

Scout Saves 123 From Drowning

Alan Lee

On 10th December 1969, following heavy rainfall from a monsoon storm, the town of Kluang (Bandar Kluang), Kluang District, Johor, Malaysia was heavily flooded. The river overflowed by seven to ten feet, and it was estimated that twenty lives were lost as a result of the flood. The deluge caused significant damage to infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and buildings.

The fast waters of the flood broke down the front and back walls of the Gurdwara perimeter fence. The Gurdwara, is a place of assembly and worship for Sikhs. Records and files were damaged, and some equipment was lost. The Granthi Sahib, Giani Gian Singh, managed to rescue the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Holy Book), and some rumallas, square or rectangular piece of silk that cover the book when it is not being read. He stayed in the roof for one to two days until the floodwaters subsided.

Stationed at Kluang at the time was Lance Bombardier G. J. Ritson, from Dover, with the 75th Aircraft Workshop, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME).

This is the incredible story of the rescue from drowning of one hundred and twenty-three people from the town, by the men of the Army Aviation Corps flying a Nimbus powered Scout helicopter. It was told in a despatch received in the Small Engine Division, in England, from its service engineer, on the spot, D. F. Martin.

The operation took place at the town of Kluang, where the local river burst its banks after a foot of rain had fallen in twelve hours. Gurkha engineers and Malay troops started the rescue work in boats, but collapsing houses and the hazards of floating debris made their task extremely difficult.

In torrential rain, and with visibility down to one hundred feet, it was decided to carry out a reconnaissance, using a Scout helicopter with the doors removed to improve visibility. A scene of the wildest chaos was seen; buses and cars had been overturned in the torrent. The whole town was under at least eight feet of water, and in the low-lying parts, the corrugated iron roof tops were covered in people frantically seeking refuge.

Among the dangers facing the pilots in any rescue bid were that none of the refugees had ever been near a helicopter, and certainly knew nothing about centres of gravity. The area was a forest of TV aerials and some of the corrugated roof panels were loose and tended to be swept into the rotor disc. Often the aircraft had to be hovered out of the wind with the driving rain almost blinding the pilot.

In spite of all this, it was decided to mount a rescue bid. The aircraft was completely stripped, with only the pilot's seat being left. Major A. C. S. Holtom took the controls, with Captain C. N. M. Jackson as crewman talking the pilot down to a touchdown on the roofs.



Aerial View of Kluang Workshops



Westland Scout, South Africa Museum

At this stage another hazard showed itself, the presence of large discharges of static electricity whenever the skids touched the roofs. However, they pressed on, and the refugees were bundled aboard the Scout and down to the welfare centre established on high ground. Loading requirements were forgotten. On one flight, the tiny cabin was

crammed with twelve Chinese women and children. The helicopter continued a shuttle service until fatigue and lack of fuel forced them to return to base. The score of rescued persons then stood at seventy-eight.

Immediately the Scout was refueled and with Captain G. M Dainty at the controls and with L/Bdr G. J. Ritson as crewman, resumed the operations. A further forty five people were plucked from the roof-tops before darkness came, when the rain stopped, and the waters began to subside.

The four people mentioned each got a "Tie of Merit". Major Holtom was awarded the Air Force Cross (AFC) and the other two officers received Queens's Commendations.

The Tie of Merit was instituted in 1968 and was awarded for good deeds in Army Aviation.



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