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National Guard rescue team saves two hikers at Penguin Peak

First hoist rescue save for new medevac unit

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — The Alaska National Guard, in a joint effort between the Army Guard's 2nd Battalion, 104th Aviation and the Air Guard's 212th Rescue Squadron, saved two hikers this morning near Penguin Peak, between Bird Creek and Girdwood in the Chugach Mountain Range.

One of the hikers was injured after falling about 30 feet from a ridge into a saddle, and was unable to walk. After receiving a 9-1-1 emergency call from the hikers, the Alaska State Troopers contacted the Alaska Rescue Coordination Center with a request for assistance.

The RCC requested medical evacuation support from the 2-104th's Golf Company, Detachment 2, and pararescue assets from the 212th Rescue Squadron. An Army Guard UH-60 Black Hawk, aircrew and flight medic departed Bryant Army Airfield on JBER and picked up the pararescuemen at the Girdwood baseball fields.

"They were prepped and ready, standing by at the Girdwood Fire Station, and the baseball fields were an open area where we could get them quickly and head to the saddle," said 2nd Lt. Cody McKinney, commander of the medevac unit and pilot for this mission.

"On the way to Girdwood, we reconned the ridgeline and saw the hikers," said McKinney. "We indicated that we saw them with a wave of the aircraft, went to pick up the PJs, then headed straight to the guys on the mountain."

The two men were in steep, rocky terrain at 3,600-ft. elevation, in a saddle about 200-ft.-wide and 75-ft. deep, with the injured hiker at the bottom, said McKinney.

"His companion had climbed to the adjacent peak to wave us down," said McKinney.

The pararescuemen hoisted down to the peak and descended to the injured hiker to assess his injuries and ability to get to higher ground for extraction. It was determined that he could not walk, and both hikers were hoisted out from the saddle, with the Black Hawk at about 70 feet above ground.

Once in the helicopter, the flight medic and PJs checked vitals and provided medical assessment and care while en route to Anchorage.

The medevac unit stood up in 2017, and it was another year before aircrews and flight medics had completed the required, specialized training necessary for medevac missions.

“Our flight medics are nationally certified critical care flight paramedics,” said McKinney. “They go to school for nearly two years.”

This was the first time the new Alaska Army National Guard medevac unit performed a real-world rescue mission with hoist. They have continuously trained and have performed hoist missions for other scenarios, but this was a life-saver.

“We train for this and everyone in our unit is an Alaskan, and we are always ready and prepared to support state and federal missions,” said McKinney. “Being able to bring someone home is priceless.”

For this mission, the AKRCC, 212th RQS and 2-104th AVN were awarded two saves.

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Photos and video, courtesy of UH-60 crew chief Staff Sgt. Brad McKenzie

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A paramedic with the Alaska Air National Guard’s 212th Rescue Squadron assesses an injured hiker inside an Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter after two hikers were hoisted off of an Alaskan mountain, July 17, 2019. One of the hikers was injured after falling about 30 feet from a ridge into a saddle, and was unable to walk. The Alaska National Guard, in a joint effort between the Army Guard’s 2nd Battalion, 104th Aviation and the Air Guard’s 212th Rescue Squadron, responded to the incident near Penguin Peak, between Bird Creek and Girdwood in the Chugach Mountain Range. The hikers were in steep, rocky terrain at 3,600-ft. elevation, in a saddle about 200-ft.-wide and 75-ft. deep, with the injured hiker at the bottom, said McKinney. (Courtesy photo by crew chief Staff Sgt. Brad McKenzie)