

1352 AAF BASE UNIT



MISSION

LINEAGE

1352 AAF Base Unit (Search & Rescue)

The 1352d AAF Base Unit (Search & Rescue) was organized 1 Dec 44 at Tezgaon Airfield (Dacca, Bengal, India -- now Dakka, Bangladesh), under the India-China Division of Air Transport Command. Moved to Mohanbari Airfield (Guwhati, Assam, India) some time in 1945 and was discontinued on 22 Dec 45.

STATIONS

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Mohanbari

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Announcement that the India-China Division's Search and Rescue Squadron has achieved the status of a full-fledged organized AAF Base Unit climaxes a story of triumph over a vicious terrain and murderous climate. Today this base unit, only one in ATC devoted exclusively to search and rescue of downed airmen, is a highly-organized, completely-equipped, fully-staffed organization whose performance record is so outstanding that air crews bailing out over The Hump have a better than three-to-one chance of returning to their base alive.

But it was not always thus. A few months after its activation late in 1942, the India-China Division of the Air Transport Command was faced with the problem of rescuing pilots, crew members and passengers forced to parachute into the rugged mountain country its routes traverse.

Early in 1943, the first efforts to rescue parachuted airmen were made. Of necessity - owing to the scarcity of aircraft for search duties and the operational difficulties existing at that time-search missions followed no organized pattern and were chiefly impromptu jobs. When an airplane crashed, or became disabled in flight and was abandoned, or unreported and overdue, was classified a missing, the first available crew and aircraft which could be spared from the Hump operation began a search for it.

Such crews did the best they could with what facilities they had, but delayed reports, meager information, and unfavorable weather often resulted in discouraging results. From such a beginning, however, the present Search & Rescue organization rapidly grew.

The purpose of rescue activities in ICD is to bring aid to all survivors of United Nations aircraft which have crashed along air routes operated by the Command. Particular missions are: (1) to search for missing aircraft and personnel in the Hump area; (2) to supply and rescue all personnel surviving from aircraft forced down or abandoned in the Hump area; (3) to identify crashed aircraft and salvage or destroy equipment aboard, and to identify, collect personal belongings from, and arrange for burial of all bodies contained therein; (4) to augment gathering and dissemination of military intelligence pertaining to jungle survival and search and rescue work, and (5) to coordinate search-rescue activities with all allied units.

As ICD's Search & Rescue Squadron has grown into a highly specialized organization, its success has grown with it. In 1943, 62% of personnel missing from flights over the Hump were rescued, and during the first six months of 1944 77% were rescued. This was the result of improved technique in searching for, signaling and supplying bailed-out airmen, and the utilization of greater facilities-aircraft, communication, supply and liaison-for finding "lost" crews. The saving of life has been increased greatly

by the parachuting of medical officers and/or medical supplies, including plasma, and whole blood, to injured personnel located far from any other medical unit.

The operational difficulties of the Hump are well known. For a long time, and understandably, there was a fearsomeness in the word "Hump" itself. One of the chief factors was the almost complete lack of information in regard to the jungles, mountain gorges, and snow-capped ranges along the lines of flight. Another was the wild tribes inhabiting the region, thought of variously as fanatical headhunters, murderous bandits, or inhospitable misanthropes. Still a third was the presence of roving Jap patrols along parts of the route, obviously eager to intercept parachuted airmen, and a fourth was enemy fighter planes, which in the early days shot down an occasional unarmed, heavily - loaded transport.

All this added up to one question every pilot asked himself when he started out over the Hump: "What are my chances of getting back if I have to bail out?" The Search & Rescue Squadron has emphatically provided the answer. As information has improved and the Jap-interception menace has abated, the most insistent problem faced by the unit remains the ever-perilous, next-to-impenetrable jungle. There are many hundreds of square miles in which two parachutists who land more than 150 feet apart cannot hear each other's voices no matter how loudly they shout, and the records of jungle walkouts include dozens of instances of such men shouting to each other within this radius and endeavoring to join each other, then losing the sound of each other's voices entirely and proceeding to hack their way through the jungle alone for days or even weeks. Such is the heartbreakingly terrain constantly fought by Hump bailouts and their rescuers.

One of the most important factors in the formation of an organization to conduct systematic search and rescue work was the celebrated "mass jump" of August, 1943, in which Eric Severeid, of the Columbia Broadcasting System, State Department representatives, and other passengers participated. The survival of 20 of the 21 aboard the ill-fated plane amazingly climaxed a month of feverish anxiety. "Dozens of officers and men," Severeid reported on reaching Calcutta, "put into motion an improvised system for getting supplies and information to us and for organizing the rescue party which saved the lives of every one of us." (One man aboard had died when his chute fouled in the tail assembly.)

In October 1943 Capt. John L. Porter was named "Flying Safety and Rescue Officer." The techniques improvised in the Severeid incident were improved upon. Men well adapted for rescue work were brought from other ICD stations to Chabua. The first aircraft assigned to the squadron were two C-47's carrying for protection two .30 calibre guns each. One was fired by the co-pilot, who held the gun in his lap and shot from the pilot compartment window: the other was manned by others of the plane's crew, who fired from the cargo door.

In early November, a Squadron crew in a C-47 spotted a Zero which had apparently crash-landed in a clearing, its pilot sitting on a wing. Diving the lumbering transport at the clearing, the crew left the enemy fighter bullet-riddled and the pilot dead beside it. A tiny Japanese flag was painted on the nose of the C-47 to call attention to its "combat" record.

Today, the Search & Rescue group continues to operate C-47's for air-dropping of supplies to grounded airmen, and as ships from which medical officers or other personnel can best jump to injured persons on the ground. In addition, fast B-25's, well-armed to ward off possible interception, make long-distance patrols to spot downed aircraft.

Tiny L-5's and L-4's are used for low-level, short-range search. They come in for other uses, top, for many times members of crews which have bailed out have been able to construct short crude airstrips on which the small craft could land and bring them out one by one. In one case, a paralysis victim, Lt. Robert Wesselhoeft, was brought out of the mountainous region of the China-Tibetan border in an L-5 with an improvised "bamboo lung" sustaining his life. Later, he was flown to the United States on an ATC hospital ship, where he presently is recovering.

Search & Rescue activity always has been under the jurisdiction of the ICD intelligence division, with S&R headquarters in the Chabua area. Pioneered by Maj. Robert L. Wright, then Division Intelligence and Security officer, much of its growth has come through the constant and unceasing efforts of Major Roland L. Hedrick, Search & Rescue Intelligence officer, who almost since the first has centered his attention on the countless details involved.

Over the period of time since the informal beginning files of information on terrain, climate and peoples of the Hump have been accumulated by intelligence and other forces. Greatest single source of information has been observation by pilots making regular runs over the Hump.

Wreckage, smoke, evidence of attempts to signal, lights seen after nightfall - all are reported in "crew sightings" which are made by the individual pilot and turned in to his station intelligence officer, who forwards them to Division Intelligence for coordination. In cases where a pilot has sighted something of unmistakable urgency, he may be brought to Chabua and flown out in a Search & Rescue flight, acting as guide in locating the spot of the sighting. This information is augmented by reports from U.S. Aircraft Warning Stations, Chinese Net Stations, and combat supply and service units of allied forces scattered over the area.

Maj. William H. Spruell -then a captain- was in charge of medical aspects of the early activities. Following the lead of his chief, Col. Don Flickinger, Division Surgeon, who had parachuted to the aid of the Sevareid party, Spruell made several jumps to attend injured personnel in the jungle. Since that time many other officers and enlisted men have bailed out in Search & Rescue missions. In December, 1943, Porter, who had figured in many hair-raising episodes, was killed when attacked by a dozen Jap fighters in the Fort Hertz region. He has been succeeded by several officers under whose leadership the squadron has maintained its high degree of success.

Present commander is Maj. Donald C. Pricer, veteran Hump pilot, operations officer and executive. Under Pricer's command is an entire organization of selected, trained personnel, practically all of them volunteers with specialized backgrounds to aid them in the hazardous search and rescue, air and ground activities.

Search & Rescue's cardinal principle is to notify downed personnel as quickly as possible that help is on the way, for this knowledge is a dominant factor in their struggle with the jungle. Even when no further aid is needed, a plane will often appear at a place where survivors are known to be, to remind them that they are not forgotten on the long trek out.

No lost plane is ever given up, nor are records concerning a located crash ever closed until every man aboard has been accounted for. On a large board in the squadron intelligence office at the base unit the location of every Hump-downed plane is kept as up-to-the-minute as intelligence can keep it. Beside the board is a relief map of the Hump area dotted with 'flags' indicating pinpointed locations of crashed planes - one color for reported, and other colors for each aircraft type identified by air reconnaissance.

There are three major phases of Search & Rescue work: the locating of crashed plane and personnel, the direction of personnel to the nearest ground party, and finally the evacuation. Missions involve a search pattern in an "area of maximum probability," defined as the area in which the presence of the lost aircraft is believed most probable. This area is determined by the lost plane's estimated time of arrival, its last radio reports, and reports from inhabitants along its route.

Each night after intelligence officers have interrogated rescue pilots, co-pilots and photographers, and the accumulated data is digested, the various crews are assigned to certain aircraft and certain missions for next day. Intelligence officers then brief them on the various missions assigned, and aid in coordinating communication that may have to be made between air and ground. The Rescue Intelligence Officer also organizes, briefs and dispatches ground parties, and pays search and rescue expenses.

Results of missions are reported in a daily search and rescue record, an incident summary report, and finally (when the job is finished) in a complete narrative of the total operation, including a survivors' interrogation report. A weekly bulletin on crashes, locations, facilities, progress of searches, and other pertinent information is distributed to all agencies concerned.

Liaison with British and other residents in the Hump area is an important factor of rescue work. Through the District Political Commissioners, missionaries, and other British and American residents, much has been learned about the various native tribes. Some have proved fierce enough to warrant the early apprehensions, but by far the majority have been found friendly, cooperative and genuinely helpful. They have sometimes unnerved a downed airman by menacingly gesturing when his already abused stomach balked at such ceremonial delicacies as fisheyes, or the blood of a freshly decapitated calf, or the intestines of a mountain goat, but on the other hand they have saved many a grateful American who would almost surely have perished.

When a Hump plane goes down and the crew abandon it, high drama enters their lives along with extremes of hardship. They may spend 93 days away from their base, as one crew did (this is the longest recorded walkout) and they may encounter anything from cobras to tigers-leeches and lice being taken for granted. Or, as the famed "Shangri-La" crew did, they might be swept far off course and fall into the splendor and the lavish hospitality of the Tibetans' holy city of Lhasa, and, after being fed, entertained and lionized there, be solicitously guided from that remote fastness back to their own civilization in a 30-day horseback journey.

USAF Unit Histories

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Sources

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