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Lifesaving dream still a reality – more than 30 years later

ON April 27 1952, a group of idealists from the delegates' assembly of the Swiss Life Saving Association founded the Swiss Air Rescue Association.

Their dream of using an aeroplane as the fastest means of supplying help to those in distress soon became a necessity.

The association of amateur pilots and rescue workers has since become a foundation manned by professional air rescue specialists. In 1982, the service was called out on as many missions as in the entire first 20 years of its existence.

REGA, originally called Schweizerische Rettungsflugwacht, changed its name after 30 years to REGA (REscue GuArd) which is now used in all countries.

Its initial idea differed from that of today. Then it was to drop trained rescue parachutists and their life-saving equipment on the accident site, thereby eliminating

the laborious and time-consuming climb that would normally be involved.

The Royal Air Force trained the first parachutists at Abingdon in 1952, and the first life-saving "drops" were performed in the winter of 1952/3.

The first helicopters which were

able to perform at high altitudes only came on the market in the mid-fifties. In 1957, the Federation of Swiss Consumers presented REGA with their first helicopter which was then stationed in the Valais and used by Hermann Geiger for rescue missions.

The helicopter also benefited from the technical developments made in the field of aviation. In a short time, the simple piston engine in turbo-charged aeroplanes were replaced by jet-propelled helicopters.

This proved itself to be the most suitable vehicle for high altitude life-saving missions.

During the summer of 1959, Fritz Buehler was elected chairman. He was responsible for the successful re-organisation of REGA.

From merely being a life-saving institution, it became a fully-fledged flying ambulance service.

As a "first" in the field of alpinism and aviation, qualified medical assistance was flown direct to the accident site.

Further developments in rescue equipment such as horizontal or vertical nets were invented, receiving international acclaim.

After 1960, REGA realised there was a need to provide a repatriation service for people taken ill or injured while abroad.

This new service was an immediate success and was soon in such demand that REGA decided in 1972 to order the world's first

ambulance-equipped jet – a Lear 24D. A second larger Lear jet was brought into service in 1976.

The number of annual missions escalated to such an extent that they now exceed 5,000 a year. It was no longer possible to cope with this volume using only voluntary active members, so REGA became a professional rescue organisation. This was the reason why the "Air Rescue Foundation" was initiated in May 1979.

On August 23 1980, the "Father" of REGA died at the age of 72. Fritz Buehler was the founder, promoter and chairman, a man whose name is synonymous with the history of international air rescue. He had been awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Medical Faculty of Basle University in 1971.

His place as chairman was taken by Peter Baer in December 1980, and six months later, the delegates of the Swiss Red Cross admitted REGA as an official member of the organisation.

REGA's objectives are to help those in need in accord with the principles of the Red Cross. It will apply all the means at its disposal wherever life or health of fellow human beings can be preserved and protected. It offers its services to all, even the financially underprivileged.

REGA is committed to providing emergency medical services at the accident site, as well as qualified medical attention during transport and, finally, assuring



An injured person is flown on a stretcher, accompanied by a REGA operative equipped with radio

delivery to the hospital best equipped to treat the patient's most serious injury.

For those in need of immediate help, REGA maintains a permanently manned operational centre in Zurich. It is equipped with telephones and telexes, as well as a short-wave radio system for air and ground communication. Whoever answers the phone, the famous 01-47 47 47 will be qualified to give you competent advice.

REGA's radio network covers the entire country and ensures instant contact with all personnel at any time.

The REGA emergency alarm centre constantly reviews the availability of all personnel, bases, aircraft, ground vehicles and equipment.

It guarantees sending the right people with the proper equipment to the correct place in a minimum of time.

As soon as a call for help is received, the REGA alarm centre reviews all available information and then decides on the fundamental feasibility of the mission.

The decision is based on qualified advice from medical specialists in the field as well as the topography, weather conditions, local time factors and the availability of means and personnel to be used.

Once the decision has been made, the operations controller issues the necessary instructions

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When winter comes, REGA evacuates men and animals from isolated settlements – even those too big for inside the helicopter can be saved!

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and co-ordinates all parties involved, informing the appropriate hospitals as well as any auxiliary organisations.

The REGA personnel are humanely motivated people with the highly medical, technical and aeronautical skills required. Special training programmes are organised for REGA's personnel and regular refresher courses.

The fixed-wing aircraft fleet uses the air base at Kloten. Helicopter missions are flown from different bases around Switzerland.

The REGA bases are so placed that they provide a comprehensive national coverage and the shortest flying time (15 minutes) to any point in the country.

Where REGA is not able to use its own resources or bases, it is

capable of establishing its own emergency staging points within a relatively short time.

REGA operates ambulance aircraft as well as a helicopter fleet suitable for transport of patients and equipped for this specific purpose.

If unable to provide suitable equipment for a mission, it will charter commercial aircraft.

Scheduled airlines are also used by REGA where necessary. It will lease its helicopters to commercial helicopter firms for the transport of patients.

Ambulances are stationed in Zurich for the transport of patients to and from Kloten Airport within city limits, as well as for medical transport and that of invalids throughout Switzerland.

In cases where its own ambulances are not available, REGA will employ suitable transportation from other ambulance organisa-

tions.

It has specialised in the extensive care and rapid airborne transport of injured and sick people according to the principles of advanced transport medicine.

The experience of more than 32,000 missions has been exploited to continuously update and refine this indispensable service.

Progress in this field makes it possible to repatriate even the most seriously injured or sick patients in ambulance jets from any part of the world.

REGA's own two ambulance jets are for patient transport only. They are equipped for the intensive care of seriously injured or sick people – "flying intensive care units" they are called, designed to meet requirements posed by patients with heart and circulation problems, skull and brain injuries, spinal damage, serious burns as

well as the transport of new-born babies who are at high risk.

REGA employs more than a dozen Lear Jet pilots on a permanent basis. This ensures that the ambulance jets are ready for immediate action at any time, day or night.

If required, other aircraft can be used for missions, from small propeller craft with pressurised cabins to large jets and airline carriers.

Such planes are chartered whenever needed and refitted by REGA with all the equipment required for the particular mission.

Doctors and nurses schooled and experienced in emergency medicine are included in the crews of REGA ambulance jets. REGA can also call on specialists from Swiss university clinics to supplement their ambulance crews.

Mariann Meier

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