



# The Courage of John Bankston

*A high school boy lost his life  
to help others.*

BY DAN COOPER

It was in 1987, during the height of summer camping season in the Texas Hill Country, that John Bankston achieved a more memorable hero status than his considerable sports accomplishments had ever earned him. That year John was just another high school football player at summer camp...until the rain came to the Texas Hill Country.

There are more camps in this

region than anyplace in the United States west of the Mississippi River. It is the Hill Country's version of big business. During the height of the 1987 camp season, July brought an unexpected late season heavy rain and with it the severe flooding that is widespread in the hills.

In Texas it has been common practice to avoid the building of extensive bridges over waterways. People are frequently forced to cross rising floodwaters in creeks and even rivers by using "low-water crossings." These are poor substitutes for bridges that don't meet the need of traffic when water rises.

In normal low-water conditions, these crossings usually protrude slightly above the surface of the stream. After even slight rains, many of them are under water by a few inches, so vehicles frequently cross at those points through several inches of flowing water.

One such low-water crossing isolates the Pot of Gold Camp from outside traffic, and on one fateful day in July 1987, the rains came. They kept coming, and with considerable force. In the hills, streams can rise perceptibly, even dramatically, in a matter of seconds. It was at just such a time that the driver of a busload of Pot of Gold campers faced the decision to cross or turn back. Yes, the water was rising quickly, but the driver felt he had time to make it. He chose to cross. Big mistake. The light truck crossing ahead of the bus stalled, stranding the bus behind it in the rising water.

The vehicles lost contact with the pavement and the water slowly swept them into the churning, rising turbulence. Panic ensued. Many campers decided it would be best to stay in the bus. Another mistake. The sliding, tilting vehicle quickly began to fill with water, and those who had lingered now

faced deeper, faster and more violent water than had been the case only moments before.

People scrambled for any refuge they could find. Trees were the most obvious and easiest to reach. But the swelling water carried the frantically struggling campers past several trees before they could manage to catch one and climb to apparent safety. The rain kept falling and the water kept rising. Locals familiar with such floods later estimated that the current reached speeds in excess of sixty miles per hour. Literally within minutes, a tree that

save was especially at risk of drowning. The camper was wearing a full-leg cast on a broken leg. It was a plaster cast. The kind you're not supposed to get wet. The kind that gets really heavy when it does get wet. Reports vary, but consistently they mention John carrying that particular camper on his back for thirty full minutes before getting him to safety – a half hour for just that one camper.

There is no telling how long John labored that day in the violently churning water that carried trees past him. In some ways, John was respond-

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seemed like a solid and secure stronghold on which to ride out the tempest became a moving, creaking, bending death trap. Enter our hero.

John Bankston was a high school football star. He was a big boy and very strong. When the water kept rising and the trees that people were clinging to began looking like traps, John started saving lives. One after another, John retrieved them from their precarious, disappearing perches. He laboriously worked his way out to them, loaded them onto his powerful back, and slowly carried them to shore. The current grew increasingly swift and dangerous, filled with sharp and heavy debris, including whole trees that had already been uprooted upstream. But John was young and strong.

The newspapers said he carried several people to safety, but he was unable to get to them all. Some died in the water that day. Many of those he saved would surely have gone with them. One of the campers he managed to

ing like a typical football player. He relied on his strength and his conditioning to keep him going when others might have stopped. He felt invulnerable in his athletic youth, and that same feeling of invulnerability that served him so well on the football field was also his undoing on that fateful day. Somewhere out there in the water, on yet another mercy mission to still another anonymous victim of the flood, John disappeared. Ten died in the water that day. John's body is the only one that was never found.

A pretty good definition of a hero is a person who does what has to be done regardless of the consequences. There are true heroes and there are pretend heroes. John Bankston was the real thing. I never knew John, but I salute him with all my heart.

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