

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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Photo provided - Little is shown in a 2006 photo.



Photo provided - Little gained fame for a rescue mission in 1944 in the Colorado Rockies.

Colorado WWII Fatal Crash Site #92

CROWN POINT

June 13, 1944

A few minutes before midnight an olive-drab Boeing B-17F (#42-30891) *Flying Fortress* heavy bomber droned through the night sky on a round-robin navigational training flight from Rapid City, SD to Greeley, CO to Akron, CO and return. Everything seemed normal until the bombardier 2nd Lt. Harold E. Eisele radioed the pilot that he could see dark ridges just below the aircraft. The pilot called for left waist gunner Cpl. Lester Place to bring forward maps from the radio room. As Place reached the flight deck the co-pilot was trying to urge the pilot to gain altitude. As the pilot began checking the maps Place noted something looming ahead in the darkness and called this to the pilot's attention. The pilot turned on the landing lights in time to illuminate a forest-covered mountainside just ahead. The pilots applied full power and pulled up the nose of the aircraft just as the aircraft impacted the first trees. The ship plowed its way through the timber and into the slope of the mountainside. When the forward progress had stopped the dazed crewmembers began making their way out of the ship. A moment later the flames roared to life and enveloped the forward portion of the ship.

Calling back and forth, five men gathered a safe distance away from the burning ship. Missing were the pilot, co-pilot, navigator and a gunner.

When dawn broke over the wreck site the surviving officer sent two of the lesser injured men for help. S/Sgt. Donald E. Jacobs and Cpl. LeRoy Faigin struggled down the mountainside for fourteen hours and happened upon a couple fisherman who took the men to Fort Collins. The military authorities were notified of the approximate crash location and of the injured men remaining at the crash site. This nearly 24 hours after the crash.

The next morning (June 15th) Lt. Amos Little jumped from a UC-54 circling the crash site and parachuted onto the crash site to give aid to the injured men. This was the first such rescue jump and Lt. Little was recognized in Time Magazine as having set a record for the highest altitude landing at just under 11,000 feet. Unfortunately Lt. Little arrived too late for the injured Cpl. Conway who had died the previous day.

Besides Lt. Eisele and Cpl. Place, Cpl. Max Weiner, radio operator, and Cpl. David E. Phillips, tail gunner, were treated at the site for their injuries. Killed were:

2nd Lt. Drury W. Holt, 0-764022, pilot, Columbia, SC

F.O. Doyle J. Hall, T-2729, co-pilot, Clinton, SC

F.O. Timothy O. Hurst, T-126229, navigator, Joplin, MO

Cpl. Daniel E. Conway, 3242984, gunner, Troy, NY

In 1994 a reunion of Faigin, Phillips, and Place took place at the dedication of a memorial marker placed beside the trail leading to the crash site. This marker was placed there by the Greeley Chapter of the

Colorado Mountain Club.

PHOTO

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