



## Fairchild Airmen rescue stranded hiker

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12/12/2007 - **FAIRCHILD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. (AFP)** -- A four-member crew from the 36th Rescue Flight here rescued a stranded, injured hiker Dec. 4 after an avalanche that killed two others hit in the Snoqualmie Pass area in Washington.

The crew took off Dec. 4 and arrived at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., where they were tasked by the Washington State Department of Transportation emergency management section to head to the avalanche site in search of the stranded hiker.

"We were tasked as soon as we landed and 20 minutes later we were off the ground again," said Capt. Evan Roth, a 36th Rescue Flight co-pilot. "There was a 38-year-old male, his 33-year-old wife, and the man's 38-year-old friend caught in the avalanche."

The wife and the man's friend did not survive.

The crew consisted of Captain Roth, Capt. Amanda Somerville, the pilot; Tech. Sgt. Devin Fisher, the flight engineer; and Staff Sgt. Jason Weiss, the independent duty medical technician; all from the 36th RQF.

Rescuers from the King County Sheriffs Office attempted the rescue earlier in the day, but both times the weather pushed them back.

"We landed at the coordinates given to us, which is where we thought the survivor was going to be," Captain Roth said. "We thought it was going to be a simple (medical evacuation)."

But the assumption was far from what actually occurred through the course of the day. The crew was then given another approximate location of the stranded hiker and took off once again and began a slow search of the area. About 10 minutes into the search, they spotted a ground search party, but could not make contact.

Both the air crew and ground crew had contact with the King County sheriff, but did not have contact with each another. The King County sheriff had to relay information between the two crews. The flight engineer was constantly asking if the helicopter was getting louder or softer, and the 36th RQF crew was able to pinpoint the location of the ground crew and stranded hiker in that way.

"We flew over the (ground party) and the flight engineer and medic were telling us that the ground party team was actually pointing in the direction of where the victim was," Captain Roth said. "So we were doing a search from high to low and were able to spot them."

Once the hiker was located, the flight engineer dropped a smoke grenade so when the helicopter came back around, the crew would be able to relocate him. Unfortunately, the loose snow from the avalanche doused the grenade, making it useless. Captain Roth then marked the location of the hiker in the Global Positioning System. The crew flew two more passes before they saw the hiker again.

"At that point, Captain Somerville slowed the aircraft to a really slow hover and did a treetop walk into the area where we lowered the medic (Sergeant Weiss) by the hoist into the snow," the co-pilot said. "We were debating whether to remain in a hover at that spot or fly around and conserve our fuel. We realized we didn't have enough fuel to stay in a hover or to make it back to McChord (AFB), so we had to change our landing point to Boeing International."

After lowering him down on the hoist, Sergeant Weiss landed in a deep patch of snow at what was thought to be the base of the avalanche. To harden the area of surrounding snow he rolled around, padding out an



A four-member UH-1N Huey crew from Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., rescued a stranded hiker Dec. 4 after an avalanche killed two others hit in the Snoqualmie Pass area in Washington. The crew consisted of Capt. Amanda Somerville, the pilot; Capt. Evan Roth, the co-pilot, Tech. Sgt. Devin Fisher, the flight engineer; and Staff Sgt. Jason Weiss, the independent duty medical technician. The Airmen are assigned to the 36th Rescue Flight. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Andy Dunaway)

extraction point that would make hoisting the victim easier.

"I sunk in about four to five feet of snow," Sergeant Weiss said. "From there I was about 70 to 100 yards from the patient, so I kind of crab crawled on my hands and knees to try to keep from sinking. After about 20 yards, I was able to get my footing under me and the snow was about waist deep at that time."

Sergeant Weiss got to the hiker who was inside of a tent. He said he opened the tent, introduced himself and made a quick assessment. The hiker had a fracture to his lower leg, was unable to place any weight on the leg and was very unstable.

"Luckily, he had coherent thought and was able to talk to me. At that time I asked him how heavy he was. He said he was 176 pounds, so I placed him over my shoulder into a fireman's carry and I carried him out about 30 yards from the heavy wooded area," Sergeant Weiss said.

The fog and snow rolled in and the tree tops were barely visible. When the snow started to get too deep, the medic said he set the hiker down, pulled up the collar on his jacket and pulled him the rest of the way, almost swimming through the deep snow, to the extraction point.

The helicopter came back around and Captain Somerville tried to get into the same spot as the drop off, but because of limited visibility on her side of the aircraft she handed the controls over to Captain Roth.

"Sergeant Fisher talked us into the tight spot. With limited visibility in the front we couldn't see too well, so the flight engineer was hanging out the cabin door, clearing us, making sure we could get as low and as safe as we could without hitting our rotors on anything. You could see the clouds coming down on the rotor tips and it was raining pretty bad at that point," Captain Roth said. "Sergeant Fisher put me where he needed to be for the hoist. Then, halfway during the hoist recovery, we suffered an in-flight emergency when the No. 1 generator failed. We were unable to reset the generator, but were able to continue the hoist and get the medic and survivor back up safely."

After securing the hiker to himself, Sergeant Weiss signaled to be hoisted up to the aircraft from the snowy avalanche bottom. Then, the crew pulled the two into the helicopter and immediately shut the doors and cranked up the heat to warm the hiker.

Other than the fractured leg, the hiker was considered to be suffering from mild hypothermia, but by the time the helicopter got to Harborview Medical Center in Washington, he was nearly rewarmed at 97.8 degrees, Sergeant Weiss said.

"I was pretty sure the crew was going to have to kick out of there because the weather was so bad, but they stuck around and I'm really appreciative that they did," Sergeant Weiss said. "What they did is truly amazing. It goes to show what kind of team you're working with."

It takes an especially dedicated person to put the life of a human in need first, as Sergeant Weiss' wedding night was supposed to be Dec. 4, but was rescheduled to Dec. 7 because of the rescue.

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