

# Medics in the thick of it

## HELP AT HAND:

Workers from RMSI rescue a sick civilian



*Myra Philp* finds out how a Dubai team is helping people in hostile environments

**T**here are tens of thousands of civilians working in the world's danger zones. The threat of illness or injury is part of daily life - but help is at hand thanks to a daring squad of doctors, nurses and paramedics based in Dubai. These medics routinely take off to hostile territories around the globe to provide all sorts of emergency services for governments and organisations, including the UN and NATO, as well as corporate clients. Based in Dubai's Internet City, RMSI has field hospitals and clinics in Afghanistan and Iraq and has been called out to emergencies in Sudan, Libya, Liberia, Somalia and Pakistan. The 150 staff, ambulances, planes and helicopters all have tracking devices and their sorties into war zones are followed every step of the way by RMSI's futuristic control centre at the firm's HQ in Dubai. Founder and CEO Rob Lamb, who is Australian, drives the firm's lust for adventure and desire to help people who find themselves injured or sick in hostile territories - venturing into countries where most would refuse to go. Lamb has worked with the Australian military, beginning his career as a paramedic and progressing to become a rescue officer then an



**ADVENTURER:**  
CEO Rob Lamb

intensive care flight paramedic and helicopter rescue crewman, before heading to Iraq and Afghanistan as a contractor. He now regularly puts on his flight suit and joins his team on missions. Lamb said: "In 2004 I was working as a medical contractor in Iraq. It became obvious the resources were not comprehensive for civilian contractors. There were a number of incidences where we were frustrated we couldn't help people who were injured or ill, beyond the basics." Lamb said the military medical support teams would help under very specific circumstances but they were always busy with their own troops. He added: "Civilians like myself had massive insurance policies but no one to respond." Two years later Lamb and his team were sitting in Dubai on tenterhooks waiting for their first call out. They were equipped with the latest technology and their Hawker 800XP planes were on standby at Dubai International Airport. But their first call wasn't to attend to the victim of a shooting or a bomb blast. Lamb recalled: "We were waiting for our first serious call. Then the phone rang and it was a female NGO worker with gastroenteritis.

"But within days we had our first serious call. A civilian convoy in Kandahar had been attacked." The medical team flew into the dangerous region in a turbo-prop plane and attended to a man out who had been shot in the chest. Lamb said: "I've never come across tougher fighters than the Afghans.

"They are certainly serious about what they are defending. "We medevaced the man to Dubai where he had surgery and got him home on a stretcher on a commercial flight." The level of security for Lamb and the other paramedics and doctors who fly into hostile zones is judged according to each individual situation, but often NATO already has a military presence on the scene. Lamb added: "If we're responding to an NGO worker it's appropriate to go unarmed and present yourself as a non-threatening element. But we are conscious all the time of how our security profile should look." One of RMSI's doctors, Brit Karen Woo, was killed in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province

### STAFF SET FOR STINGS

**THE RMSI team has to be prepared for anything - even the most obscure of tropical diseases. One of those encountered by people in Iraq is the little-know Leishmaniasis - which can have deadly side-effects despite being spread by the bite of sandflies. Months after the nasty bite patients can be hit by the side effects, which can affect the whole body.**



### READY FOR TAKE-OFF:

One of the planes on the tarmac and, below, staff on a mission speak with kids

while doing humanitarian work during time off. Woo, 36, was one of 10 volunteers who had been giving free medical aid to the local population. They were executed in an attack claimed by the Taliban in 2010. Lamb said: "She was doing some humanitarian work in one of the provinces. Her desire to help resulted in her death. That is the reality of war."

RMSI staff have also had a few near misses, including being in a camp in Basra which came under rocket and missile attack. And in Kandahar, where the company carries out emergency services for NATO staff, they spent a lot of time in the bunkers playing cards to dodge mortars. With an international clientele, Lamb



### HARDCORE HOLIDAYMAKERS

**THE medical team has encountered a bizarre new phenomenon in Afghanistan - extreme tourism. People are flying into the war-torn country to climb mountains in the Hindu Kush range, which is nearly 1,600km long and 320km wide. Lamb said: "We've been called in to assist a number of patients hiking there. Altitude sickness can be life-threatening. "It can be extremely difficult to get helicopters into and out of these areas. We get called out by their insurance companies or embassies."**

constantly has his eye on potential hotspots and he usually checks them out himself. One of his most recent trips was to Mogadishu in troubled Somalia. He said: "I did manage to meet some other Aussies there. They were out crayfishing with the backdrop of hijacked container ships!" The team, including Lamb, also recently went through helicopter escape and evasion training to allow them to fly over the sea off Libya, where one of their clients is laying a major gas pipeline. As Lamb spoke a patient was being flown by relay from Libya to Bangkok for emergency treatment - the route of the planes being charted on the control room world maps. Lamb said: "It's not just the planes and ambulances that we track. "We also track our personnel. We have trackers so small that if we get into a kidnap situation we can drop them into our trousers and hopefully send a signal for long enough to allow our location to be tracked. We have to be prepared for anything." myra@7days.ae