

1950's Pararescue

Perhaps the most spectacular rescue technique and the one which, of all of them, demands the highest training, is pararescue the jumping from a plane under almost any conditions of weather to save a life. To paramedics U.S. Air rescue Service personnel, it may be remembered, with special training in advanced first-aid and survival techniques this is just part of their job. Doctors who have seen them in action have said that "To do more than these men can do, you would have to parachute in a whole hospital."

Some idea of the toughness of pararescue training can be gained from the following account of two of the men who jumped to a crashed U.S. Navy patrol bomber on the Greenland polar icecap, way up beyond the Arctic Circle. In that terrible cold there was little chance that anyone could have survived the crash. A landing, even by helicopter, was impossible, but the slim chance that even one of the bomber's crew might be alive was enough for Sergeants Elliot Holder (PJ 1947-53) and Robert Christensen (PJ 1952-61). To them, as to all men who carry out air rescue, there is always a survivor until it is proved that there is not. So down they went.

A howling, biting gale nearly dragged Holder to his death over a 1,900-foot precipice when he landed, and he and Christensen soon afterwards found that they had, indeed, jumped in vain. There was nothing they could do for the bomber's crew, but now the secondary problem arose as to what they could do for themselves. There was no hope at all of their being picked up while the gale lasted and last it did, for eleven days, with winds at times of over 100 miles an hour. On the twelfth day the wind at last dropped and the two men were picked up by helicopter very little the worse of their adventure!

A few years ago, shortly after midnight on February 13th, with the temperature twenty degrees below zero, two other paramedics jumped from their Air Rescue SG-47 near Goose Air Base in Labrador. Below them was the burning wreckage of a giant B-36 six-engined heavy bomber which had crashed shortly before, and flames from it lit dark night sky and threw long, moving shadow over the snow in which it lay. Round the wreckage the heat had melted it, but the two paramedics landed in such deep drifts about three hundred yards away that it took them three hours to struggle through to the scene of the crash.

But it was certainly worth it, for there were fourteen survivors and the two men set to work at once to treat the injured. They worked on through the rest of the night until, at dawn, helicopters came to ferry them all back to Goose Base.

Pararescue was again at work under arctic conditions when a crippled jet fighter crashed into the freezing waters of Cook Inlet in Alaska. It was a solo effort this time.

The jet pilot was in a sorry plight, and quite unable to help himself, but A/1C Howard C. Griffus (PJ1954-62) of the U.S. Air Rescue Service was at hand to jump, while a helicopter hovered overhead. It would have been more comfortable for Griffus to carry out a double lift, so that both he and the pilot could be hoisted up on the which together, but this would have been a comparatively slow process and it was clear that, if the pilot's life was to be saved, seconds counted. And so, without a thought for himself, Griffus manipulated the now unconscious man into the helicopter sling and gave the signal to hoist away.

A second helicopter was by now circling the spot, but it had no hoist or other means of lifting the pararescue man from the numbingly cold water. All it could do was to keep him in sight until an Albatross arrived and landed and picked him up.

No one of these three short accounts can give any real picture of what the men involved faced, but they do at least show Pararescue well and truly in its element. Such men form what has been called an elite corps within the framework of the U.S. Air Rescue Service, but they do not come by their distinction easily. They must be precision parachutest, highly trained in first-aid, and experts on survival under any conditions, for as often as not their job only begins when they reach the ground.

A man who wishes to become a paramedic must, in the first instance, go through a very stiff series of tests, both physical and mental, the latter to test his intelligence, coolheadedness and ability for quick thinking in an emergency and his general suitability as a person for the job. Not every applicant, however keen, has the right temperament (though keenness counts for a lot), and the examiners must be sure that he comes up to their very exacting standards in every way.

Once this first stiff hurdle is over and the man has been accepted, he is sent to the Army Airborne school in Georgia. Here, instruction in the technique of parachute jumping is given. Five "live" jumps make a man a qualified parachutist, though his real experience will be gained only later when he is on the job, and he may have to plan and carry out landing under the most difficult conditions imaginable. But now at least he knows the rules.

After the parachute school the trainee goes next to the School of Aviation Medicine to go through the Air Rescue Specialist school on a four week's course. During this he must learn not only how to treat injuries and certain illnesses, but he must in addition be able to find out just what those injuries are, so that he can treat all but the most serious and complex in the correct way. Those that are beyond him he must learn to describe accurately over the radio so that a doctor at the other end can give instructions as to what has to be done. And these instructions a paramedic must then be able to carry out.

Since he has to use a radio he must understand its working, and lastly he must know all the normal drill of the Air Rescue man: the helicopter lift and double lift and so on.

Most of the present pararescue men have also been through a course at the Survival School, which included coastal survival (survival in the water), desert survival in the Mojave Desert in California, and they were taught how to survive and travel under mountain and arctic conditions in the Rocky Mountains. This school has now been closed, but the value of its training is well shown in the case of a paramedic who jumped high on a mountain side to go to the aid of a man who had broken his leg. With all his practiced skill he treated the man's injury and got him down the mountain to where a ground rescue party could take him over and rush him to hospital. And the paramedic had broken his own leg!

A paramedic may have to jump so that he has to land among trees, in water, in a narrow, rocky valley, on a mountainside as in the case above, or in a swamp. Into everything, as they say, but the kitchen sink.

He may, in fact, have to go down in an area where fog or mist allows him only the briefest glimpse of what lies below. In most cases the mere fact that a jump rather than a helicopter landing is being made means that there are more than the usual difficulties

ahead, and accuracy is of the most vital importance if the jumpers is to escape injury to himself. A pilot parachute can be direction of the wind, and of course, a standard parachute can be steered within certain limits by an expert jumper if he pulls on the lines that support him to spill some of the air out of the required side of the chute. Experiments in this art are going on all the time, and a new type of highly steerable parachute, specially developed for pararescue work, is being introduced.

But of course, even with this, much practice is needed. Competition between the pararescue teams of the American Air Rescue Service squadrons is keen. Yearly contests are held in which the men compete against each other in water, tree and open field drops. They have to try to land from a given height on extremely small target areas strips of canvas on the ground, or a dinghy in the water, and the standard of accuracy is, as might be expected, extremely high.

Nevertheless, the real competition comes when the pararescue men are up against the forces of nature when they are on the job. Then everything may be against them, but again and again they win through. Take for instance, a case which occurred one midwinter in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho.

High up in their cabin on a mountain pass, Mrs Gene Jackson and her baby were both critically ill. The situation was desperate one for, by the time word of their plight was got through to the Air Rescue Service Squadron which was at McChord Air Force Base, Tacoma, a blizzard was blowing. Icy winds swept the mountains, bringing with them snow that piled great drifts in every hollow of the rocky slopes. The Jacksons' cabin seemed completely cut off from the outside world, for the storms too wild and the snow falling too thickly for it to be possible for a plane to take off.

But the Air Rescue Service was not to be beaten and mobilized a ground rescue team to attempt the seemingly impossible task of reaching the lonely cabin. They set out and battled on upwards, floundering shoulder high in the deep drifts. But, well trained as they were, they found that the equipment they had to carry a portable radio, food, medical supplies hampered their progress. Even without it their pace would have been painfully slow.

The storm grew worse and the drifts more formidable and at length the men were forced to admit that they were fighting a losing battle; the sheer depth of the snow was too great. If it had been physically possible to go on, they would have gone but reluctantly their leader radioed back to base that they would have to give up the attempt.

Then suddenly the sky began to clear a little and the snowfall eased, but enough had fallen for this to make little difference to the men on the mountainside. But back at McChord Base, where their news had been received with dismay, things began to hum. There was a chance now, if only a slim one, that a plane could get through. In such weather, for it was still blowing pretty hard, a helicopter was out of the question, and in any case it was extremely unlikely that one would be able to land. Pararescue was the obvious answer.

Quickly a doctor, paramedic Staff Sergeant John E. Robins and their pilot assembled and soon their plane was rising into the murk above the air field and heading for the mountains. The winds and the tricky air currents above the steep slopes threw the machine about without mercy, bucking it like a wild horse, but the crew steadied themselves in their seats and buckled on their harness.

The pilot, fighting with the controls, could yet spare one eye for the ground below. Sometimes clouds and the storm blotted it out altogether, but there were breaks every now and then when he could see the ground. Soon the searching eyes of Robins and the doctor were added to his and they reached the area of the pass where they knew the cabin to be.

Suddenly the pilot tensed and gestures downwards. There, half-buried in the gigantic drifts, was the lonely cabin. There was no sign of life about it but there could be no doubt that they had reached the end of their journey.

Carefully the pilot circled, studying the wind direction, and then made his run in. Armed with their medical and other supplies and their portable radio, Robins and doctor jumped and landed safely. Then they fought their way through the snow to the cabin to find that they were only just in time. With luck they could save the lives of Mrs. Jackson and her child, but it would be a near thing.

They set to work at once and at length the crisis was past. The patients were made as comfortable as was possible, but better medical facilities were obviously needed. The easing of the storm had continued and then two men now reckoned that a helicopter might be able to reach them if it had somewhere to land.

They radioed their request back to their base and then, taking it in turns, while one kept an eye on Mrs. Jackson and the baby to beat down and flatten a small area of the surrounding snow. It was heavy work and they relieved each other at frequent intervals, but at least it kept them warm!

At length they judged that they had prepared a firm enough surface, and they marked its boundaries with some old boards. These, they knew, would stand out clearly from the air against the surrounding whiteness.

Then the whirling rotor of the helicopter was above them, descending slowly and carefully on to the chosen spot. Within minutes it was off again and Mrs. Jackson and her baby were on their way to hospital.

Another mountain jump, in better weather condition but even more hazardous, was carried out by Staff Sergeant Charles Chapman (PJ 1952-74) and Sergeant Walter Atkins (PJ 1952-66) of the U.S. Air Rescue Service stationed on Ladd Field At Fairbanks in Alaska. The men they set out to rescue were Bud Branahan and his three passengers who set out on a hunting trip in Branahan's Grumman Widgeon.

The Widgeon, a smaller, civil version of the Air Rescue Service Albatross, was flying through a canyon in the Brooks Mountains, toward Loon Lake, where the pilot planned a landing. But before it could get there down-draughts caught the heavily loaded plane and it crashed on a narrow, sharp-edged ridge that ran between two mountain peaks. On one side of the ground sloped away pretty steeply, but on the other, to the north, after a short distance there was a sheer cliff going down some 2,000 feet. A spot in fact, to turn a pilot's hair white!

To make matters worse, three of the men in the plane were badly injured, two with broken backs, and the pilot with his jaw broken in four places. The fourth man, whose name was Guse, came off comparatively lightly with only a torn knee ligament, but he was badly shocked.

Somehow Branahan and Guse got their two companions out of the wrecked Widgeon and made them as comfortable as possible. Luckily the plane had not caught fire so Branahan then went back to it and out a call for help over the radio.

Back at Ladd Base A.R.S. went into action as soon as the message was received, and the Albatross with Chapman and Atkins aboard set off at once. In the fine, sunny weather there was little difficulty in finding the wreck, but to get down to it was another matter altogether. The site was well over 5,000 feet above sea level and the rarefied air up there would mean that parachutes would fall a good deal faster than they would at ground level. The narrow ridge, with 2,000-foot drop on one side, was not the easiest place to aim for quite apart from the fact that its surface was a mass of huge boulders and sharp, jagged rocks.

When the men on the ground realized that a jump was contemplated, they ignored their own plight and begged the two parachutists again and again over the radio not to attempt it.

However, Chapman and Atkins decided otherwise. A spotter chute was sent down first and showed that there was practically no wind. The two men picked their spot carefully and followed the chute on the next run. Almost before they knew it they were on the ground.

They landed on the side of the ridge nearest to the precipice and about a quarter of a mile from the wrecked Widgeon. This had been the only place that they could see that gave them any chance of coming down uninjured, but even so Atkins bruised his legs badly on some boulders.

All the medical skill that the two paramedics possessed was needed to tend the seriously injured crew of the Widgeon, and it was obvious that three of them, and specially the two with broken backs, needed skilled hospital attention and needed it quickly. A helicopter was the only answer.

It was asking the near impossible to expect one to come down in such a spot, but with the Air Rescue Service on the job this was achieved. Shortly before sunset Captain Gardner flew out from Ladd Field and set his machine down on the narrow ridges. Dr. Charles Blackner was with him and the first of the injured was taken aboard the helicopter.

At such a height and in that rarefied air, it was only possible for the helicopter to take one person at a time. But, unbelievable as it sounds, Captain Gardner made three trips altogether between the mountains and Loon Lake, on the last two of which he had to land on that terrifying spot on total darkness. On the third trip much of the helicopter's fuel had been used up and so, with its load lightened, the door was able this time to go with his patient so that he could take charge of things once more at the other end.

Gardner offered to come back yet again for Guse, the only remaining member of the Widgeon's crew, but Guse, not seriously injured, would not let him. Instead he spent the night on the mountain with Chapman and Atkins while his three companions were being ferried from Loon Lake to hospital.

But at dawn Gardner was back for him, and as Guse looked down when the helicopter rose once more in the still mountain air, he saw the two sergeants calmly preparing their breakfast as they waited till their own turn came.