



AAC Publications

SEARCH AND RESCUE AWARDS

The AAC and Rocky Talkie partnered again in 2023 to solicit nominations for the annual Rocky Talkie Search and Rescue Awards. These awards recognize standout rescues performed by volunteer SAR teams in the previous year, with the goal of driving greater community awareness of the incredible contributions these volunteers make to our mountain community. This year, \$36,000 in grant funding was split among the winning teams. (Rocky Talkie allocates \$2 from every radio sold to SAR funding.) For more info, visit the AAC's SAR Awards page.

HOOD RIVER CRAG RATS + PORTLAND MOUNTAIN RESCUE Mt. Hood, Oregon

Around 5 p.m. on January 26, 2022, a snowboarder (male, 28) was riding off the Hogsback, a steep ridge high on Mt. Hood. The snow surface was very firm and icy, and the snowboarder lost an edge. He slid off the ridge and fell into a large cavity in the snow over the Devil's Kitchen fumarole. (A fumarole is a vent in the earth that emits volcanic gasses.) From the snow surface, he fell about 30 feet to rocks in the bottom of the cavity. The snowboarder sustained a broken leg that prevented him from climbing out. His situation was dire because the Devil's Kitchen fumarole vents steam and hydrogen sulfide gas that can accumulate at toxic levels in the cavity. His two partners witnessed the fall and called 911.

The Hood River Crag Rats and Portland Mountain Rescue (PMR) both were dispatched. Volunteer rescuers began arriving at Timberline Lodge around 7:30 p.m. Team 1, consisting of 10 rescuers from both units, rode a snowcat to the top of the Palmer ski lift (8,500') and proceeded from there on foot. They reached the fumarole at 10,000 feet at roughly 10:30 p.m. The snowboarder's two partners were becoming hypothermic, and they were provided with fluids, food, and a heat blanket.

To protect against toxic hydrogen sulfide gas, any rescuer entering a fumarole snow cavity must wear a respirator, goggles, and a monitor that sounds an alarm if gas concentrations reach dangerous levels. To determine if it is safe for a rescuer to be in a fumarole cavity even with protective equipment, PMR uses a second monitor to remotely measure gas levels. One rescuer donned protective equipment while others rigged the PMR-designed Counterweight Fumarole Extraction system, with which rescuers on the surface can haul a rescuer and patient out using mechanical advantage.

When the rescuer reached the patient at the bottom of the fumarole cavity at 11:10 p.m., he found the patient's injuries would require using a litter for extraction. Another rescuer, a physician, rappelled into the fumarole on a second rope system to assist in packaging the patient. Team 1 then extracted both rescuers and the patient from the fumarole about six hours after he fell in.

Team 2, consisting of rescuers from both units as well as paramedics from American Medical Response, arrived at Devil's Kitchen around midnight. One member of Team 2 escorted the injured party's partners down to Timberline Lodge. Team 2 then began lowering the patient in a litter 1,500 feet down to the Palmer ski lift on extremely icy, steep slopes. From the top of the lift, the patient was transferred into a snowcat and transported to the parking lot, where an ambulance was waiting. All personnel were out of the field by 3:45 a.m.

INYO COUNTY SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mt. Emerson, California

At around 2 p.m. on May 27, Inyo County Search and Rescue coordinators were notified that an emergency satellite beacon had been activated on Mt. Emerson in the High Sierra. One member of a party of three climbers had been struck by rockfall at a belay station, breaking her leg and foot in several places. The climbers were about 1,500 feet up the southeast face (III 5.4), at an elevation of about 12,000 feet. The SAR team was activated, and coordinators requested a helicopter from California Highway Patrol.

The SAR team noted that a cold wind system was forecasted to arrive and persist through the weekend, possibly affecting a helicopter's ability to hoist the patient. The expected weather also meant a potentially life-threatening situation if the party had to spend the night out on the mountain. Plan A would be to attempt a helicopter hoist, but the more likely Plan B would mean assisting the party by climbing and descending the route on Mt. Emerson. Plan B would mean an all-nighter.

Shortly before 6 p.m., an attempted helicopter hoist failed due to gusty winds. Over the next few hours, six SAR members and their equipment were dropped off at 10,500 feet. Team members started climbing the southeast face right as darkness fell, with the first member arriving at the patient by around 9:45 p.m. The patient was assessed and packaged in a vacuum splint and rescue litter. By midnight, it was time to begin the long process of descending the route.

During a previous rescue on the same route on Mt. Emerson, in 2019, an Inyo SAR member had been struck and significantly injured by rockfall. With this in mind, the descent was executed in careful stages to minimize the number of people exposed to rockfall and to mitigate the perils of working in the dark, cold, and windy conditions. One SAR member would rappel a 300-foot rope and establish an anchor in a safe spot. The uninjured subjects would rappel to that spot. Next, the litter with the injured person would be lowered on two ropes, along with three litter attendants, while each rope was controlled by a SAR member. Each of these cycles took well over an hour, and rockfall was a constant hazard.

The patient reached the ground around 9 a.m. after five 300-foot lowers. From the base of the route, about 20 SAR members, who had hiked through the night to reach the climb, carried the patient through a large talus field and wheeled the litter out to the trailhead and a waiting ambulance. She reached the hospital about 24 hours after the accident.

CHELAN COUNTY MOUNTAIN RESCUE

Enchantments, Washington

On October 10, Chelan County Mountain Rescue (CCMR) responded to an incident involving a hiker who had become trapped under a large boulder. The hiker and a friend had gotten off the trail near Lake Viviane in the Enchantments, nearly 10 miles from the road, when he dislodged the rock that pinned him.

Alerted to the accident in midmorning, the Snohomish County Helicopter Rescue Team was able to insert two medics above the patient, who was located on a very steep, rocky embankment. The situation was worse than expected. Both of the hikers' legs and his left arm were pinned by a boulder the size of a refrigerator. The boulder also was wedged between a rock wall and a tree. The medics set up an anchor, rappelled to the site, and worked to stabilize the patient, who had already lost a lot of blood.

Chelan County Fire District and CCMR personnel arrived by helicopter, aiming to use inflatable airbags

to lift the rock off the hiker. The rescuers were able to free the patient's arm but not his legs, and any wrong move might do further damage. While personnel from the fire district, Cascade Medical, and the Helicopter Rescue Team worked with the patient, the CCMR team began planning for either a raise or lower from the location, depending on whether a helicopter hoist would be possible. They also laid plans for a potential trail evacuation.

Rescuers considered cutting down the tree anchoring the boulder, but feared the rock might roll onto a team member or crush the patient's legs even more. One of the most experienced CCMR members hung from a rope, dug through the blood-soaked earth, and advocated for one more attempt with an airbag, despite being in the line of fire if the rock rolled. As the bag inflated, the rock shifted just enough that rescuers were able to pull out the hiker. The medics then tended to a large bleeding wound in his right leg and packaged him in a litter.

The Snohomish County Helicopter Team attempted a hoist, but sudden downdrafts caused them to abort. Another helicopter tried to land above the scene, and CCMR prepared to raise the patient and then carry him to that landing zone, but after about 10 minutes in the area, that helicopter also had to leave due to gusty winds.

CCMR set up a lowering operation to get the patient to the bottom of the face, with the expectation of carrying him to a lower landing zone or even all the way to the trailhead. They feared the patient might not survive such a long evacuation. Luckily for all involved, the Snohomish County Helicopter Rescue Team was able to return one more time and successfully hoist the patient from the scene. He was transferred to the hospital for emergency surgery and the start of a long recovery.

Images

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