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Flying rescue

They were known as the "heroes of the air" in their pioneering days, and the fascination with air rescuers remains great to this day. Ever since it was founded, Rega has been striving to provide help to those in need more quickly and more professionally. A profile of the organisation on its 60th anniversary.
By Miriam Hutter

A hiking or climbing accident in the mountains results in broken limbs and concussion. Urgent assistance is needed. One of the party pulls out his smartphone and makes an emergency call to Rega. The app sends the caller's coordinates to the operations centre while he gives details of the incident over the phone. The rescue helicopter can now fly to the exact location of the accident, and the emergency doctor knows precisely what to expect. This is the ideal scenario for modern air rescue in Switzerland.

The start of professional air rescue was a successful operation to save the crew and passengers of an aircraft that crashed on the Gauli Glacier in 1946. Two Swiss Air Force pilots could not only deliver provisions and emergency aid, they were also able to land on the glacier and bring the victims to safety in the valley. From then on, experiments were carried out with various methods to enable aircrafts to land safely on glaciers and snowfields.

Swiss Air Rescue (SRFW), Rega's predecessor organisation, was founded at the beginning of the 1950s. Its rescue parachutists, trained in the UK by the Royal Air Force, and its rescue aeroplanes and helicopters were deployed not just in Switzerland but abroad as well in accidents, avalanches, floods and even following the collision of two aeroplanes over the Rocky Mountains. The SRFW became an independent association in 1960, before going on to become the "Rega" foundation in 1979. The name "Rega" is derived from a combination of the organisation's names in the Swiss national languages: Rettungsflugwacht – Garde aérienne / Guardia Aerea.

The use of helicopters became increasingly important in the 1960s and they ultimately replaced aeroplanes completely in mountain rescue. Helicopters require less space to land and can hover over one place. This means that mountaineers who have had an accident can be rescued from steep and even overhanging rock faces using rescue winches. Rega is constantly developing new rescue techniques and resources. The principle of taking medical care to the patient rather than "simply" transporting him to the nearest hospital was established in the 1960s and 1970s. An emergency doctor and a nurse always fly with the team.

Bringing Swiss people home

Bringing Swiss people home in emergency medical situations has long been one of Rega's tasks. It carried out its first repatriation flight in 1960, when a patient was brought home from France in an aeroplane. Rega undertook its first major mission abroad in 1977, when it flew the Swiss victims of a coach accident in Aswan home using a hired Super-Caravelle. In 1996, a mission took Rega around the world for the first time: two pilots, two co-pilots, a doctor and a nurse repatriated three patients within 43 hours, landing in eight different locations. In more recent times, the major operation following the tsunami in Southeast Asia was among the most spectacular: in December 2004, Rega repatriated over 60 patients from Thailand and Sri Lanka within a week, using its three air ambulance jets as well as charter and scheduled flights.

Public solidarity

As a section of the Swiss Rescue Association and a non-profit organisation, the SRFW began collecting donations from the public back in 1955. It raised its profile with a demonstration of an operation over Zurich's lake basin. Two years later, the Federation of Swiss Consumer Associations (VSK) donated a helicopter. The patronage model that exists today dates back to the 1960s: after federal government decided against funding the SRFW, which had by then become an independent association, its president turned to the public. He offered patrons free air rescue for a contribution of 20 Swiss francs a year. The Rega Foundation has almost 2.4 million patrons today. Thanks to donations, it is on standby to carry out rescue operations around the clock. Rega undertook over 14,000 missions in 2011.

Commercialisation of air rescue

Since 2011, Rega has no longer been the only air ambulance service in Switzerland. The Touring Club Schweiz (TCS) now also provides medical repatriation and transfer flights from one hospital to another, which are known as secondary missions. However, this service is only available to TCS members who have taken out a specific insurance policy. TCS has therefore been accused of "cherry-picking" by Rega, which provides assistance to absolutely anyone in an emergency situation. Primary air rescue missions are the main cause of high stand-by costs and Rega is being left to bear these, wrote Albert Keller, former president of the foundation's board of trustees, in its annual report. Consumer and patient protection groups are nevertheless pleased with the introduction of TCS' service. They hope this new competition will bring prices down.

Rega itself faced accusations over its commercial activities in May of this year. The Swiss media made public Rega's deployment of its air ambulances for contract flights with no Swiss involvement.

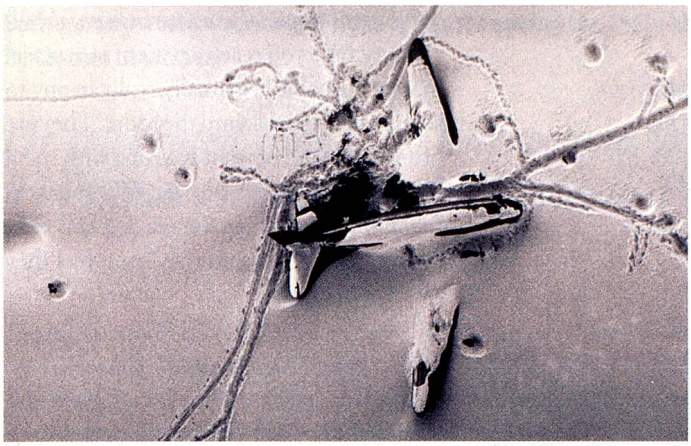
1952
Swiss Air Rescue is founded as a section of the Swiss Rescue Association (SLRG). Helicopters and parachutists are declared ready for action in the same year.

1960
Helicopters play an increasingly important role in air rescue. Swiss Air Rescue (SRFW) breaks away from the SLRG, its parent organisation, to become an independent association. The first repatriation flight (from France) is carried out.

1966
The running costs of helicopter rescue gradually exceed Swiss Air Rescue's resources. After the Federal Council refuses to provide public funding, the association turns to the public. The principle of patronage is established with donations in return for the promise of free services.

1971
Swiss Air Rescue takes delivery of its first helicopter financed entirely by patrons' contributions, an Alouette III.

Photos: Rega



The US Dakota C-53 aeroplane that crashed on the Gauli Glacier in 1946

In the cockpit of a helicopter on a night flight

Transportation of a newborn in an incubator from one hospital to another

Deployment in traffic accidents: Rega is often called upon by the police

The air ambulance jets are sometimes used to transport foreign soldiers to their homeland from war zones. Rega actually carries out such operations on behalf of international insurance companies if they are medically necessary. As far as Rega is concerned, their passengers are simply patients, whether they are in uniform or not. It also points out that the clients are invoiced the full cost in such cases, including accommodation expenses and aircraft depreciation. Patron contributions have never been used for contract flights. The Swiss Foundation Supervisory Board exonerated Rega and acquitted it of charges of "misuse of the Swiss cross" and violation of the purpose of its foundation.

Patrons keep Rega in the air

In 2007, Rega was declared "Switzerland's most popular brand" in a study by the market research institute IHA-GfK in Hergiswil. Rega's immense popularity with the public is demonstrated by the contributions from its patrons. The 2.4 million patrons – individuals and families – provide around 60 % of the foundation's funding, while Rega generates the rest of its budget through rescue operations paid for by clients. Even today, it does not receive any funding from federal government.

MIRIAM HUTTER is a volunteer at "Swiss Review"

PATRONS ABROAD

Swiss citizens residing abroad can support Rega by becoming patrons. They benefit from the following aid services:

- Rescue flights within Switzerland
- Telephone consultation on medical problems abroad
- Repatriation flights to Switzerland for medical reasons

In return for their financial support, Rega waives the costs of such missions for patrons if they are not covered by third parties (insurers).

Further details: www.rega.ch – menu "Support Rega"

1973
The SRFW purchases the first civilian air ambulance jet for repatriation flights. A rescue helicopter is stationed on the roof of Zurich's Children's Hospital. This is known as the "baby helicopter" because it's used to transport premature newborns.

1979
The Swiss Air Rescue Association becomes a charitable foundation. The current radio call name "Rega" becomes the organisation's official title.

1981
Rega, the Swiss Disaster Relief Unit, the Swiss Army Rescue Troops and the Swiss Disaster Dog Association form the Swiss "Rescue Chain" set up to provide immediate assistance in earthquake disasters. Their first deployment comes in 1982 in North Yemen.

1990
During a rescue mission in the Vaud Alps, a strong gust of wind blows a helicopter into the side of the mountain as it is landing. The machine is destroyed but, fortunately, nobody is hurt.