

Doctor made house calls — by parachute

By CURT SYNNESS - Independent Record - 03/31/08

More than 60 years ago, before helicopters were used for mountain and wilderness rescues, Helena's Dr. Amos "Bud" Little was making rescues from the sky.

In 1944, Little, then 27 and serving as an Air Force "paradoctor," gained national recognition for one of the most daring parachute rescues in U.S. history in a remote region of the Colorado Rockies known as Hell's Half Acre.

"Shortly after midnight on June 14, 1944, a B-17 Flying Fortress out of Rapid City, S.D., bound for Greeley, Colo., had crashed on the north side of Crown Peak in the Roosevelt National Forest, just below the snow and timberline at 10,800 feet," according to a July 1999 Wildland Firefighter magazine article titled "The Savior Who Fell From The Sky" by Mark Matthews.

Three of the bomber's 10 crew members were killed instantly. Another died the next morning. Two survivors were able to walk down from the mountain. The other four were injured too badly to leave the site, including one with a broken back.

Little's heroics were reported in three national magazines — Time, Coronet and Reader's Digest.

"Soon, a bomber, with an Army doctor aboard, was on its way to the rocky ledge where the four injured men lay," stated the Time article of July 10, 1944. "The doctor first dropped a parachute load of supplies from the circling (UC-54), then jumped himself. When the main rescue party arrived by land, nearly four hours later, the patients had been fed, bandaged and drugged to ease their pain.

"The doctor is small, husky Lt. Amos Little, of Marlboro, Mass. He is one of six paradoctors attached to the Search and Rescue section of the Second Air Force."

Little had been contacted in Casper, Wyo., at 2 a.m. on June 15. "As soon as we spied the crashed bomber, I dropped the 85-pound kit containing equipment for treatment of shock, burns, fractures, lacerations and other injuries," Little told the Great Falls Tribune in 1945.

"It landed within 25 yards of the mangled B-17, but my landing was not quite as good. I bailed out at 12,500 feet, a thousand feet above the craggy mountain top where the wreckage was. The wind carried me (about 600 feet) from the crash, and I thought I was a goner for a minute. As I approached the ground, my chute snagged (the top of) an old dead tree, and I fell about 20 feet with that tree right after me. It landed with a hell of a thud a few inches from my head."

At the time, Little's rescue was unofficially the highest altitude for a parachute landing. He was recognized as the only physician to make a rescue jump in the U.S. during World War II.

In 1994, one of the survivors of the bomber crash of 50 years earlier penned a tribute to his rescuer.

"How do you say 'thank you' to someone who risked his life to save you and your comrades by jumping from that altitude?" wrote David Phillips from his home in Chandler, Ariz. "It was an incredible effort, for which I and the others are forever grateful."

After graduating from Dartmouth in 1939 and Johns Hopkins University in 1942, Little enlisted in the U.S. Army. It was while stationed at Great Falls that he volunteered for jump school. “They gave us a choice to work on a tractor motor or learn how to jump out of airplanes, and I chose the latter,” said the 91-year-old Little, who currently resides at The Waterford in Helena.

He attended jump school in 1943 with the smokejumpers at the U.S. Forest Service Parachute School at Seeley Lake and then finished his training at Fort Benning, Ga.

Little made 52 parachute jumps between 1943 and 1946 — 45 practice and seven rescue jumps. In the summer of 1944, he bailed out over a raging fire in the Lolo National Forest to rescue a smokejumper who had broken his back.

In October of 1945 in western Montana, Creek Morgan of Kellogg, Idaho, was accidentally shot in the arm by a high-powered hunting rifle by a hunting companion who was aiming for a bear.

“Capt. Amos Little parachuted to the spot where Morgan lay in the rugged timberlands of the Bitterroot National Forest to perform the operation,” reported the Missoulian. “Little said Morgan was ‘darned near dead when we landed.’ ”

Little and nine smokejumpers made the dangerous 2,000-foot leap to aid the wounded hunter. They administered three quarts of blood plasma during the all-day trek from the thickly wooded area to an awaiting plane, which flew him to a hospital in Missoula.

“Dr. H. M. Blegen said Morgan’s condition was serious, but ‘the emergency work done by Capt. Little undoubtedly saved his life,’ ” according to the Missoulian.

Bud Little relocated to Helena in 1947, where he operated a private medical practice for many years. He and his family — wife Mary and children Jim, Sue and Rogers — became key members of the Belmont Ski Club. The day after the Mann Gulch Fire in 1949, Little helped identify the bodies of the 11 smokejumpers who perished in the fire.

In 1958, he made the 24th documented ascent of Granite Peak. He was appointed the director of the 1960 U.S. Alpine Ski Team, and served as the vice president of the International Ski Federation from 1970-88. In 1955, Little received the A. Leo Stevens Medal for his para-rescue work, and in 1965 he was enshrined into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame.

An appropriate quote from an article on Little’s profession six-and-a-half decades ago from the newsletter The Slip Stream reads, “There are times when they parachute rather blindly, floating down the hillside into the unknown. ‘I am a doctor,’ he utters. Words that have never sounded more sweeter in all your life.”

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