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Balad Airmen rescue U.S. teachers in Iraq

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3/12/2008 - **BALAD AIR BASE, Iraq (AFPN)** -- Airmen from the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron here were called out to rescue two American citizens lost on a hiking trip March 2.

"We initially started hearing information about a possibility of American citizens getting lost during a hiking trip at around 4 a.m.," said Navy Lt. Evan Scaggs, a 64th ERQS pilot and the flight lead for the rescue. "The Joint Personnel Recovery Center started to gather information about who the people were, where they were and checking to see if there were any other problems, while we were on stand-by for the call."

The recovery center passed on the information, while the HH-60G Pave Hawk flight crew and pararescue crews started preparing for a possible rescue mission.

"We started by working flight path times, number of people needed, finding out what kind of terrain they were in and making sure we were staying away from hostile areas," said Capt. Jared Ostroski, a 64th ERQS pilot. "These are some of the steps we take in order to make sure that we know what we are going into before we attempt a rescue."

Servicemembers from the 64th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron fast rope from an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter and secure a 360-degree area March 6 at Balad Air Base, Iraq. Members of the squadron rescued two U.S. teachers who got lost while hiking in Iraq March 2. The flight crew members are deployed from the 66th Rescue Squadron, Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and the pararescuemen are deployed from the 38th Rescue Squadron, Moody Air Force Base, Ga. (U.S. Air Force photo/ Airman 1st Class April Mullens)

As the crews waited, F-16 Fighting Falcon pilots were relaying information regarding the coordinates to where the hikers, who are American teachers, were last seen. There was also coordination taking place on the ground with the hikers' friends who reported them missing.

Once all of the information was verified, approximately two hours later, the crew got approval to go out and retrieve the hikers.

"We loaded up with our flight crew of four people, plus we also had two pararescue Airmen with us," Lieutenant Scaggs said. "Typically, anytime we go on a mission like this one, pararescue makes sure that they load up their medical bags, climbing kits and anything they may need for rough terrain rescues."

"Basically, we bring the rescuers to the site and we are there to make sure they get in and get out as smoothly as possible," said Senior Airman Mike Arview, a 64th ERQS flight engineer. "We were called in because the ground search was unsuccessful due to the terrain, but we were ready to go."

After traveling to the location, approximately 120 nautical miles north of Balad Air Base, the crew joined in the search with other aircraft to locate the hikers.

"We searched for the hikers for about 30 minutes, talked to the group on the ground, started running low on fuel and had to go refuel, then came back and were able to locate them," Lieutenant Scaggs said. "It took us a while because they were in an area where one side of this mountain was at an 80 degree angle and the other side was a 90 degree angle, so it was hard to see them unless you came in at just the right direction."

Because of the terrain and the area the survivors were in, the helicopter crew had to be extremely careful while they were hovering to make sure they were safe as well.

"Once we dropped the PJs off, we realized that if we came in another way, we would be able to hoist them up from where they were rather than having the rescue team pull them up the side of the mountain," said Senior Airman Evan Miller, a 64th ERQS flight engineer. "So, we basically backed into the ravine and hovered for a

while, I then had to swing the hoist into the pararescuemen and we were able to hoist one survivor and one PJ up to the helicopter. After that, we hoisted the other survivor and the last PJ, with all of his equipment, into the aircraft."

After everyone was safely in the aircraft, the rescue team checked the survivors for any health issues they may have suffered by being out in the area overnight.

"Other than them being tired, dehydrated and cold, they were fine," Lieutenant Scaggs said. "However, one more night out there at about 4,700 feet and they may have suffered from hypothermia or frost bite."

Although this may have seemed like quite an ordeal for the hikers and their friends, this is what the rescue teams train for and are glad to do, they said.

"This was the most challenging hoist I have ever done," Airman Miller said. "This was my first rescue. It was a great feeling knowing that we were able to get in there, get this done and save two people."

This was the first time the PJs were able to use their high-angle equipment.

"I was told that it was the highest elevation rescue mission that has happened in Iraq," Lieutenant Scaggs said.

There are many steps people should remember when they are going out hiking, camping or participating in any other outdoor activities, said the pararescuemen.

"It was really hard to find these people because they were wearing dark-colored clothing," Lieutenant Scaggs said. "People need to remember that if they are going to be outside, they need to make sure they have something that is made of a bright color so that it is easier to see them."

All members of the flight crew are deployed from the 66th Rescue Squadron, Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and the pararescuemen are deployed from the 38th Rescue Squadron, Moody AFB, Ga.

"They did an outstanding job," said Lt. Col. Chad Franks, the 64th ERQS commander. "They executed this rescue just like they train. It may seem an extraordinary effort, but that is what these people train for every day.

"I hope people realize, it doesn't matter what service or country you are in, the Combat Search and Rescue team will come and get you," Colonel Franks said.

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