National Park Service
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Grand Teton
National Park

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Grand Teton National Park News Release

Eight Grand Teton National Park Rangers Receive Department of the Interior Valor Awards

Dan Burgette, Chris Harder, Craig Holm, Leo Larson, Jack McConnell, George Montopoli, Jim Springer and Marty Vidak will each receive a Department of the Interior Valor Award at a special ceremony to be held on February 2, 2005 in Washington D.C. These eight Grand Teton National Park rangers, from the Jenny Lake rescue team, are being recognized for their heroic actions, courage, and professionalism in risking their personal safety to bring multiple injured climbers safely out of the Teton Range after lightning struck the mountaineers during an afternoon storm on July 26, 2003. Lives were saved as a safe evacuation of seriously injured climbers was executed through the collective efforts of these eight rangers and the exceptional skills and support of the rest of the Jenny Lake rescue team, numerous other Grand Teton National Park rangers, interagency dispatchers, two contact helicopter pilots, Bridger-Teton National Forest helitack crews, and Teton County and Idaho Air ambulance personnel.

A group of thirteen mountaineers from Idaho were climbing Grand Teton's Exum Ridge on July 26, 2003 when a passing thunderstorm produced a lightning bolt that struck eight members of the party at 3:45 p.m., injuring seven climbers – five of whom were seriously injured. As the group climbed at an elevation of 13,000 feet on a section called the Friction Pitch, Erica Summers took a direct hit and was instantly killed. Her husband, Clinton, sitting next to her on a rock ledge, was rendered unconscious from the lightning strike and sustained serious injuries. The force of the electrical charge knocked Rod Liberal off the rock wall where he was climbing just below the Summers, leaving him unconscious and hanging upside down in his climbing harness. Three other climbers standing on a narrow ledge at the base of the Friction Pitch were also knocked unconscious and tumbled down the cliff face until their rope became entangled in some rocks 100 feet below. Shortly after the lightning storm hit the group, Teton Interagency Dispatch Center received a cell phone call for help, beginning a complicated rescue mission that lasted eight hours.

Several factors made the ensuing rescue extraordinarily difficult; the incident occurred at a high mountain elevation, the weather continued to be unsettled and cold, and it was late in the day, leaving minimal time for completing a rescue before darkness. An initial reconnaissance flight confirmed that multiple patients were scattered in various locations across the steep rock face. Liberal, who was hanging on a cliff, appeared near death until he slightly moved his head and one hand. Reaching him to provide critical medical care became the top priority.

The quickest way to place rescuers at the scene of a mountain accident is by helicopter using the short-haul technique. This system involves suspending a rescuer by a 100-foot long rope below a hovering helicopter and inserting (placing) that rescuer onto a cliff face or rock ledge near the patient. Although this technique is very efficient, it involves inherent risks that can include variable weather conditions and placement of a helicopter near mountainous terrain.

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To begin the rescue, rangers were first flown to the Lower Saddle of the Grand Teton at an elevation of 11,600 feet to set up a rescue base and rig ropes for a short-haul operation. The first attempt to short-haul a rescuer to the scene had to be aborted due to clouds obscuring the peak. Consequently, two rangers were sent on foot from the Lower Saddle rescue base to the Friction Pitch. In order to reach the injured climbers as quickly as possible, these rangers climbed the steep ridge without being roped up.

When the clouds cleared, six other rangers were short-hauled from the Lower Saddle to a higher location where the injured were waiting. Over the next five hours on steep technical terrain, rangers set up climbing anchors, rappelled to the multiple patients, conducted medical assessments, rendered initial first aid and prepared patients for evacuation from the ledge.

Four of the injured climbers were short-haul air lifted from the Friction Pitch to the Lower Saddle where they were then placed inside a second helicopter and flown to waiting ground and air ambulances on the valley floor. Liberal, the fifth and most seriously injured climber, was placed in a basket-like device called a litter. Then rangers used ropes and pulleys to raise the litter containing Liberal to the top of the cliff where it was then attached to short-haul ropes for a helicopter flight to the valley floor. A park ranger was tethered to the litter carrying Liberal and suspended from the helicopter by short-haul ropes to accompany and medically attend the critically injured man during the flight out of the mountains to a waiting air ambulance. This final rescue maneuver was completed just 20 minutes before it became too dark to fly. Had rangers been unable to complete this final rescue mission, Liberal would have been forced to spend the night on the mountain, greatly reducing his chance of survival. As the rescue concluded, rangers climbed the remaining portions of the Exum Ridge route and descended from the Grand Teton in darkness. The entire rescue operation was not completed until midnight.

After being evacuated from the mountain, two patients were flown from Lupine Meadows by air ambulance directly to the Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center (EIRMC) in Idaho Falls, Idaho. From EIRMC, Liberal was flown directly to the University of Utah Medical Center's Burn Unit in Salt Lake City, Utah. Three of the other seriously injured patients were transported for treatment to St. John’s Medical Center in Jackson, Wyoming.

The Jenny Lake rescue team and support personnel intensively train each year, practicing short-haul maneuvers and other rescue techniques. This level of preparedness made it possible for the rescue team to execute a highly complex mission and safely evacuate five seriously injured people – two of whom may not have survived without the skills of the team.

This mass casualty incident is considered to be the most complex rescue ever conducted during the fifty-three year history of the park’s Jenny Lake rescue team.

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