



LICENSE TO *Soar*

Patrice Billings's love of adventure and flying opened the way to a life of firsts. BY SHEREE K. NIELSEN

DURING A routine helicopter patrol, Patrice Billings and her partner spotted a suspicious-looking Jeep near the wood line in the field below. They needed to investigate, but no ground team was available.

After landing the helicopter, the two discovered that the Jeep had vanished. A long scar of tire tracks cut through the brush and disappeared into the woods. With guns drawn, Patrice and her partner trekked cautiously through the wooded area as they followed the tracks.

Upon locating the Jeep, they peered through the windows and saw a few suspicious items on the Jeep's front seat: survival gear, an axe sheath, a woman's wig, and bomb-making materials. The speedometer logged only a few hundred miles, a good clue that the vehicle was stolen. The duo couldn't find the driver, but Patrice had an eerie

feeling that someone was watching them. "That was the first time in my life the hairs stood up on the back of my neck," Patrice says.

The tactical unit was immediately called in for an area search.

The suspect, a recently released prison inmate, was driving through the Midwest robbing banks. He had explosives strapped to his body that would detonate if his heart rate dropped below a certain level. When the culprit was captured months later, he said, "It's a good thing those helicopter pilots left when they did because I was just getting ready to blow them away."

This wasn't the first time Patrice faced a life-threatening experience, and it wouldn't be the last. She's lived most of her life on the edge.

As a twenty-eight-year veteran of the St. Louis County Police, Patrice has lived a life of firsts: the

first female to graduate at the top of her class from the St. Louis Police Academy, the first in firearms in the academy's history, and the first female police-officer helicopter pilot in the nation.

Esther, her mother, encouraged Patrice to "do

Above: In addition to becoming a pilot, Patrice also served as a member of the SWAT team for ten years. **Below:** A young Patrice drives the toy police car that inspired her career.



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