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Samaritans of the skies

It is night in Casablanca. A four-year-old boy lies racked with pain in a hospital in the Moroccan metropolis. An ambulance jet of the Swiss Air Rescue Service takes off from the runway of Zurich airport – destination Casablanca.

What's happened? In the afternoon before this eventful night the little boy was hit by a moped while out shopping with his mother. Result: a complicated fracture of the thigh. The boy's father, an expatriate Swiss and for years a member of the staff of a Swiss company working in Casablanca, searched for hours on end for a suitable hospital. Four times he was sent from hospital to hospital. In the fifth, the doctors said that they had not got the equipment to help the badly-injured boy.

At the scene in 15 minutes

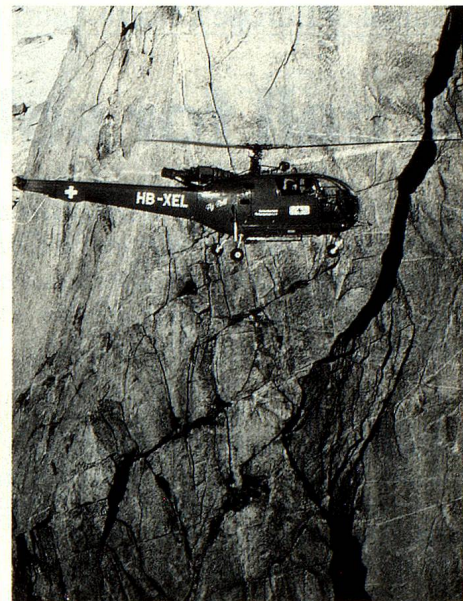
Its permanent readiness for action and highly professional organisation make the Rega (short for Rettungsflugwacht and Garde Aérienne) a lifesaver. Fifteen rescue helicopters, three ambulance aircraft, sixteen permanent doctors, ten anaesthetist or intensive-unit nurses, ten flight helpers with medical training for emergencies, forty pilots, twenty technical service staff and twenty task force leaders guarantee round-the-clock operation 365 days a year.



Last year, Rega ambulance jets were called out on nearly 800 missions abroad. Our picture shows the interior of a new aircraft put into service in March 1988. This is a British Aerospace BAe 125-800 B-type ambulance plane with two intensive-care stations and, in all, three berths.

And, then, the fortunate flash of inspiration of an acquaintance: the Swiss Air Rescue Service in Zurich. From the emergency centre, manned round the clock, came the words that straightaway eased the anxiety of the despairing parents: «Rettungsflugwacht, Grüezi». The necessary personal data and particulars were taken down quickly and unbureaucratically. The Rega doctor, already alerted by the leader of the task force, confirmed by telephone with the hospital doctor in Casablanca that the hospital in Morocco indeed did not have the necessary facilities to be able to undertake specialist treatment of the fracture. A quick decision was made; the boy must be fetched. The smoothly-running organisation runs smoothly and after 2,590 miles flown, the ambulance jet with the injured boy already lands back in Zurich in the early morning.

The Rega abides by the principles of the Red Cross in helping everyone, at any time, everywhere and whenever possible. And much is possible. From fifteen sortie bases and within a quarter of an hour, these «Samaritans of the Skies» can reach the scene of every accident in Switzerland. Such primary missions, i.e. for mountaineering, skiing, avalanche and traffic accidents, as well as acute illnesses, form the largest field of the Rega's activity. Then there are the so-called secondary missions such as transfer flights (between hospitals in Switzerland) and repatriation flights (from abroad). All such missions are undertaken in accordance with all medical criteria; in the case of sorties abroad, for example, socio-medical considerations can well play a part – long periods in hospital abroad, language problems, and family reunions.



Accidents happen everywhere: A Rega helicopter in action over impassable terrain. (Photos: Rega)

Every fifth Swiss a donor

The Swiss Air Rescue Service and Air Guard has some 1.1 million donors who bear about a third of its cost, the rest being borne by insurances or non-donors according to the actual costs of the missions. In cases of financial hardship, the Rega can waive part or all of the bill. As a thank-you gesture for their support, Rega donors are not asked to pay up – sponsorship that could well pay off one day. A flight by ambulance jet, with doctor and nurse, to Casablanca and back, as in the example we have quoted, costs nearly SFr. 20,000.–.

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Rega donors abroad

Whoever, in the case of a stay abroad of longer than three months wants to call on the repatriation service of the Swiss Air Rescue Service free of charge, can cover the costs of such air transport by a supplementary insurance. The total contribution for donorship and insurance amounts to SFr. 100.– a year for individual persons and SFr. 250.– for families. This covers medically necessary repatriation flights to Switzerland, organised by the Rega, to the following extent:

- (a) With ambulance aircraft from all countries of Europe, the northern part of Africa (excluding the Equatorial countries), the countries of the Arabian peninsula, and the Near East, up to and including Iran.
- (b) With scheduled flights from all countries in the world.

The above contributions of course also cover primary missions by rescue helicopters in Switzerland.