



Rescue Flight crew makes toughest save of careers

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10/5/2007 - **FAIRCHILD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash.** -- When a rescue team that's been saving lives for more than a decade between them calls one rescue "by far the toughest," you know it's time to sit up and listen. They've got a story to tell.

Those life-saving men are from the 36th Rescue Flight here, and that memorable rescue took place Oct. 1. Over the course of that evening and the next morning, a four-man crew from the 36th saved a 77-year-old man in a rescue they each are calling the most difficult of their careers.

The rescue began with what you could call a routine dispatch; with more than 600 saves under its belt, the Rescue Flight is accustomed to cries for help. The call came from two hunting guides from the Flying B Ranch in Kamiah, Idaho, Scott VanWinkle and Corey Swanson. Their companion and coworker Lloyd Johnson was injured and stranded in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness near Mink Peak in Idaho; they needed airborne assistance to get Mr. Johnson out of the area and to a hospital.

By 5 p.m., the rescue team was on its way. Aircraft commander Capt. Micah West and co-pilot Capt. Christopher Johnson guided the UH-N1 Huey helicopter from Fairchild toward the coordinates given by Mr. VanWinkle and Mr. Swanson via satellite phone.

"It looked like we had time to go to the area, if the coordinates they sent us were correct, and return to Lewiston, Idaho, with him to a hospital," said Captain West. "The only thing that was questionable was the weather; they knew a front was moving through and the clouds were kind of low."

The coordinates given were correct, but that questionable weather quickly turned into an unquestionable problem. Heavy, low cloud cover prevented the crew from getting close enough to the injured man for a rescue. Finally, they had to turn the Huey around and spend the night in Lewiston - a move the crew did not want to make.

"It's a pretty sinking feeling when you have to leave the search area, and you know someone is out there and their life is depending on your abilities to perform," said Tech. Sgt. William Wren, flight engineer. "That's always a really tough thing."

After their mandatory 12-hour crew rest, the team was up and running; they started back toward the coordinates the morning of Oct. 2.

"By that time we knew what we were doing, where we were going - we just checked the weather," said Captain West. "It was significantly better. The front had moved past the area of the search, so our ceiling was much higher."

That raised ceiling allowed the Huey to fly up to 9,000 feet, whereas the night before their limit was about 5,000. Mr. Johnson was located right in the middle at 7,300 feet. Surrounded by steep, jagged rock, the rescue area was not easy to reach, but at last the save looked possible.

The rescue crew had come prepared with a hoist, and quickly saw that the device would be necessary, as the terrain was too steep for landing. Tech. Sgt. Patrick Hunt, independent-duty medical technician with the 36th, was lowered 170 feet to the ground to assess Mr. Johnson's injuries.

"Our plan was to get the medic down, stabilize the guy and bring him up pretty quickly, then fly him to the hospital and go back for gas," said Captain West. "But Sergeant Hunt kept finding more and more injuries he had to work with before we could lift him up."

Those injuries were numerous and serious enough that gas started running out, and the crew had to readjust their plans. They quickly decided to bring the injured man to the flightline in Lewiston, and started working with the control tower to arrange an on-scene ambulance.

While these arrangements were taking place, the crew ran into even more trouble ... The hoist, the critical tool

for raising the patient into the helicopter, failed.

"It failed while we were pulling the guy up on the stokes litter - he was about halfway up," said the captain, explaining that the stokes litter is a basket-like carrier that stabilizes the patient. "At that point, we couldn't take the guy back down to the ground, and we couldn't bring him all the way up. So Sergeant Wren worked on it, and managed to get the hoist working in low speed, and we drug him up by five-foot increments."

Finally, Mr. Johnson was in the helicopter. All of this time, though, the helicopter had continued to use more gas, and Sergeant Hunt, the medic, was still on the ground. Plus, the hoist Sergeant Hunt needed to get back on board was already having problems.

"We considered having the medic hike back out with the two companions, since he was healthy enough to do it," said Captain West. "I decided we had enough gas for one more pass, so we came back around to try the hoist. If it didn't work, we'd have to leave him there - we knew we only had one pass to pick him up."

During that pass, Sergeant Wren called upon all of his training and experience, and got the hoist working. They pulled the medic up in low speed, and though there was a bit of turbulence on the way up, got Sergeant Hunt back into the Huey.

"We flew back at our max speed all the way to Lewiston; we landed right with our required gas reserve, 200 pounds," said Captain West.

A successful save in the end, and perhaps successful only because everyone involved did everything right, from the crew members to the civilian men on the ground. Mr. Johnson, a retired Marine, and his two companions are all experienced woodsmen and wilderness guides; they knew how to handle the accident even when they had to stay overnight in the woods.

"Lloyd Johnson has worked in the Idaho backcountry for a long time and is very well-versed in how to handle himself, even in the worst of circumstances," said Karen McLain, guest services manager at the ranch. "He's a tough guy."

Big game manager Mr. Van Winkle and guide Mr. Swanson spent the night with Mr. Johnson and did everything they could to keep him warm and alert. Not only did their responsibilities include caring for their patient, they also maintained a large bonfire so the Huey could locate them from the air, and kept watch over a pack string of 12 mules.

"From the time the incident took place, we knew Lloyd's life was in our hands," said Mr. Van Winkle. "He was injured on the worst part of the mountain, exposing us to severe wind gusts and snow, making it very difficult to keep him warm. But in the end Lloyd came through because of his strong nature, and we thank God for the great crew that was able to come in and perform the very difficult mission we laid before them."

"Those guys definitely contributed to this man staying alive," added Sergeant Wren. "They were able to keep him warm and tend to any needs they could meet."

Pair that with a rescue crew Sergeant Wren called "impeccable," and you have an astounding rescue story.

"If you're not firing on all cylinders during a time like this, bad things happen," he said. "That was definitely a huge factor to the success of this mission - everyone brought their A-game ... Mr. Johnson is also one of the toughest men I've ever met. That's a man with an incredible will to live."

And a crew with an incredible will to save, though you won't hear them bragging about it.

"I'm just a man who happens to have the right training to do the job," said Sergeant Wren, who will retire from the Air Force Oct. 12. This rescue mission was his last. "I was blessed to be a part of this. There's nothing better than being able to help out your fellow man."