

The Amazing Versatility of a Helicopter

By Liz Gibbons

As I reflected on the difference between helicopters and fixed wing airplanes I began to have a new appreciation for the versatility of helicopters. Helicopters are designed to move in all directions including up, down and backwards. They can get into and out of tight places and hover over a fixed location as they rescue a person lying on a mountain, in the sea, or on a battlefield. There are helicopter rescue teams on call in the Alps and in the Himalayan Mountains. In the latter the elevation can be 17,000 feet or higher. Helicopters can also transport people to hospital quickly by avoiding traffic and being able to land on the hospital's roof. They can hover over traffic to report an accident or traffic jam or over a burning building or other news breaking event.

I think helicopter pilots are a special breed of humans. Helicopter pilots need to have a sense of adventure as they never know what the next mission may bring. In addition to having the skills to maneuver a helicopter they have to have nerves of steel as they often must maneuver the helicopter within inches of a rocky mountain ledge or raging sea. When they hover their craft over a forest or mountain top while a person is strapped into a litter to be lifted up to the helicopter, they have to have the emotional cool to deal with the tenseness of the moment. If they make the slightest wrong move several people's lives could be at stake.

I saw a series on the internet of the Mountain Rescue Team above the town of Chamonix in the French Alps. This is the location of Mount Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe with its 16,000 foot elevation. The area is a popular climbing location. Its helicopter rescue team is referred to as the Angels of Mount Blanc, and they are called out on an average of ten rescues a day in the summer. The weather is unpredictable and can change rapidly. The mountain has many glaciers, and there are deep chasms to fall into. Its dome is covered in ice and snow. Fatalities on the mountain average one hundred per year. There is always a doctor on the rescue team. The team never knows what kind of injury they will see or the possible challenges they'll face in getting to the person(s) in danger. They risk their lives as they deal with icy mountain faces and sheer cliffs. Because of the helicopter team's quick response they have saved many lives.

Helicopters are marvelous vehicles. I wonder how many people in the world owe their lives to the maneuverability of a helicopter and to the skill and dedication of the pilot and crew.