

Unexpected Complications Turn Hoist Mission Dangerous

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Many of the missions the Oregon Army National Guard gets called for start with people, often tourists, trying to enjoy nature, but getting into situations they can't get themselves out of, said Staff Sgt. Benjamin Sjullie. With nature being unpredictable, those missions can turn dangerous quickly.

"I had a mission in the gorge a couple of years ago where it was three kids who had gone out for a day hike," Sjullie said. "They did not expect to spend the night, and they ended up getting lost and leaving the trail. This was over by Cascade Locks on the Oregon side, where it's pretty steep, rocky and mountainous. Luckily they had cellphone coverage, so they were able to call, but they couldn't really describe where they were. So they used a signal fire on a little rock ledge. There was a waterfall right there by them. They could see the gorge and they could see the Columbia River, but they couldn't get down because it was about a 200-foot drop right there, and it stopped them from going any further.

"When we got to the location, it was a really tough hoist because although we have 350-foot cable on our hoist, the trees in that area are about 190 to 250 feet tall, and we were on a 65-degree incline on the hillside," he said. "So you add that incline, plus the height of the trees, and we were running out of cable. It was really thick there, so we spent a lot of time getting me on the ground."

Once on the ground, the situation quickly changed.

“The whole time we were hovering we didn’t realize their campfire, which we assumed was out, was not out,” Sjullie said. “So, when they finally got me down on the ground on the hillside, one of the pilots let me know over the radio they were low on fuel, so they were going to have to go to Troutdale, (Oregon), and get some fuel. I said, ‘No problem. I’ll get them ready to go. By the time you get back, we’ll be waiting for you.’ Well, once the helicopter took off and the rotor wash died down, the fire picked up, so we had this huge fire all of a sudden on the hillside, and it was just filling up the drop zone that I was in.

“Once I lost sight of the treetops, I knew we were no longer going to be able to get into a hoist there, so we took off,” he said. “I kept saving my GPS locations as I was talking to the helicopter, and I think we traveled more than a mile and a half just to get to a location where the helicopter could get us out. It was tough because the kids, they were all 18 years old, and they were wearing board shorts, skater shoes and tank tops. They had spent the night out there, so they were freaked out. We had this fire that was chasing us up the hill. It was tough. They kept slipping down the hill. It was supposed to be a simple mission. It was the middle of August, and none of us had water. I was in full gear.”

With Sjullie pulling them up the hill at times, they eventually made it to where the helicopter could pull them up.

“They were running on adrenaline, but when we hoisted them — we did three separate hoists and we got them up and out of there — they weren’t injured, so we took them down and landed in a park near the river,” Sjullie said. “The parents were there waiting with some firemen and medics. Once we hit the ground and they knew they were safe and they saw their parents, they just all lost it.”