

Glenn Holmes – Rescue in the Himalayas October 2013

Glenn Holmes is a 57 year-old British, former-Royal Air Force helicopter rescue crewman and medic from Colwyn Bay, Wales. He spent several weeks during September to November 2013 attending a paragliding adventure holiday in India, where at the same time the Paragliding World Cup Association was holding one of its Pre-World Cup events 50km east of Dharmasala in Bir, in the Himalayas. Bir is a *Mecca* for paragliding during September to November where the mountains rise to in-excess of 15 000 feet and thermalling and cross-country flying is at its best. During this year's event Glenn volunteered to lead two separate rescues on successive days; these rescues undoubtedly saved the lives of the two paragliders involved.

For the World Paragliding Competition, the Paragliding World Cup Association made use of a Bell 407 helicopter on contract for medevac purposes. Towards the end of the event, 2 paragliding crashes were reported to the event authorities and Glenn volunteered to crew the helicopter, which had no rear-crewman to facilitate any mountain rescue scenario that might occur as it was contracted for medevac purposes only.

Late afternoon on the Wednesday 30th October reports came into the event Paragliding control of a crash high in the mountains somewhere west of Parampur. A Dutch paraglider, had crashed at around 12 000 ft. Late afternoon the helicopter took off to search for the paraglider but couldn't get high enough to search effectively for the casualty due to the bad weather and thunderstorm activity. The helicopter dropped off some mountaineers well below the estimated position and then returned to Bir.

Once back at Bir, still on 30 October 2013, it was reported that a Russian paraglider sustained spinal injuries and broken ribs having collided into the mountain-side, again at 12 000ft in a dangerously precarious position. As a current, experienced medically-qualified helicopter rescue crewman flying for the British-owned company 'Heli Operations', Glenn, with no concern for his own safety, volunteered to attempt a rescue. Just before dark, Glenn and the helicopter pilot flew out to the crash-site in an attempt to locate and recover the injured paraglider. After 30 minutes searching they did find him. Glenn and the pilot then found an area close-by to land-on; the only way the rescue could be achieved, particularly in the dwindling light conditions was for Glenn to tie one end of a 100ft untested rope to the helicopter skid and the other end to himself. The pilot then got airborne with Glenn suspended freely 100ft below the helicopter, and carried him 200m to the seriously-injured paraglider.

This is an extremely unconventional and risky undertaking, even in the most benign conditions at sea-level. Glenn could only communicate with the pilot via hand-signals. He would not have been able to disconnect himself in the event of a helicopter emergency nor be able to prevent himself being slammed into the cliff-face. The helicopter, at the extreme limit of its operating envelope had absolutely no redundancy nor power margin in the event of any failure. Normally for rescue operations of this type the crewman requires a winch with a strong and tested winch wire and harness which can attach safely to the crewman and to the winch hook with various "Quick Release" and cut capabilities, for him, the helicopter pilot and an additional winch-operator. Glenn gave up all of these safety features.

Whilst suspended and close to the mountainside, Glenn was put down near the casualty and then clipped himself onto the casualty using a karabiner; on Glenn's command, again using hand-signals, the helicopter lifted them both off the cliff-face. The helicopter then carried them, still suspended 100ft below the helicopter at 12 000 ft, to a safe area. Here, the helicopter landed both Glenn and the casualty on the mountainside before landing-on itself. This enabled Glenn to stabilize the casualty before putting him inside the helicopter and evacuating him to expert medical help. By the time Glenn and the helicopter returned to Bir it was dark and nothing could be done for the first crash victim until the next day.

Next morning, on 31 October 2013, Glenn volunteered to help in the recovery of the Dutch paraglider pilot, somewhere in the region of Parampur, approximately 40km from the other crash site. The plan was to search for the casualty and then use the same technique as they used the previous night for the rescue: land somewhere near the casualty, attach Glenn to the rope and suspended 100 ft under the helicopter, fly him onto the casualty's position whilst Glenn hooked onto him before lifting them both off.

When they arrived in the crash-area they carried out a search and eventually found the casualty. Unfortunately the paraglider had crashed into a vertical slab at 12 000 ft and he was situated in a small vertical gully with the paraglider canopy caught on the rocks above him. Glenn tried to close the helicopter in on the position but the cliff-face meant they could not get the helicopter in close enough; the weather conditions consisted of thick cloud patches which surrounded the casualty and the helicopter power margins available to the pilot made this option even more perilous. The casualty was hanging upside down in his harness and the only thing preventing him falling was one of his legs, which was hooked in the strap of his harness. As he had been stranded on the mountain-side overnight and he was in a desperate condition. He had sustained serious injuries including two broken legs. Glenn reassessed the rescue plan and decided the best option was to drop off the 3 experienced mountaineers who had accompanied them, about 500 ft below the casualty on an outcrop of rock where the helicopter could get one skid on. They would then dispatch the mountaineers in two landings who could then climb to the casualty and hopefully move him to a better place to affect a rescue. Once the climbers were dropped off, the helicopter returned to Bir for a couple of hours whilst the climbing team climbed up to the casualty and moved him.

Whilst back at Bir Glenn came up with the rescue plan to effect the rescue itself. He briefed the pilot and mountaineers who had radio-communications. Glenn's plan was to remain in the helicopter and guide the pilot into an overhead hover. Glenn judged that using a 30 ft rope tied to the skid he could recover first one of the climbers and then the casualty to a point somewhere below the crash site, where they could land-on and then load them on-board and fly them to medical help. Mid-afternoon with the weather closing-in again they flew back out to the crash-site. By now the climbers had moved the casualty. With Glenn in the helicopter door on a makeshift harness made from a climbing harness, rope and karabiners and using a sand bag as a weight, Glenn coned the pilot into position overhead the casualty, then talked him down to a height where he lowered the rope and karabiner to the first climber who hooked-on. The helicopter then flew him to a landing point 1000 ft below on a buttress onto which Glenn guided the pilot before lowering the climber onto the ground. Glenn then recovered the rope and the helicopter flew back to the casualty and the remaining climbers and again coned the pilot into position on the narrow ledge to attach the casualty to the rope and then flew him off the ledge to the landing point where again Glenn coned

the pilot in height and direction to place the casualty on the ground next to the first climber previously lowered. After landing-on Glenn put the casualty on board the helicopter, which flew him to Bir and expert medical assistance.

Mountain flying is by definition an extremely demanding and dangerous skill. To conduct the rescue of casualties in mountainous terrain and at such high altitude is amongst the most difficult things a helicopter crew can undertake. By volunteering to undertake these rescues, understanding that his skill was all that could prevent two certain fatalities, Glenn showed enormous courage. This is amplified further as Glenn had no specialist equipment whatsoever and yet he unhesitatingly placed his own life in the hands of an unknown pilot who had no previous experience of this type of mountain rescue.



Pictured facing the camera is the Indian helicopter pilot that flew the rescue helicopter. His name is unknown.



This is the second crash site, on 31 October 2013. This was taken by Glenn Holmes at 12000ft altitude. The Dutch paraglider suffered 2 broken legs and was in a terrible condition when rescued.



This is the Bell 407 helicopter used in the rescue operations on 30 and 31 October 2013. It is totally unsuited to airborne search and rescue operations, particularly at high-altitude. It has insufficient power, equipment and handling characteristics for such operations. The helicopter skid that Glenn used to attach the 100 ft rope can be seen clearly.



Another photo taken by Glenn Holmes. This shows 'Brian', in the black puffer jacket, a New Zealand national, paraglider and experienced mountaineer who took part in the second rescue, of the Dutch paraglider, on 31 October 2013. He and John Silvester (see below) climbed up the mountain to prepare the Dutch casualty for Glenn to lift using the long-line technique.



Again a picture taken by Glenn Holmes after the second rescue of 31 October 2013. The tall man with orange trousers is John Silvester (silv@flyskyhigh.net), a paragliding expert (who lives near Glenn Holmes in Snowdonia); along with 'Brian' he climbed up the mountain face at 12000 ft to prepare the injured Dutch paraglider for recovery by the long-line technique instigated by Glenn Holmes. Glenn long-lined John off the mountain first before going back to the casualty to receive him at a point on a ridge about 1000ft below the crash site.