

Navy Search and Rescue team are busiest in history

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A Royal Navy Search and Rescue team based in Scotland carried out more missions in 2007 than any helicopter search team has done in the UK since records began.

The crews of the three Sea King Search and Rescue helicopters based at HMS Gannet, in Prestwick, Ayrshire, undertook 357 helicopter missions in 2007, which is around 100 more than the next closest UK helicopter base and an increase of 30 per cent over last year's figures.

The 357 missions saw them assist 349 people, making it the greatest number of missions and people saved by any single UK Search and Rescue unit since Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre records began in 1983.

As a consequence of such regular activity the bright red and grey Sea Kings have become a familiar sight over the seas and mountains of the Highlands, Lake District and Northern Ireland, where the team operate.



Some rescues involve a crewman attached to the end of a 250 foot (76 metre) wire.
[Picture: Royal Navy]

Gannet Search and Rescue Officer Lieutenant Commander Florry Ford believes the reasons are clear for the increase in his teams' activity, saying that there are more people in the hills walking; less snow has meant the climbing has been more technical which has caught people out; people have mobile phones so they can better call the rescue service for assistance; and a lot more people are conducting dangerous sports in the hills. But, he adds, this hasn't caused too much of a problem:

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The missions have included rescuing survivors of a boat explosion near Loch Lomond, pulling injured climbers off Ben Nevis in poor weather and air lifting a rather large and amorous bull to safety after injuring itself on a local farm.

"You never know what's gonna come your way from year to year," says Commander Ford.

A rescue of three climbers from Ben Nevis in June took from 2100 hrs until 0630 the next morning. Gannet's second-in-command, Lieutenant Commander Martin Lanni, said:

"We had a crewman swinging on a 250 foot (76 metre) wire to get down to three men and two mountain rescue team members who had reached them. In total the guy had to go up and down five times. These guys on the wire are very brave. They have got nothing below them at times but 200ft (61m) of air. I really take my hat off to them because it's scary enough being in the front of the helicopter."

Four missions were carried out on New Year's Eve alone, with the unit rescuing a person with spinal injuries from the River Etive near Glen Coe, one of Scotland's most challenging stretches of water for canoeists; coming to the aid of a 78-year-old woman with a suspected heart attack; transferring a 23-year-old woman with serious asthma; and coming to the aid of a 69-year-old woman, again with a suspected heart attack. Lieutenant Commander Lanni, pilot on the evening, said:



Gannet Sea King helicopters rescue people from mountainsides
[Picture: Royal Navy]

"It really was a busy day. And we saw in the bells on board the helicopter. But, as we were heading back to base after the final call out, we were able to enjoy a unique view of what must have been the best fireworks display in Scotland, as we flew overhead along the Clyde - all the way from Glasgow to Prestwick. It really was quite spectacular."

The Hogmanay call outs rounded off a week of festive rescue flying, which also included the medical transfer of a premature baby from Craigavon on the shores of Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland to Yorkhill on Christmas Day. The crew got the baby across the Irish Sea safely after having picked up a doctor and nurse from Yorkhill on the outward journey.

The medical team managed to stabilise the two-week-old baby and the Gannet crew was delighted to have a happy ending to their Christmas Day call outs.

Duty officer in charge at Christmas was Lieutenant James Bullock who said:

"It's always difficult to be separated from family and friends at this time of year. But search and rescue is a vital emergency service, an essential job, and we are always happy to be able to help out people in distress. And it was nice to be able to get the baby safely to hospital and finish off Christmas with a bit of festive good news."

Gannet Search and Rescue Flight also involves itself in community projects such as the lifting of a footpath bridge to a remote site and helping local ramblers enjoy Forestry Commission trails.