



Fairchild helicopter crew rescues fallen hiker

by Tech. Sgt. Larry W. Carpenter Jr.
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11/15/2007 - **FAIRCHILD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. (AFPN)** -- Members of the 36th Rescue Flight here rescued a stranded 20-year-old hiker Nov. 11 about 20 miles south of Missoula, Mont.

Local emergency responders were unable to rescue the man due to the hazardous terrain; therefore the 36th RQF UH-1N Huey flew to the site and lowered an independent-duty medical technician 70 feet via hoist to the stranded hiker.

The man had fallen about 1,000 feet down an avalanche chute, a down-slope hillside pathway along which avalanches repeatedly fall, coming to rest at an elevation of 7,000 feet. The hiker landed on a rock outcropping that allowed him roughly six feet of moving space, from which he called for help using his cell phone.

"When I got to the patient, he was alert and oriented -- shivering and visibly cold -- but he was not severely hypothermic," said Tech. Sgt. Jason Oldenberg, a 36th RQF independent-duty medical technician. "He was moderately hypothermic, but was able to function and ride the forest penetrator up (to the helicopter)."

Once determining the man needed no emergency treatment and was safe for transport, he was hoisted into the helicopter and flown to the rescue team's command post. Instead of both men taking the penetrator up together, Sergeant Oldenberg made the decision that it would be safer to go one at a time. Due to the high winds, this allowed him to stabilize the penetrator so that it would not swing out of control as they hoisted the hiker up to the helicopter.

Along with Sergeant Oldenberg, the rescue crew included Capt. Kevin Burns, the aircraft commander; Capt. Christopher Johnson, the co-pilot; and Staff Sgt. JD Hill, the flight engineer. The rescue was the 620th for the rescue flight.

Sergeant Oldenberg said the patient told him that he was caught in a blizzard before he slid down the hill. The hiker was not equipped for survival. He had a headlamp and a daypack but no survival gear. The headlamp fortunately turned out to be key in signaling the crew to his exact position.

"We got the call at 11:45 that evening," Sergeant Oldenberg said. "When I talked to the patient, he said that he had been out in the elements for 15 hours. I would say that he had approximately two to three hours before going into severe hypothermia. He would have been in a bad situation."

The training that the rescue crews go through ensures that when the time comes, they perform without hesitation and are able to adjust when things don't go exactly as planned.

"I think our training was paramount," he said. "I wouldn't have had the confidence to accomplish the mission in those conditions without the training."

"I'm extremely proud of the rapid response and the great coordination between us, the Air Force Rescue Center, and the ground crew," said Maj. Curtis Wichers, the 36th RQF commander. "The crew displayed great competence in their abilities to get into that tight spot and safely extract the hiker."

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