

On station with ... Bankstown Helicopter Base



THE TOURIST BROCHURE SAYS:

Sydney Metro Airport Bankstown is in the heart of Greater Sydney, within easy reach of the business and population growth centres. The Airport is conveniently located with the M5 and M7 close by, bringing Greater Sydney and the Sydney CBD within easy reach.

Bankstown Airport was established in 1940 as an airbase and now creates employment directly or indirectly for 6,000 people. It is the busiest airport in Australia, with 362,206 aircraft movements last year; and the 26th busiest airport in the world, handling corporate jets, turbo props, twin engine aircraft and helicopters.

Bankstown Airport is the current home to the Ambulance Sydney Helicopter Base.

THE STAFF AT BANKSTOWN HELI BASE SAY:

The Sydney Helicopter Base at Bankstown is where we sign on and off, perform our equipment checks and a fair bit of training. But we can be off at a moment's notice to anywhere in the state for patient retrievals, from remote and regional centres to the Tertiary Referral Hospitals in Sydney. Our pre-hospital work can be pretty exciting as well, with both aircraft winch equipped and a road retrieval capacity for high acuity cases where our medical teams add value to the efforts of paramedics on scene.

From our vantage point, we are literally overseeing the longest continual sporting event in Australia! There can be between 10,000-15,000 people participating in a variety of snow sports each day in Perisher alone during this period.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON JOBS AROUND HELICOPTER AND ROAD RETRIEVAL?

Over 90% of road missions and just over half of all helicopter missions (55%) are inter-hospital. The majority of helicopter missions (55%) involve trauma patients, whereas road missions involve a more diverse range of diagnostic groups with cardiovascular, neurological, respiratory and trauma patients accounting for 70% of missions.

HOW MANY JOBS DO YOU DO?

We conduct between 2000 and 2500 missions each year, around 50% of which are by helicopter and 40% are road missions, the rest involve fixed wing. Three out of four missions are inter-hospital. On average, we undertake six winch missions per month. Across the service, the single biggest group we see are trauma patients, comprising more than one in three patients.

HOW MANY STAFF AT THE BASE?

We have 16 SCAT helicopter paramedics and six road retrieval paramedics. We work as part of medical teams, with 20 permanent part-time consultant physicians and about 16 registrar physicians who rotate through the Base every six months as part of their training for Fellowship status in Emergency Medicine or Anaesthetics.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE?

The fact that we could end up anywhere in the state, in any situation for an unknown length of time presents a real challenge and attraction to our role. Maintaining the huge range of skills from SCAT and retrieval, to winch rescue and night vision goggles is a challenge requiring constant training. The fact that we work as single paramedics with doctors is a great professional development opportunity, as well as a responsibility. It's also our role to integrate our doctors safely and effectively into the pre-hospital environment.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING IN RETRIEVAL?

Retrieval is part of State Wide Services so we're working with a variety of people and personalities. Being an integral part of a high performance team is really enjoyable and integrating that team into Ambulance's response to critical incidents is really satisfying.

Of course, sitting in the back of a multi million dollar high-tech helicopter and flying over the top of the Opera House and Harbour Bridge down the helicopter lane is not too shabby either!

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR MOST MEMORABLE JOBS?

An MVA in a remote bush setting recently that involved four elderly males on a hunting trip and three Ambulance Rescue Helicopters. Their open cabin jeep rolled, ejecting all occupants on a down hill stretch, but the animal carcasses stayed swinging on the roll bars! The least injured occupant crawled to higher ground to raise the alarm. When the Rescue 23 arrived, we were able to land nearby the accident and scramble up the hill to find one unconscious patient with a head injury, one patient with abdominal injuries and a pneumothorax, and one with a fractured femur. Fortunately, we had a local Ambulance Supervisor on scene, however in this remote setting and with the patients separated on the hillside, we were under resourced.

The doctor and paramedic performed a Rapid Sequence Induction to secure the unconscious patient's airway and packaged the patient for extrication by stretcher winch. Rescue 26 from Wollongong winched down their doctor to assist the paramedic with the remaining patients, whilst Rescue 23's doctor was winched up with the head injured patient to fly to the nearest trauma hospital. We treated and packaged the next two serious patients and loaded them into our aircraft and flew away just in time for the second Sydney helicopter to arrive and take away the fourth patient. It's wonderful to work in a Service that has such resources available for the community.