



RONALD REAGAN has survived an assassination attempt, colon and prostate cancer and has lived with Alzheimer's for years — but recovering from a simple fall at home may prove to be the toughest fight of his life.

The beloved former president, who will turn 90 Feb. 6, is facing a desperate battle for survival after emergency surgery to repair his shattered right hip, say sources. He must complete demanding physical therapy or risk developing potentially fatal complications from pneumonia or heart failure.

His devoted wife Nancy is heartbroken that her true love is facing yet another ordeal.

"Nancy is so upset that Ronnie is going to be put through such a painful rehabilitation," a close friend of the Reagans tells STAR. "She doesn't mind for herself, her only concern is that Ronnie doesn't suffer."

Sadly, the odds are stacked against him. Docs say his age and the Alzheimer's disease that has ravaged him for the past seven years will be major hurdles to overcome.

"Alzheimer's represents a challenge, especially in rehabilitation," says the president's orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Kevin Ehrhart. "It could be months until Mr. Reagan is back in the condition he was before the fall."

The operation also carries a high fatality rate for a 90-year-old — one in five patients die within a year and 40 percent go from the hospital to a nursing home, unable to care for themselves.

"As is typical with anyone of his age with a broken hip, it's a long, uphill struggle," admits Ehrhart.

The 75-minute operation itself was relatively routine. Pins, screws and a plate were drilled into the bone to reposition it and hold it in place while it heals.

Reagan came through the crisis with flying colors. And Nancy was by his side as soon as he woke up.

But now she is torn over the months of grueling physical therapy he must endure, say sources.

"The trouble is Ronnie understands little of what's happening to him, so he panics the moment he doesn't see Nancy," says a close friend of the Reagans. "Nancy has to be in his line of vision at all moments or he gets alarmed to the point of hysteria."

According to the source, "Ronnie is very thin and frail.

"Even before the accident, he

had little stamina. Now he'll be expected to go through hours of painful therapy every day, and not even understand why."

The beloved former president was diagnosed seven years ago with Alzheimer's disease, a progressive degeneration of the brain.

The symptoms include memory loss, disorientation and other intellectual impairment. His condition has progressed to the point that most of his memories have faded away. He doesn't even remember that he was president.

He simply doesn't understand what's going on or why he's been hospitalized.

The potentially fatal injury came

'It's a long, uphill struggle'

at his Bel Air, Calif., home around 1 p.m. Jan. 12. A little more than an hour later, the Reagan entourage, which included Nancy, his live-in nurse and six Secret Service agents, arrived at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, about a half-hour away.

Reagan's latest health crisis is just one of many that Nancy has seen him through in their 49-year marriage.

In 1981, he underwent emergency surgery to remove a bullet in his

lung after an assassination attempt. Just four years later, he battled colon cancer, and 18 months after that he had prostate surgery.

In 1989, he fell from a horse and hit his head. Nancy and docs believe the concussion and bruise to the brain he suffered hastened the onset of Alzheimer's.

"When the doctors told us they'd found symptoms of Alzheimer's, I was dumbfounded," says Nancy. "Ronnie's fall from the horse had worried me terribly."

She's lived with the harsh reality ever since and faced the challenge with courage.

But now, his latest injury and the news that Reagan's daughter Maureen, from his first marriage to actress Jane Wyman, is once again fighting cancer, is almost too much for a family to bear.

In a bitter irony, Maureen was in the same hospital as her dad.

The double tragedy is almost too much for any family to bear.

In his touching exit from public life in 1994, he wrote: "Unfortunately, as Alzheimer's progresses, the family often bears a heavy burden. I only wish I could spare Nancy from this painful experience."

But he was confident that the American people would rally to his beloved Nancy's side.

"When the time comes," he wrote. "I am confident that with your help she will face it with faith and courage."

—ROBIN MIZRAHI and
JILL ISHKANIAN ★

NANCY HAS seen her beloved husband through many health ordeals in their 49 years of marriage, and her love and devotion remains his best medicine

**the prez
goggles
cover
from
an hip
as he
ns 90**