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Mayor's Gala: Dangerous rescue saved 2 hikers

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LAS CRUCES - The two hikers were determined to get to the top of Florida Peak outside Deming but found themselves trapped on a small ledge as a winter storm rolled in the evening of Dec. 16, 2010. Clad only in T-shirts and shorts, the two young women were about to endure a long ordeal that put the climbers of the Organ Mountain Technical Rescue Squad through one of their most dangerous and complicated missions in years. In the end, the hikers were airlifted by helicopter in a dramatic rescue.

"We were in a rain cloud the entire night," said Marta Reece, one of the Rescue Squad members who will be honored as Local Heroes at Friday's 2011 Spirit of the Red Cross Mayor's Gala. The temperatures were close to freezing, and gusting winds were strong enough to lift her off her feet, she said. The slick rock was crumbling underfoot, she said.

The first attempts by rescuers to rappel down from the top of the peak to the two women below were not successful. One of the climbers, Kenny Coppedge, crawled up to the ledge where one girl had already passed out from hypothermia and the other was hoarse after so much yelling.

"Kenny really did save those girls," Reece said.

The winter storm conditions made it impossible for climbers to see, especially when trying to climb down. During the night, several rescue members found themselves pinned or unable to go forward while others were simply lost.

Reece said that the rescue team found the girls more by voice and the brief flashing of

their camera than by the GPS coordinates, which were inexact.

"There was an error of plus or minus a mountain (of the GPS units)," Reece said.

The frigid, gusting conditions put the rescue team

in danger of hypothermia as well, she said.

A second climber, Aaron Hobson, also made it to the ledge, and by using knotted rope cords stuffed into a crack in the mountain was able to "MacGyver" an anchor, according to Reece.

Reece was at the top of the peak belaying out rope to climbers below as they moved the girls from the ledge to a skirt of rock around the peak. The girl who was in the worst condition was carried on one climber's back, she said.

Because of the girls' deteriorating condition, rescuers decided that they could not risk taking them all the way down the mountain. After they were off the ledge, a Deming Fire Department paramedic was there to take care of the girls. (Two other hikers who were with the girls had managed to get to a lower altitude, where Deming rescuers set up a fire).

However, a quick decision was made to evacuate the girls by Border Patrol helicopter, Reece said. There was no real landing point for the helicopter, so the pilot radioed down that he could hover with one skid touching the top of a cone of rock that had a surface about the size of a dining room table, Reece said.

The pilot also said he had about 10 seconds to hover there in dangerous winds.

Rescuers climbed to the top of the cone with the girls and laid themselves flat as the chopper touched down. The pilot threw open the door and rescuers loaded the two girls in as fast as possible.



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The girls had been trapped on the ledge at 5 p.m. on the 16th. It was past daybreak on the 17th when they were finally on their way to the hospital.

Later, the rescuers themselves would be evacuated by helicopter.

The crumbling rock, lack of visibility and freezing conditions with ferocious winds made this mission one of the most complicated in recent Rescue Squad history, Reece said.

"It was a lot of pressure, intense and sustained pressure," she said.

Fortunately, both girls recovered, though one was in the hospital for days, Reece said.

"I am Facebook friends with one of them now," she said.

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