

## Tragedy Puts Huron In The News

*On Sunday, August 28, 1967, at 4 p.m. seventeen skydivers parachuted accidentally into Lake Erie just east of Huron. The accident was considered one of the worst disasters in a sport that had become popular during the 1950s. The following article is from the August 31 Erie County Reporter.*

The 53-hour intensive search for the 15 missing parachutists who inadvertently dropped over Lake Erie Sunday afternoon, which brought more than 400 persons to Huron to aid in the search or to succor the grief-stricken relatives, ended as dusk fell over the lake Tuesday night.

Included in this number were between 75-80 representatives of newspapers, TV, and radio who came to Huron to report the tragedy and the resultant search for survivors to the nation and to the world. No complete log of news media representatives was kept but Coast Guardsmen gave out a partial list which included the three main TV chains, ABC, CBS, and NBC, newspapers in Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, Columbus, Akron, Dayton, Lorain, Pittsburgh, and many other nearer cities. There were radio and TV crews in evidence from most of these same cities.

So great was the demand for news of the progress of the search that phone calls for information came from one newspaper in Australia whose name was not secured, from the London Daily Sketch, Bakersfield, Calif, radio, the Chicago American, Chicago Tribune, Milwaukee Journal, New York Post, and other media from Dallas, New York, Detroit, and Pittsburgh.

When hope of finding survivors became dim Tuesday, most of the news media representatives departed.

Lt. Thomas Irish, Coast Guard Commander for the Ninth District, moved his search command and communications post to Cleveland at dark Tuesday and later that evening Albert Gongos, executive director of the American Red Cross for Erie County, closed the shelter and canteen in city hall where wives and other close relatives of the missing men had spent long, anxious hours.

Involved in the two-day and night search over a vast expanse of Lake Erie, often in seas as high as five feet, were more than 100 Coast Guardsmen, on land, on four search boats, and the C.G. Kaw. Not included were personnel

necessary to man three C. G. helicopters, and one amphibian plan. Two Army helicopters together with Army fixed wing aircraft also aided in scanning the waters of the lake.

The Coast Guard Command and communication equipment arrived in Huron only hours after first word of the missing chutists was flashed on news wires. But when they arrived the Red Cross under Mr. Gongos had already established the shelter in city hall with cots, blankets, coffee, and food. From all parts of Erie County and from Red Cross units in other areas, including a mobile canteen from Toledo, flocked R. C. volunteers. During the stay in Huron, Red Cross volunteers including nurses numbered approximately 80.

One of the functions of the Red Cross during emergencies is to provide food, for stricken relatives and disaster relief workers and Monday and Tuesday it is estimated that the Red Cross fed about 350 persons each day from the city hall canteen, the field emergency kitchen and from the Twine House which assisted the Red Cross.

And a partial list of organizations which aided in the search over approximately 105 square miles of the lake is wide ranging. As soon as the word was received in Huron, the Yacht Club went into action. Nineteen boats belonging to members began to search the area within an hour and assisted in recovery of two survivors and two bodies..

Monday morning Huron police and the Erie County Underwater Recovery Unit went into action as did the Coast Guard, Highway Patrol, Erie County Sheriff's deputies. Coast Guard Auxiliary, State Wildlife Commission, State Liquor Commission, and the underwater recovery teams from Lorain and Akron.

"The cooperation we have received from Huron and from other officials and volunteer agencies has been truly outstanding," Lt. Irish said in announcing Wednesday morning the Coast Guard search would be continued on a reduced basis, but as Lt. Irish said, "the Coast Guard never gives up hope."

The rest of the story: *Only two jumping at a low altitude hit the original target near Ortner Field, two were fished from the lake alive and in good health, two were found dead floating in the lake the same day as the jump, and fifteen were missing and feared dead when the search stopped on*

*Tuesday. Three men who were supposed to jump signed the manifest but did not get on the plane. The skydivers had gathered from all parts of Ohio at Ortner's Air Field near Wakeman for a chance to dive at an altitude of 20,000 feet that was considered an unusual event in diving circles. Two planes, a converted B-25 bomber carrying the jumpers and a plane piloted by Huronite Ted Murphy, left the airfield in late afternoon after the event had been postponed in the morning because of cloud cover. Murphy's plane carried two photographers who were going to photograph the jump. He heard the Cleveland Hopkins Radar Control Tower give the okay to the B-25 pilot for the jump because the plane was one mile west of Ortner's Field. Then he realized that it was his plane on the radar screen not the B-25 that was nowhere in sight. Nearly 25 miles away, seventeen dived through the cloud cover to find themselves unexpectedly over Lake Erie. The water was described as choppy with waves up to two feet and only one of the divers was equipped with flotation gear. Eyewitnesses said the skydivers came down in a straight row one after another hitting the water as if it was planned. Many thought a nearby boat was going to pick them up. The two survivors managed to cut away some of their gear before they hit the water. A passing private fishing boat headed in the opposite direction circled around and picked the men up before they were dragged under by remaining gear. By September 10 all but one body was recovered. After an FAA investigation, no charges were filed. However, the accident resulted in changes in rules and regulations for sport skydiving.*