A humanitarian foundation, working for the common good

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Mariann Meier concludes her report on the work of the Swiss Air Rescue Association, started in last month's *Swiss Observer*.

IN the last issue we learned of the history of REGA, the Swiss Air Rescue Service, which has over 30 years of experience in life saving and air transport of the sick and injured.

The REGA emergency telephone number was called some 57,000 times in 1982, an average of about 150 times a day. The ratio is one mission to 10 phone calls.

As a rule, each accident results in one to two phone calls which lead to a rescue mission. Further calls usually concern organisations which offer help, authorities who enquire about how things are going and, of course relatives who ask about accident victims' conditions.

Nevertheless, many phone calls to the special number do not lead to a mission. The centre does not consider itself as an organiser of rapid air rescue operations only, but also as an adviser for people in need.

Above all, Swiss tourists abroad readily turn to REGA for advice when confronted with seemingly insoluble problems.

In 1981, REGA was called in for 415 mountain accidents. The next year there was an increase of 25 per cent in mountain missions. Five hundred people were saved in the mountains, and 86 died in mountain accidents.

Ski accidents have increased by 30 per cent. Many hundreds of ski victims are flown to hospital for final treatment of the most serious effects.

REGA helicopters take emergency doctors and avalanche dog teams to the site of avalanches. Out of 70 search flights in 1982, including 15 at night, 33 people were rescued alive while in six cases only the bodies of victims could be recovered.

Then there are cases of severe illness in remote areas, which may account for several hundred a year. Again hundreds of people are successfully delivered for medical specialist treatment. But sadly, too, with some people suffering severe illnesses, the Air Rescue Service comes too late.

In cases of serious traffic accidents the REGA rescue helicopter with an emergency doctor has increasingly been called to the scene of the accident during the last few years.

In 1982 182 accident victims were flown to the emergency section of special clinics; six died on the accident site.

The Swiss Air Rescue Service brings patients home from practically every country in the world. In 1982 each of two REGA jets flew a total of 950 hours and together covered about 1.5 million kilometers.

Altogether 544 patients were flown in 514 flights with REGA jets to hospitals in their own country, 58 were transported by specially chartered aircraft, and 160 were flown on regular airline flights with supervision provided by a REGA team.

Other missions undertaken are to aid mountain agriculture, for transporting sick or injured farm animals, even hay and other animal feed. In 1982 REGA transported 56 human organs, made 29 shipments of blood, serum of medicine and in 24 flights took 35 specialists to emergency sites.

In order to successfully complete the thousands of missions every year the 150 REGA staff are on duty on and behind the scenes. And a like number of volunteers and members of the REGA Association also stand by. In addition REGA collaborators work very hard so that the Swiss Air Rescue Service can be ready for action around the clock.

As a humanitarian foundation working for the common good the Swiss Air Rescue Service does not ask for any guarantee of compensation for undertaking a mission.

After a mission REGA asks those who have been rescued or transported to fill in a questionnaire. On the basis of information provided by patients it is decided to whom, if anyone, to send the bill.

REGA has made agreements with insurance companies and they cooperate when patients are insured and claims on the insurance are justified. If no means are available and no insurance pays, REGA drops the charges either partially of wholly.

It is the donors who make up any losses by their annual subscriptions – the average cost per mission is about Fr 4,300. REGA appreciates the donors' assistance, and in return does not charge donors if they need help from REGA.

REGA cooperates with many other organisations, such as the Red Cross, the Swiss Alpine Club, the International Committee for Mountain Rescue, the Swiss Association for Rescue Dogs, the Speleology Association, various health organisations, Military Helicopter Rescue Service, the German Red Cross and the German air rescue service SOS, and of course with automobile associations, including those in Britain.

The achievements of REGA are legion. Going back to the beginning of the century we realise the immense technical progress in this particular field of aviation.

On October 14, 1905, the Dufaux brothers from Geneva lifted more than 5 kilos into the air with the world's first helicopter.

Six and a half years later the pioneer pilot René Grandjean from Avenches used his self-designed and ski equipped

A REGA helicopter lifting an accident victim in a horizontal net

monoplane to make over 100 passenger flights from Lake Davos. On August 18, 1919, Robert Ackermann and Arnold Isler landed their DH-3 just below the peak of the Jungfraujoch.

Two years after that the French-Swiss pioneer pilot François Durafour made a wheeled landing with his Gaudron biplane on the perpetual snows of the Dôme du Coûtier in the Montblanc Massif. Then followed regular flights with ski-equipped aircraft.

During the war the Swiss Air Force supplied isolated mountain villages with food. Paracrates were dropped from a Junkers Ju 52. Air Force Colonels Bloetzer and Bridel organised a regular supply service to the Axalp with a Fieseler Storch plane.

On November 24, 1946, in a spectacular rescue operation, the military pilots Viktor Hug and Pista Hitz saved the crew of an American Dakota that had crashed on the Gauli glacier, also using a Fieseler Storch.

In 1951/2, the St. Moritz hotel owner Fredy Wissel, and later Hermann Geiger from the Valais began the systematic development of glacier landing techniques using ski equipped aircraft.

In October 1952 Hermann Geiger made the first landing on the Bluemlisalp with the new glacier aircraft Piper Super Cub equipped with retractable metal skis.

On December 22 the same year the first REGA helicopter rescue operation was accomplished by Sepp Bauer with a 360 Hiller in Davos.

From then onwards REGA was called to flooding in the Netherlands, to avalanche disasters in Austria, to recover the dead after two passenger aircraft had collided over the Grand Canyon region, to rescue mountaineers from the Eiger North Wall and victims of a disaster in the Vierzy tunnel in France, to fight forest and heath fires in Germany, to help in earthquakes in France, Yugoslavia, El Asuam and Italy.

A number of the pilots concerned in such daring missions were given many international awards, specially in the USA.

REGA began transporting human organs in 1970 and started organising symposia and continued repatriating patients from many parts of the world, including Russia.

The first rescue helicopter financed exclusively by donors (1971), an Alouette III, was pensioned off nine years later after 200 flying hours and 90 missions. It is now at the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne.

In May 1972 a REGA helicopter, popularly called "Babycopter", was permanently stationed on the roof of the Zurich Children's Hospital.

And so the work went on, and today the Swiss Air Rescue Service is one of the best organised in the world.

Its activities are expanding, but can only really be carried out successfully with the help of donors. The contribution is only Fr 20 a year or Fr 50 for a family.

There is a slightly higher contribution if you live abroad and want to be covered completely. You will be issued with a donor's card and sent a newssheet regularly.

It is a marvellous organisation, and it should be a matter of pride for any Swiss – also those living abroad – to support this great humane institution. Address: REGA Secretariat, Dufourstr. 43, 8008 Zurich.