

TALES OF THE RIVERMAN 153



Some people are frightened of heights; me; I'm terrified. I don't like lifts, high rises, I remember lying face down on the bottom of a cable car reciting Tam O'Shanter to myself and it was just as well it was dark when I went down a rope off a high bridge to rescue a woman. It must have been adrenaline that allowed me to abseil off ships and high quay walls, to sit in a boat while it was lifted in and out of the river by a shipyard crane. Anyway, that's all in the past. Funny thing is that I do not mind flying, and I loved helicopters. Last night the police helicopter was over the park. I'm in no way a blue light chaser, but I do still react to the noise of the helicopter above, especially if it is near the river, suppose I will never change. The unmistakable noise and seeing the searchlight light up the park, brought back many memories.

My first involvement with a helicopter was when Radio Clyde decided to have an "eye in the sky" morning and evening, to help Glasgow people move around in their vehicles, giving rush hour details of any traffic hold ups. Captain George contacted me asking if I would fly with him and point out land marks and tell him stories about the area that he could use in his broadcasts. With a little bit of apprehension, I agreed. No problem, it was wonderful, I just took to it, perfectly relaxed and enjoyed every minute. I answered Captain George's questions and hopefully left him with a wealth of information. ("Captain George Muir, helicopter pilot and broadcaster became one of the country's best-known aviators. He loved his native Glasgow with a passion and told all what a wonderful "dear green place" it was").

The Air Support Unit Police Inspector, asked me to do a similar thing. Now that really was amazing, as we flew low, down the Clyde Valley, I described and gave details of places I had only viewed from water level. I had the privilege of being in the helicopter one day when a robbery took place. From above we could see a man running, carrying something, being chased by officers. The man was a fair distance ahead

of the “ground troops” and had time to climb into a “skip” to hide; but of course, he could not hide from the eyes in the sky, and his hiding place was immediately relayed, resulting in apprehension.

It was in the “County”, Lanarkshire, that I had my last flight. A body was reported to have come downriver and been washed in among fallen trees that were piled up against the topside of a small island. I was conveyed to the locus, but from the banking we could not see where the body had ended up. The helicopter landed in an adjacent field and I was soon airborne. From this vantage position, I was able to see exactly where the body was. It was then back to ground level, water level and a short row against the strong current, for a swift recovery of the cadaver.



Often, we could work in tandem. If someone was reported to be in the water and Hotel Mike 40 was in the air, I knew they could see and guide me to anything on the surface, except under overhangs and below bridges allowing me to concentrate on these areas. The “heat seeker” was extremely good for finding persons, on the river bank. One night the helicopter was following a wanted person when the “trail” suddenly went dead. The eyes in the sky could not see up the sewer pipe into which the man had crawled, from my boat, I could. Chase over.

I did get a bit of a fright when I entered the river to rescue a man (why was my boat not available immediately?). The Helicopter was above and the downdraft was severe. We soon agreed on a height at which the downdraft was not a problem to people in or on the water. This is extremely important as one evening, a large helicopter joined a search. Luckily, I had come out of my boat, as the downdraft subsequently turned the boat on its side and oars, boathooks etc went sliding into the water. Some other, nearby, moored small boats, were turned over. Fortunately, it was dark, and there were no racing craft on the river (the agreement on the river is for no boating after dusk or before dawn). We learn from these occurrences. I give thanks to the pilots and officers who looked after me.