

SAFE COMMUNITY



David Thomas

GIPS – THE UNSUNG HEROES

IF I were to ask you if you had heard of GIPS, my guess is that most people in the foreign community would say “no”.

However, this elite unit of the Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR) comprising nearly 600 men and women is one of the major resources in Portugal in tackling forest fires, as well as other disasters ranging from rescuing people from collapsed buildings, searching for various people in wild terrain and rescuing people from floods.

Because their work is so dangerous and because little is known publically exactly what they do, I am calling them “The Unsung Heroes”.

Their motto underneath their logo is aptly entitled “Se fosse fácil, não era para nós” – In English “If it was easy, it is not for us”. Their logo is based on a bird found in Lousã, an area in Portugal where most of their founder members came from.

I was privileged recently to meet Major Marco Marques, the current Commander of GIPS based on the outskirts of Lisbon, in a purpose built establishment. We spent some two hours discussing the role of GIPS before he was called away to attend the major fires in the north of the country.

Major Marques was one of the founders of the unit and after spending some six years there, undertook other duties, including environmental policing, before returning as Commanding officer in February this year.

GIPS was formed by the government in 2006, its aim

being to act as a fast response to inaccessible forest fires and other catastrophes. Initially some 11 officers were identified including Major Marques (who was then a Lieutenant) and the GNR intake of around 200-300 men and women at the time, instead of graduating and patrolling the streets, were retrained to undertake their unique role.

Since then the unit has relied on volunteers who undertake extensive training, particularly the physical element. Every six months their physical standards are tested and if they cannot meet the requirements they are transferred out.

Their last intake was some 50 graduates in June 2017, who unfortunately missed their graduation ceremony at the time and were instead deployed at a moment's notice to fight the fires in Pedrógão Grande.

GIPS is divided into 22 units based on a company/platoon structure, such as for instance the one in Monchique.

Typically their work, as first responders, involves leaping into a helicopter on receipt of an emergency call and flying to the location of the fire; then landing or abseiling down (if they cannot land) and attacking the fire. They then unroll the flexible bucket attached to the side of the helicopter so it can collect water from the nearest point before returning to help extinguish the fire. The helicopter cannot take both water and a full crew due to the weight.



In 2016 GIPS flew some 4036 missions, and 1061 so far this year, and were able to extinguish fires within 90 minutes, in 97% of cases. In many cases no other firefighters, such as Bombeiros, were involved due to the remoteness of the location. Clearly this is firefighting at its most dangerous without nearby support vehicles should things go wrong. Their average response time in reaching the fire point is under 10 minutes.

Apart from flying to the scenes of fires, they have responded using road vehicles in no less than 551 occasions since the beginning of 2016.

An example of the work they have undertaken was in the Pedrógão Grande fires where



Major Marques attended, in which a building in the fire area had collapsed on top of many gas cylinders. The unit were sent in to stabilise the building so that the gas cylinders could be removed!

Another of their roles is the search for missing persons in remote areas, where the terrain means accessibility by vehicle is almost impossible. These are the responsibility of the USAR (Urban Search and Rescue Units). In undertaking this work they are aided when required by Remotely Piloted Aircraft with thermal imaging.

GIPS also has a CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) capability. This very specialist unit, which I was able to speak with, is supported by some very specialist equipment, mainly sourced from overseas. They can attend incidents such as chemical spills, where the nature of the chemical is

unknown. Their first task is to conduct an analysis before rescue work involving other personnel can begin – well I did say that their work is often dangerous! Their equipment is certainly advanced, and as such I was not allowed to photograph this or give details.

Moving from fires to floods, GIPS have both a fast response role in rescuing victims in support of the work of the Bombeiros. The Special Underwater Operations Unit (UEOS) is the only one to conduct criminal forensic investigations underwater. Often referred to as the “Aquatic CSI”, the procedures are identical to those adopted on land, but the degree of difficulty is much greater. Other roles in floods include clearing water courses, with special pumps that can be used for a variety of liquids. They also operate in contaminated water again supported by special equipment.

If fires were not a challenge, then operating during the winter in the Serra da Estrela in the north of Portugal, where temperature can be as low as -20°C, certainly is. GIPS have specialist Protection and Relief Intervention Teams based in the area, which are involved in rescuing hikers who may have injured themselves or rescue work should an avalanche occur. More often it is rescuing stranded motorists and clearing of roads.

Whilst not undertaking emergency rescue or firefighting, GIPS have an important role to play in training others in the GNR and providing expertise to other entities both in Portugal and overseas. They regularly take part in international exercises with counterparts from other EU countries and provide presentations at various seminars to the public. Indeed Safe Communities Portugal have been privileged to have GIPS participating in several of our seminars in the Algarve.

GIPS has tremendous esprit de corps, the type of comradeship between colleagues found in units such as this. Their base is a museum of memorabilia testifying the diverse work that they do, and reflecting the tremendous pride they have in their work.

From this feature you can see that their work is certainly dangerous and since the unit was formed 11 years ago, tragically four GIPS personnel have died in the line of duty.

The “Unsung Heroes” are indeed a credit to Portugal and we salute the brave work that they undertake.

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