

R.A.F. Harpur Hill Mountain Rescue Team. R.A.F. 28 Maintenance Unit, Harpur Hill, Buxton.

The war years

Casualties in the hills and mountains of Britain were not confined to walkers and climbers out for recreation; it included the pilots and aircrew of both British and enemy aircraft.

Navigation systems in most aircraft were primitive and relied mainly on the ability of the crew to recognise landmarks from the air. Mountainous areas attract their own weather systems and are frequently plagued by fog and cloud, making observation of the ground difficult, if not impossible. Disorientated aircrew often thought they were flying over much lower ground than they actually were and the result was all too often the sudden impact of the aircraft with the ground. The crews had little chance of escape and the rescue of any survivors was often dependent on the crash having been witnessed by someone on the ground. In remote areas with bad visibility crash sites are surprisingly difficult to locate. The high moors and crags of the Peak District claimed their share and over 250 aircraft crashes are recorded in the area. The recovery of the wartime crews became the responsibility of the RAF 28 Maintenance Unit based at Harpur Hill near Buxton.

In 1942 the base Medical Officer was Flight Lieutenant David "Doc" Crichton. Although he knew little about mountaineering, he became involved simply from a need to respond to the calls that were coming in about crashed aircraft. Crichton was a Scot and had graduated in Edinburgh in 1939. He has already been "mentioned in despatches" for work following an explosion at a bomb dump at Burton-on-Trent and received the King's commendation for bravery in the 1945 honours. As the numbers of calls increased "Doc" Crichton slowly started to gather together a small band of volunteers to help. Initial practice was to take two medical orderlies in an ambulance when a crash was reported. Later, Crichton had the assistance of a permanent N.C.O., Flight Sergeant John Thornton, later awarded the B.E.M.

As available equipment was sparse, mainly a standard RAF issue medical kit and a basic stretcher, the unit started to design its own equipment, and manufactured a stretcher using parts from a bed as runners. As time moved on the unit acquired a jeep, proper clothing and a rocket gun. It is rumoured that the jeep was the gift from the American Army in recognition of services rendered. Certainly a letter was received by the Air Ministry from the American Army thanking the RAF Mountain Rescue Team at Buxton for the help given to an American pilot in the Peak. This may have caused some embarrassment as it is alleged that this was the first the Ministry knew of such a team.

The unit also had portable radios which were to prove very useful on other occasions beyond mountain rescue calls. Communications equipment, even amongst the police and ambulance services, was very primitive so word that the R.A.F. had reliable radios available soon got around.

All mountain rescue activity in the RAF at the time was unofficial but the work carried out at Harpur Hill, and several other units around the country, led to formal recognition in January 1944 after it was revealed in a report that 517 airmen had lost their lives in mountainous areas of Britain. By the time the Harpur Hill unit was officially recognised it had already dealt with over forty incidents and Flight Lieutenant Crichton was awarded the MBE in 1946 for

his services to mountain rescue over the previous three years. “Doc” Crichton left Harpur Hill in the same year and eventually retired from the RAF with the rank of Air Commodore.

Account continues in part 2 covering the post war years, with photo's...