

The Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance

The first records of a rescue by an aerial vehicle was in 1870, when a gas filled balloon was used during the Siege of Paris. The men it carried were not injured but the method enabled messages to be taken over the Prussian lines into a safe area in Belgium. The potential was immediately realised by the militaries.

By the end of the First World War, primitive aeroplanes were beginning to be used to transport weapons and men and the first reports of wounded being returned within the fuselages of the planes began to appear.

Departure of a balloon from Paris at night, from the Illustrated London News



Although not officially recognised, Winston Churchill was credited with establishing a special Royal Air Force unit during the early 1920's during the frontier war in Somalia. A fleet of some 12 De Havilland biplanes were provided for the expedition and it is suggested that at least one was fitted out as an early air ambulance to evacuate the sick and injured from remote areas.

(The unit was codenamed 'Z' which, with hindsight is a little unfortunate, given the letter's modern connotations.)

Aeromedical operations underwent a huge leap forward during World War 2 on both sides of the conflict. Inside the Douglas Dakota aircraft, "flight nurses" were used to deliver first aid to wounded allied soldiers during the Normandy invasion in 1944.



In the far East, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) formed Air Ambulance Units (AAU) and Medical Air Evacuation Transport Units (MAETU) with male orderlies to accompany the flights. Later they recruited nurses who were specially trained for in-flight medical care.



By the 1950's the potential for helicopters to reach inaccessible places was realised using the bubble fronted Bell 47 aircraft. Anyone familiar with the popular M*A*S*H (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) sitcom about the Korean War will remember the opening sequences of the programme. Within 20 years, during the Vietnam War, they had been replaced by larger Bell-

designed "Huey" helicopter which were spacious enough to carry trained medical personnel and the wounded and the necessary equipment to preserve lives.



During the "Malayan Emergency" our forces used the more advanced Sikorsky S55 Whirlwind helicopters, that were later built by the Westland company under licence in our region of the South West of England.

Later versions of the British-built aircraft went on to become the mainstay of the RAF Air Sea Rescue Services. These yellow-painted aircraft became common sights around our coasts before they were replaced by the Westland Sea King helicopters in the 1960's

The increasing 'popularity' of air ambulances stemmed in part from government studies which showed the positive effects of the air ambulance, as well as the production of increasingly reliable and secure aircraft that could accommodate more advanced medical equipment.

All around the world, air ambulance operations are now an integral part of society, with medevac services extending to urban areas and not just to remote locations. To illustrate their versatility, an incident in London in 2022 involved a landing inside Trafalgar Square to rescue an elderly man who had been hit by a vehicle.

Most regional hospitals in the UK now have helicopter landing sites and various units have dedicated specialist teams to handle a wide range of specific emergencies. The list of helicopter landing sites compiled by the Southampton University Hospital illustrates the expanding reach of the network. *Helipads For Hospitals* is a UK charity founded by former RAF and Air Ambulance helicopter pilot John Nowell, who helped train Air Ambulance pilots.



The Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance has been flying missions in our region since March 2000. They currently respond to an average of eight incidents a day.

Their crews are trained to cope with complex medical and surgical events, which can include blood transfusions, and surgery under sedation and anaesthesia, to stabilise patients in critical conditions to give them the best chance of survival before they reach hospital.

Their own website carries a wealth of information about their operations and how to donate to the charity that supports their life saving work.

Dr Peter Smith – May 2025



[Dorset And Somerset Air Ambulance Charity](#)

[Helicopter landing sites](#)

[Helipads for Hospitals – Together, we can help Air Ambulance patients](#)