie Jo McAfee, 68, recalls the challenges when winter pass closures cut off the valley from surrounding communities. But a different, unusual emergency arose for her last winter—a fast-moving, mysterious flu-like illness—that put their Calstar membership into action.

"We are prepared for many things, but we were not prepared for this. It was so insidious, the way it snuck up on me. I realized that it was getting worse very quickly," she says.



Billie Jo
McAfee

On Feb. 1, McAfee developed an unusual cough. Then, she started vomiting. Drinking lots of fluids, she suspected she had the flu, but wasn't sure. Three days later, she met her husband at the door as he returned from work. "I think I'm in trouble," she said. They went directly to the ER at Barton Memorial Hospital. On the way, she passed out in the car.

"When we got there, they asked me to spell my name, and I couldn't," she said. That is all she remembers.

McAfee was already in critical condition. Calstar was called to transfer her quickly to Renown Regional Medical Center in Reno. She vaguely remembers thinking that the helicopter looked like a tiny mosquito, and she didn't think she would fit inside. But during the flight she recalls feeling comfortable and warm.

"I remember the scene in little funny flash clips," she says. "I remember a soothing voice saying 'in two minutes we will land, and here's what will happen'."

Flight nurse Mark Haase was on the transport that evening. He recalls Billie Jo's situation as complex, compounded by multiple factors, including electrolyte imbalances and fever.

"She was gravely ill with overt cardiac complications that warranted rapid air ambulance," he says. "I recall her demeanor to be rather brave and calm in light of the seriousness."

On arrival, McAfee vaguely remembers having a port installed in her neck, being prepared for surgery, and then bright lights overhead. She was in the ICU for two days. She kept waking up to discover doctors all around her, but was not able to answer their questions. Her husband was always there. McAfee was put into quarantine, and on the fifth day, her

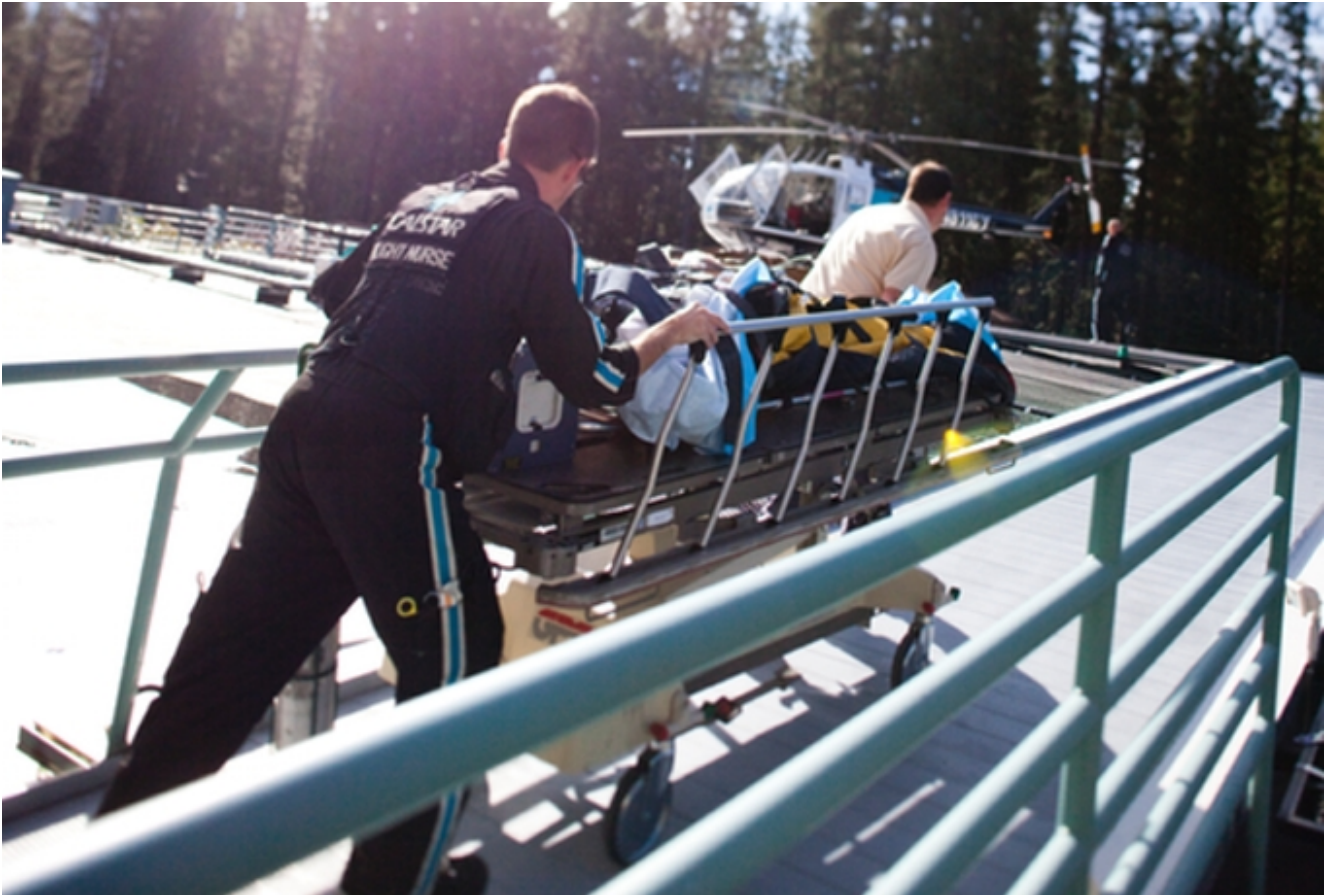
doctor told her what had happened: severe sepsis.

“I had to look it up, as I had never heard of it. I was shocked to discover that this was one of the things people died from in World War I, when they had wounds and no antibiotics. It’s a bacterial infection, and it can get into your bloodstream and take over, wrecking your organs and your brain. I read that people often die within about four days,” she said.

According to the Sepsis Alliance, sepsis is the body’s toxic response to infection. The organization says, “every hour that sepsis is not treated increases the risk of death.”

“I truly believe that I would not be alive if not for the helicopter transport. At the time, I had no idea how sick I was. Sepsis gets to a point where you can’t reverse it, and time is of the essence,” McAfee says. “An ambulance would have taken an hour and a half, but Calstar got me there in about 20 minutes.”

In McAfee’s case, the source of the sepsis was a mystery. To her surprise, much later it was discovered to be caused by a seriously diseased gallbladder. Tests of that organ had originally come back normal—its condition possibly masked by all the medications and antibiotics she was on. However, as she continued healing, she was still aware that something was not quite right.



Billie Jo McAfee credits Calstar with saving her life. Photo/Provided

Recovery and recharging

After about two months, McAfee felt good enough to go for coffee or shopping with friends, but found she would have to spend the next two days in bed. "I'd tell myself, this is a reminder that you were very sick – and need to take things slow."

Something still wasn't allowing her to fully bounce back. After she underwent a highly specialized scan, it was indeed found that her gallbladder was in bad shape. When she had it removed, months later, McAfee recovered right away.

Recently, she stopped by the Calstar station at the South Lake Tahoe airport to say hello and to thank the staff for her nick-of-time transport last February.

"It's amazing what Calstar pilots and personnel can do. In

winter here, we have bad accidents or mishaps in the Kirkwood area, and they are crackerjack at getting in and helping people in need. I've told everyone in the valley that it's a no-brainer: join as a member," McAfee says.

"I just want to extend my thanks to Calstar. If they hadn't gotten me to the trauma center in such an expeditious manner, I probably wouldn't be here to deliver the message," she adds.

Back in Christmas Valley, the McAfees are again readying for the winter. This time, they are looking forward to a happy, healthy, and much less eventful New Year.

Laura Kaufman works for Calstar.

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Notes:

- Calstar memberships may be purchased **online**.