



AAC Publications

Rocky Talky Search and Rescue Awards

2021 Incidents

Rocky Talkie and the AAC partnered in early 2022 to solicit nominations for the Rocky Talkie Search and Rescue Awards. These awards recognize stand-out rescues from the previous year; \$25,000 in grant funding is split among the winning teams. (Rocky Talkie allocates \$2 from every radio sold to SAR funding.) More than 5,000 people voted on the top nominations, and the lead vote-getter and three runners-up are highlighted below. For detailed stories and photos, visit rockytalkie.com/SARaward.

OURAY MOUNTAIN RESCUE

July 30, 2021

As the worst storm of the summer bore down on tiny Ouray, Colorado, a handful of climbers hustled to descend nearby Mt. Sneffels (14,157 feet). Sneffels' summit is guarded by several moves of tricky climbing, now coated with verglas. One of the climbers, a 50-year-old man, slipped and cartwheeled past his hiking partner, falling 40 feet to rocks below.

The partner scrambled down to check on him and immediately called for a rescue. In early afternoon, dispatchers contacted Ouray Mountain Rescue Team (OMRT). "Confirmed fatality," the message read. "Send help." Just 25 minutes later, the team got a second message: "Cancel." Not sure what to expect, the volunteers loaded gear into rescue vehicles and made a beeline for the remote trailhead.

By the time they arrived, the fallen climber's partner and a few other hikers had made it down to the base of the mountain. The storm had hit the peak while they waited for help, and between flashing lighting, sheeting rain, and sub-20°F temperatures, it hadn't been safe for them to stay with the injured man. They said the man was alive, but badly injured. OMRT volunteers made sure the victim's partner got proper care and then waited in their vehicles for a break in the weather. By now the man had been lying in the rocks, drenched and freezing, for at least six hours. The odds for survival weren't looking good.

The storm cell eventually sputtered out, and Grant Kleeves, a longtime OMRT volunteer and accomplished mountaineer, OMRT lieutenant Patrick Brighton, and two other rescuers started hiking up the mountain. As the rescuers approached the narrow bench where the patient lay, Kleeves called out to the man and saw his eyelids flicker. Shocked, Kleeves turned around: "Get on the radio—he's still alive!"

The patient had entered the late stages of hypothermia. When that happens, the body sends out a final burst of heat. Though he was literally dying from cold, the patient had shrugged out of his jacket and started to remove his shirt. It's a phenomenon called "paradoxical undressing."

The rescuers started assessing the patient, wrapped him in sleeping bags, and gave him oxygen. They soon found he'd fractured his skull—and that there was no way he could be safely carried down the mountain without doing further damage. Brighton, a surgeon in his day job, listened to the man's erratic breathing. He radioed down to base camp: "We don't think he's going to survive the night."

OMRT captain Ruth Stewart had made multiple calls to request helicopter support, but the operators

said flying in these conditions wouldn't be possible. By now it was pitch black and there was more bad weather coming. Brighton's team would have to stay put. So, the four volunteers on the mountain unpacked their one remaining sleeping bag and huddled against the rock. It was going to be a long night.

As the patient's muscles began to warm up and he became more alert, he grew combative. He started rolling, clawing at his oxygen, and trying to walk off the narrow platform. The rescuers tried to calm the man, but nothing worked. Dodging flailing limbs, they held him down. Ultimately, they had to clip him to an anchor they'd built, effectively tying him to the mountain.

For the first four hours of the night, the rescuers took turns sitting with their legs draped over the patient, both to keep him warm and to keep him from throwing himself off the ledge. Around midnight, the patient fell into a deeper sleep. His condition seemed to be stabilizing, but the rescuers were still worried. They were in radio contact with doctors at the local hospital, but there was only so much they could do. The only option was to keep the patient warm and wait.

Meanwhile, far below the summit, the rain and hail had swelled into a landslide that took out the narrow mountain road to the trailhead. Brighton's team was cut off. Then a local miner named Bumper Williams called the team. Ouray is a small town, and Williams had heard about the ongoing rescue. He volunteered to bring a bulldozer from the mine and clear the road. Within minutes, the operation was back on track.

Up on the mountain, with his medications and oxygen resupplied, the patient's breathing started to even out. The rescuers switched out heat packs regularly, working through exhaustion to keep him warm. Around 4 a.m., as a hint of light peered above the horizon, Kleeves heard mumbling. He turned.

"Why are you sitting on me?!" the patient asked.

Kleeves couldn't help but smile. Looking down at the man they'd fought to save—and fought with—all night, he felt a wave of gratitude. A few hours later, just as the sun peeked over the saddle, the patient was airlifted off the peak.

TAHOE NORDIC SEARCH AND RESCUE

January 28, 2021

Ten feet of snow over three days had loaded every chute west of Lake Tahoe virtually to the breaking point. On his last run of the day, a snowboarder took a wrong turn at Sugar Bowl Resort and carved down into a ravine called Coldstream Canyon. By the time he realized he was lost, retracing his steps was impossible in the chest-deep snow. The snowboarder, an off-duty California Highway Patrol officer in his mid-40s, used his phone to call for help as darkness fell.

Even though the man was only a mile away, ski patrol believed there was no safe way to reach him from above, given the extreme avalanche danger. Poring over a map, the Tahoe Nordic SAR team laid two plans: One group would attempt to ski a circuitous five-mile route over lower-angle terrain, while another would head directly up the canyon with a Sno-cat and three snowmobiles. When the Cat bogged down, 1.5 miles from the snowboarder, rescuers fought through the deep snow on foot. It took another three hours to reach the patient, just before 1 a.m., where they outfitted him with snowshoes and started for home.

LARIMER COUNTY SEARCH AND RESCUE

July 19, 2021

The Happy Hour Crag in northern Colorado's Poudre Canyon is named because it's quite close to the road and easy to access after work. But when a climber at the crag fell 30 feet and suffered an open fracture in his back, the ensuing rescue in complex terrain made a mockery of the Happy Hour name.

To access the patient, a man in his early 20s, Larimer County SAR teams had to be ferried across the Cache La Poudre River, climb a loose 250-foot gully, and traverse a narrow ledge across the multi-tiered cliff. As medics treated the climber and packaged him in a litter, one of the team members rappelled off the ledge to scope a descent route through a narrow chimney. They started down with the patient around 1 a.m. After lowering him down the cliff and scree gully, he was ferried across the river and then hauled up a steep bank to the road, arriving shortly before dawn.

LAS VEGAS METROPOLITAN POLICE SEARCH AND RESCUE

October 20, 2021

Nearing the top of the Red Rock Canyon classic Epinephrine, two brothers were simul-climbing the moderate exit ramps when the leader slipped. The leader had just downclimbed to adjust his highest piece, and the extra slack added to the force of his fall. All three pieces he'd placed pulled out, and suddenly both men were tumbling toward the base of the cliff, more than 1,000 feet below. Yet something stopped them.

A Las Vegas Metropolitan Police SAR team responded via helicopter, flying with night vision equipment. Locating the climbers with a spotlight, they realized to their amazement that the climbers' rope had snagged on a tiny rock knob—this was all that was keeping them on the face. After picking up a bolt kit, rescuer Ben Williams and a police officer were flown to the slabby face and dropped off on a small ledge. Williams quickly drilled an anchor, lowered down, and very carefully clipped the stranded climbers' rope into the new anchor. After backing everything up, rescuers belayed and raised the two climbers to the anchor, from which they were flown to safety.

Images



Clear skies finally allow a helicopter to approach the summit of Mt. Sneffels in Colorado after a severe storm trapped an injured man and prompted an all-night rescue.



Rescuers with Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue move through a heavy storm toward a stranded snowboarder.



Rescuers maneuver a patient down rugged terrain toward the Cache La Poudre River.

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