

## International Rescue

**Following 18 months of training with RAPID UK search and rescue, and a lot of sweat and tears, Garry Wonnacott of the Plant Hire in the UK finally passed his operational assessment on Sept 26<sup>th</sup>. He was officially ready to be let loose on real casualties.**

Rapid UK is a volunteer based charity of search and rescue workers who go abroad in natural and manmade disasters in their own time unpaid. So, after a quick trip to see his mother to get his badges sewn on, Gary thought he had time to put his feet up and relax - yeah right!

Along comes Oct 8th, just another Saturday morning in work catching up on some dreaded recharges and breakdown logging. Still half asleep, and coffee-less, the phone rang. "Garry, earthquake Pakistan, are you available". Within 2 hrs of that phone call, he was on his way to Heathrow Airport, and is not afraid to admit, with a rather large sweat on!

Then, within another 4 hrs, he is on his way with a team of 15 other Rapid UK members. On arrival in Pakistan they were tasked with the search of a collapsed tower block in Islamabad. On arrival at the site the enormity of the job ahead was apparent. But they had a job to do and once they had liaised with the local authorities onsite they located a casualty almost straight away. A young woman of 24 who, with a great deal of effort, they finally extracted after about 4 hrs. Whilst this was happening, they also found a young man who was also extracted from his void, and taken to hospital.

In the following days, using a variety of sound location and search devices, they proceeded to find a further 5 people alive, including a 2 year old boy, who they encouraged to crawl down the tunnel towards them, so that they could grab him and then get to his mother, who was unable to move for herself. "Although the work is quite harrowing and arduous, just to find someone alive gives you hope and renewed energy" says Garry.

Throughout the week they used a lot of heavy plant machinery to move and clear rubble away in order to get to new voids and spaces. Then once a tunnel is located they shout, listen, use specialist electronic equipment, until they were happy to move on. This always comes with the added stress, that one of the diggers will over stretch or catch a live casualty, so everything is done as precisely as possible, and they do not move on until they are 100% happy, that it is clear.

Garry's team were later joined by another 13 members of their organisation, who helped with the searches and rescues and allowed them to get a little shut eye, but all in all during the 6 days Garry was there, he got less than 7 hours sleep.

Local support was amazing, they had Lucozade on tap, and anything that was needed was there in a jiffy, even to the point of when Garry's team ran out of cigarettes, suddenly 200 appeared. "The locals were so appreciative of what we were doing, that at times you felt quite humbled" Garry said.

After 5 days they started a phased withdrawal and returned to UK in 3 separate groups, the final group of 4 not leaving until they were 100% certain that no one else was left alive in the remaining rubble. Their withdrawal was via the British Embassy where they were allowed a little swim in their pool. Finally back in the UK, Garry proceeded to spend the following weekend entirely asleep.

People do ask Garry why he does it, and he says "in some ways I cannot explain it, but I suppose it's to do with making a difference."

Finally a word or two from Garry "I would like to say a big thank you to anyone who donated money to the relief fund and can assure them that, from the people I met in Pakistan and the way they pull together, the money will be well spent and put to good use."

"Also one final thank you to everybody at Plant Hire's East Anglia depot, who covered my work load while I was away, and did a sterling job as they always do."

Following Garry's return from Pakistan and discussions with the powers that be, Plant Hire have donated some new kit, a TS400, 18" Chain Saw, 240v 9" Grinder and JCB Power Pack which will be put to good use in future disasters and let RAPID UK, carry on the good work.



Above: the tower block & one of Garry's team emerging from a tunnel. Left Garry with his search camera