

Introduction

On the 29th of May 1946, the Air Rescue Service was formally established as an integral part of the United States Army Air Force. This is a history of that organization--its inception, birth and later day development under the Military Air Transport Service.

The writer of any history is always faced with the problem of where to begin, for it is never an easy matter to put one's finger on some elusive point in time and say with exactness and without hesitation, "This is where it all started."

We try to isolate a time, a place, a situation from which we can go forward; but then after further search, we discover a link which takes us deeper into the past. This link might be an event which has sparked a chain reaction, or perhaps some creation of man's imagination, a concept, an idea or even a dream which has refused to die.

And so if we record the fact that on May 29th 1946, Colonel Wallace S. Ford assumed command of Headquarters Air Rescue Service as a part of the Air Transport Command, we would be historically accurate. But this wasn't the beginning. So much had already gone before.

History--according to one man's definition--is a complex continuum. That is to say it is a steady flow of literally innumerable events no one of which can become distinctive except that it be related to something else. The writing of a "history" therefore, becomes a highly selective process wherein each fact presented is chosen from a multitude on the basis of its relationship with some other significant fact or group of facts. ~~Obviously, it would be impossible to set down all the facts available on any large subject and cram them into a single volume.~~ The

writer must be selective. That's where the trouble lies because, no matter how hard one may try, it is impossible to be totally objective in selecting any particular item.

When one makes the decision to include this fact and exclude another, one makes a subjective decision based on a fantastic number of intangibles. And that is why, to paraphrase Plutarch, it is so difficult a matter to trace and find out the truth of anything by history. That which seems important and "belongs" in one man's history would never even be seriously considered by another even though both men were to work from the same source material.

All agree that certain of the concepts behind the Air Rescue organization are very old. Many years before the Wright Brothers lifted the first heavier-than-air machine off the ground at Kitty Hawk, man's mind had conceived of the air as an avenue of escape from death. Greek mythology provides the story of Daedulus and Icarus who devised wings of feathers and wax in an attempt to fly to safety and freedom. Daedulus was successful, but Icarus failed when he flew too near the sun and his wings melted--a flying safety hazard which today's flyers need not face.

We think of that basic rescue aircraft, the helicopter, as a modern invention, yet it too had its origins in the distant past. It was visualized by the illustrious painter and "genius of all trades," Leonard di Vinci. His drawings of this imaginative aircraft are still in existence and, although crude by our standards, an idea was born, a contribution made.

As for the first actual aerial rescue, we are told that this occurred in 1870, thirty-three years before the first airplane was to fly. During the Franco-Prussian War, while the guns of Bismarck's Army pounded the city

of Paris, the ingenious French utilized observation balloons to airlift 160 patients from that beleaguered city.

during World War I,
A half century later when German forces were again attempting to overrun France, several attempts were made to use airplanes as ambulances. As early as 1915, the French Air Service evacuated the sick by air from Serbia. The airplane was then in its infancy. Any such trip was bound to be hazardous with the outcome doubtful, but it was a daring step forward.

As early as 1918 our own air arm was modifying World War I trainer and combat type aircraft to serve as "flying ambulances." On September 24th a test run was conducted between what is now Scott AFB, the present home of MATS Headquarters, and Mascoutah Field some several miles distant utilizing a modified "Jenny."

In 1926, during the Riffian War in Morocco, the French again took the initiative by improvising ambulance planes which they flew over the treacherous Atlas Mountains to evacuate a significant number of wounded personnel. The great possibilities of rescue by air were being slowly realized. Yet, incredible though it may seem, there are officers and airmen in Rescue today who during World War II, flew mission after mission in all the various theaters and were never aware of the existence of rescue agencies in their vicinities.

However, World War II did give the concept of aerial rescue its real impetus and we choose, therefore, this point in time for our beginning. We choose it not because it affords opportunity to recite a string of unbroken successes and colorful tales of derring-do. In too many instances quite the opposite was the case. True, there were successes and there were heroics. But it was the shortcomings and tragic failures of World

War II that pointed out the need for organization and professionalism in the art of saving lives from the air that led slowly but inevitably to the Air Rescue Service of today.

In every history there must be omissions.

Certainly there is no intent to slight those who participated in the many superb missions which have, for considerations of space, escaped mention on the pages that follow. The contributions of these anonymous men have added inestimably to the lore and legend of Rescue. Their dedication has brought to thousands that most precious of all gifts -- the gift of Life.