

# CHAMONIX RESCUE

I never thought the touring season would end like this

by Denis Hicks



*PGHM on their way in - D A Hicks*

I guess we have all read up on being rescued off the mountain? Two days before France initiated its COVID lock-down and closed access to the mountains, it finally happened to me and my two friends.

One friend took a hard fall snowboarding on the Crochues – Bérard traverse in Chamonix. He hit a wall of hard snow in flat light. Clearly in pain whenever he put weight on his leg, we called in a rescue with one bar of 3G on the phone. We described our position and altitude, the current visibility, number of people and the colour of the clothes we were wearing, the assessment of the injury and the level of pain as volunteered by the brave casualty (5 on a scale of 10). "Ok, we are quite busy, it might be a few minutes." Cool! Time to secure our gear.

It took about a minute. With barely time to secure skis and packs, the helicopter arrived and circled. We gave the Y signal and the helicopter glided in, the crew pointing to indicate a soft touchdown (*appui patin*) about a metre from our injured friend. In a tornado of spindrift, two crew jumped out, shook hands and assessed the injury. The helicopter was asked to leave in a few minutes. One of the crew splinted the leg and the other asked us what we wanted to do.

As we were explaining we would ski out if they could take our friend's gear, we hardly noticed that he had already gone - splinted, harnessed and winched away with one of the crew. The gendarme still with us cracked jokes about my awful French but remembered to shout "You will find him in Chamonix hospital! Know where it is?"

A quick handshake, another tornado of spindrift as the helicopter returned and hovered touching the snow, a reminder to take my friend's snowboard and he jumped back on board as we flattened ourselves in the snow under the hurricane of the downdraft.



*PGHM having remembered the snowboard - D A Hicks*

Suddenly, we were back to alpine peace and tranquillity but, understandably, feeling a bit more cautious. Then a truly awful ski traverse on frozen avalanche debris (why the hell didn't we ask for a lift?). At the bar in the hamlet of Le Buet we downed a beer and were told the helicopter had been back for a second casualty on Mont Buet (3096m) itself.

We were lucky to have had a phone signal, even if it was minimal. Otherwise, it would have been a 40 min climb up to a ridge. Our friend had a clean break of the bones above the ankle. His boots, fortunately, had held everything roughly in place. He had six weeks in a cast, so ideal timing for self-isolation.

If it happens to you, I suggest you know how to describe your position accurately and secure your gear ASAP. Put on a hood and ski goggles for the downdraft and just enjoy seeing these professionals operate.

Many thanks to the military Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne (PGHM) and l'Hôpitaux de Chamonix! The following week, I learned that the helicopter had been re-tasked for transporting COVID victims.