

"I'M JUST THE FLAG CARRIER"



#CELEBRATING LUXEMBOURG

Luxembourger René Closter remortgaged his house to co-found Luxembourg Air Rescue (Lar), a not-for-profit which has flown around 40,000 missions since 1988.

Jess Bauldry: What was the watershed moment for setting up Lar?

René Closter: While working for the Samu [ambulance service], I had a young school boy who, while leaving the school bus, got hit by a truck and lost his foot. We tried to bring him to France to a specialist centre for retransplantation. There were no helicopters available in France, Germany or Belgium. I had to take him by ambulance. He was 6 years old, the same age as my son. I had his foot in a cool box next to me. Because the holiday period had started it took more than four hours to go to France. It was too late for his foot. Coming back, I said to myself it can't be like this. Luxembourg cannot continue with such medical infrastructure.

You struggled to find support to set up Lar. Tell us more about this. I started to visit all of the politicians, doctors, government ministers, civil

servants, all over the place I heard "no". So, I remortgaged my house, started Lar and rented a helicopter. I got an offer at Clearstream to become their logistics manager. I became a senior vice president for worldwide logistics safety. I managed this little helicopter here by phone from hotel rooms and by fax. We tried to find a director, but didn't have enough money to pay them. In 1994, my board told me, "it's your baby, why don't you take it over?" So, I took over as CEO [in 1996].

You were the first helicopter pilot for Lar? Had you flown before and do you still fly?

No. At the age of 45 I decided to take my pilot's licence. For two years I did a French helicopter licence. I'm turning 65, so I cannot fly any more.

How well known is Lar today globally and to what do you attribute this renown?

We're proud to have been selected last year out of 800 participants as air ambulance provider of the year, worldwide. We're getting asked for more and more. We've a very high level of quality that very few organisations worldwide are prepared to deliver. For example, we can transport two heavily ventilated patients in one aircraft. We're the only ones who can transport newborn babies in an incubator. In one day, we had three of them. We recently had a mission bringing a baby who was seven days old from India to Hong Kong to get surgery.

When you talk about Luxembourg to people abroad for your job, what do they say?

They do ask about Luxembourg, especially because on our aircraft you've a map of the world and a red dot where Luxembourg is. Depending

on their education, they ask where Luxembourg is. You just go to the wing and say, there it is. On our helicopters we also have the Made in Luxembourg crown, which we carry with a lot of pride.

The Grand Duke said during a meeting that Lar is the best diplomat for Luxembourg.

What makes you feel proud of Luxembourg?

My father was a concentration camp prisoner and my family had nothing. Their house was bombed out and my father came back from the camp and didn't tell us children much about the experience. I heard about it later. Since then, I felt extremely proud of the country of Luxembourg. This tiny country that was a bit forgotten before the war. If you see the country at that time and today, I feel quite proud about what's been established over the years and this typical Luxembourg spirit of sticking together.

What would you say if someone told you that you were a shining example of a good ambassador for Luxembourg?

I would accept that. What's important for me to mention is Lar is not René Closter. René Closter is the guy who carries the flag and gets the hit. Lar is a group of fantastic people who on a regular basis risk their health and sometimes even their lives for saving others. I think it's very important and I'm proud to say our people make the difference.

What are your plans for the future?

I'm going to die in the saddle. I feel too young in the head to quit. I've quite a lot of ideas. It was a dream when it started, then it became a vision and after that, we made it a reality. But not me, all of us together. The whole team. I'm just the flag carrier. <

LUXEMBOURG AIR RESCUE

It operates of seven McDonnell Douglas MD-902 helicopters, of which one is for police use and two are permanently based at hospitals in Luxembourg City and Ettelbruck. Its subsidiary, Luxembourg Air Ambulance, has five LearJet 45XRs. Together, they perform over 3,000 missions around the world every year, including repatriations of the sick and injured or emergency.

www.lar.lu

RENÉ CLOSTER

An electro-technician by profession, Closter worked for the City of Luxembourg fire brigade from 1973. He helped co-found the Samu and then, in 1988, Lar. He is a licenced paramedic and until his 65th birthday, a licenced helicopter pilot.

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In 2017 Maison Moderne and Nvision celebrate Luxembourg by profiling 100 people who contribute positively to the country's international reputation and brand image. The series will culminate in a gala evening on 13 December at Luxembourg Congrès.

www.maisonmoderne.com/en/celebrating-luxembourg