

Civil Air Patrol

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Tsunami!

Hawaii Wing Warns Of Impending Danger

A Helping Hand

Member Provides
Medical Relief In Haiti

Going For Gold

Former Cadet Dreams
Of Olympic Gold Medal

Neither Rain, Nor Sleet, Nor Snow...



Photo by Capt. Crystal D. Housman, California Wing

By Jennifer S. Kornegay

The natural beauty of Southern California beckons many to the sky for an eagle's-eye view, but the rugged terrain can be both a blessing and curse for the pilots who fly over it. A recent plane crash in the area during a brutal storm put Civil Air Patrol on the front lines of search and rescue efforts, testing its will and skill.



Photo by 1st Lt. Chris Mattson, California Wing

Above: Maj. Roy Hofheinz, left, Senior Member Gene Ramirez and Capt. Frank Tullo are members of the CAP aircrew from the California Wing's Palm Springs Composite Squadron 11 that located the crashed plane, above, in Joshua Tree National Park. Their quick response during terrible weather led to the rescue of the plane's instructor and student pilot.

A day that began with a routine flight in clear skies ended with two people trapped in the wreckage of an upside-down plane as night closed in fast, rain and sleet fell and temperatures plunged well below freezing. Thanks to the quick thinking, organization and pure grit of several squadrons in CAP's California Wing, the plane's pilots, Warner Henry and Rocky Harvey, were found alive and were rescued.

The morning of Jan. 18, flight instructor Henry and student pilot Harvey took off from Roy Williams Field in Joshua Tree in a single-engine Cessna 172 headed to Palm Springs. Their flight path took them directly over desolate Joshua Tree National Park. As a storm moved in, the aircraft got caught in a downdraft and crashed on one of the park's highest points, Quail Mountain. "It was a training flight, and Warner was aware of the weather but wanted to use it to teach me," Harvey said.

Park Richardson, owner of the airport where Harvey and Henry took off and one of Henry's close friends, praised Henry's reaction in a bad situation. "I've worked with Warner for 32 years, and he's an excellent pilot," Richardson said. "He got caught in a circular downdraft, but he managed to slow the aircraft down; that's why they survived the initial crash. Then, thanks to CAP, they survived."

Harvey recalled his first thoughts after the crash. "When we went down, all I was thinking about was how we could get in touch with someone in case they couldn't

Capt. Matt Scherzi of the California Wing's Saddleback Composite Squadron 68 served as information officer for the mission. A 10-year senior observer with CAP who has participated in more than 50 active missions, Scherzi said the Joshua Tree search and rescue was particularly satisfying. "In all my years and all my missions, this was one of the few that resulted in actual survivors," he said. "It makes our day as CAP members; it makes all those weeks of looking for people who didn't survive worthwhile."



find us," he said. He found the hand-held radio but couldn't find the antenna, so that was out. Then he found Henry's cell phone, but there was no service.

With a broken leg, Harvey dragged himself out of the plane and crawled up the ridge about 200 yards away in an attempt to get a cell signal. "I couldn't get anything, and I was too tired to get back in the plane," he said. "I actually dozed off, and then woke up to rain at about 1:30 p.m. I knew then that I had to get back in the plane, or I would freeze."

But Harvey never needed to make that grueling trip. By noon that day CAP was already working the mission and on the hunt for the downed plane. Around 11:30 a.m., Capt. Frank Tullo of Palm Springs Composite Squadron 11 got the call that an emergency locator transmitter signal had been detected. When ELTs are sounding off, there's little time for speculation or preparation, so CAP stays ready to spring into action. Tullo and two other Squadron 11 members, Maj. Roy Hofheinz and Senior Member Gene Ramirez, took off to begin the air search.

"I was the lead pilot and observer on this mission. Gene was the left seat pilot and Roy was the scanner. This was, without a doubt, the most difficult mission I've ever been on, thanks to the storm," Tullo said. "The weather was awful, so it was important to have Gene since he's instrument-rated. We had rough air, icing conditions and heavy rain."

The crew spent the first part of their time in the air trying to pinpoint the ELT signal with the original coordinates they were given, but when Squadron 11 ground team leader Maj. John Craig provided new, more accurate information, the search took them deeper into the storm. The crew flew for two hours in the nasty conditions before they finally picked up the signal and were able to give an exact latitude and longitude to the ground team. Tullo, Hofheinz and Ramirez never even saw the crash site. "We were in total instrument conditions," Tullo said. "We couldn't see anything below."

But Harvey and Henry could hear them. "That gave us hope. We thought, 'Good, they know where we are,' but we didn't expect them to come for us until the morning," Harvey said. "We were hurt, but we could still talk, and we just settled in for what we knew would be a long night.

We wondered if we would survive surviving the crash.”

While Tullo and the others were in the air, Maj. Bob Keilholtz of San Diego Senior Squadron 57 was beginning the search on the ground. He used the initial reports of the ELT to acquire a signal, then took his own bearings. The resulting location was one he felt he could reach — although it was tough going even on the best day. He and Park Ranger Dan Messaros made their first attempt to get up Quail Mountain around 4 p.m. “After a little ways down a road, we hit a wilderness area, so we got out of the car and hiked,” Keilholtz said.

Then darkness came, bringing with it sleet, snow and slippery, icy ground. “We could tell where the plane was, but we couldn’t see it,” he said. With the weather worsening, Keilholtz and the ranger made the difficult decision to turn back and return with more people.

They made it back to the same spot a few hours later, and one of the team shouted out, “search and rescue.” Then, after a few anxious moments, they heard Henry’s faint response.

“Around 10 p.m., I heard someone call out to us. Those were the best words I’ve ever heard in my life. It was our rescuers,” Harvey said. “I was so grateful to them, and so grateful that they came out at night. I honestly don’t think I would have made it till morning. It was so cold.”

While the whole team was elated to know there were survivors, immediately the searchers had a new set of troubles on their hands, as Keilholtz explained. “What first went through my mind was ‘great’ and then ‘oh no,’” he said. “These guys had hypothermia and broken bones. One was almost totally nonresponsive, so we knew we had a battle with time now. We had to get them out fast.”

Keilholtz reacted swiftly and formulated a plan. “I knew to carry them out we would need many people, and it would beat everybody up to do it. The other choice was to wait until morning, and I didn’t want to do that. The third choice was to find a helicopter that would fly at night,” he said.



Civil Air Patrol Maj. Bob Keilholtz poses for a photo in front of one of the helicopters used to transport two survivors from the remote crash site in the middle of a fierce storm. Keilholtz, a veteran of CAP California search and rescue missions, said the copters made a huge difference: “That turned an eight-hour carry into just about 15 minutes, and remarkably, we had both survivors at the hospital within four hours,” he said.

The Riverside County Sheriff’s Office and Marines out of Arizona stepped up to tackle the risk, both sending helicopters to the scene. “That turned an eight-hour carry into just about 15 minutes, and remarkably, we had both survivors at the hospital within four hours,” Keilholtz said. “It was so remote, and with the bad weather, that was amazing.”

Maybe more amazing is the determination the ground crew showed while waiting for the helicopters. They built fires to try and keep the survivors warm; they even covered the two men with maps and anything else they could find. “We had to cut them out of the aircraft, and we just had hand tools to do it, things like pocketknives with files,” Keilholtz said.

After serving with CAP for more than 35 years, Keilholtz has been involved with hundreds of searches and rescues, and while many were nondistress situations, he still approaches every mission with the assumption that CAP’s teamwork, expertise and efficiency can save a life.

“When CAP gets involved, it is usually a bad situation,” he said. “It’s not the crash in somebody’s

backyard; it's in a hard-to-get-to area, so we hardly ever find survivors. When I first saw the aircraft in this crash, I thought we didn't have to hurry anymore; it looked like a nonsurvivable crash. The lesson that came out of this is there's always the possibility that there is a survivor, so you have to act quickly and do what it takes to get to the site safely."

Capt. Matt Scherzi of Saddleback Composite Squadron 68 in Costa Mesa worked with the local media as the mission information officer for the rescue, keeping them informed of CAP's efforts and progress. As a senior observer who has participated in more than 50 active searches during his 10 years in CAP, Scherzi, too, knows the odds of finding survivors are low, and he underscored how exciting and validating this particular mission was.

"While the search was on, the media would ask me, 'Do you think they are alive?' My standard answer is always, 'We only search when there is a possibility of survivors; we don't do just recovery.' You don't want to take hope away from the family, but you don't want to give them false hope either," Scherzi said.

It's a delicate dance Scherzi and other mission information officers perform routinely. "In all my years and all my missions, this was one of the few that resulted in actual survivors," he said. "It makes our day as CAP members; it makes all those weeks of looking for people who didn't survive worthwhile."

Hofheinz, a CAP veteran with more than 20 years under his belt, stressed the team effort involved. "I feel like CAP made a big difference on this one. We all worked together and with other agencies like the sheriff's office and the FAA," he said. "There is so much coordination required, and there was great cooperation between the three of us in the plane. Gene did a great job of flying in those conditions, while Frank and I worked the direction-finding equipment and the radios."

Ramirez, whose 30 years of flying experience and multi-engine instrument rating proved so valuable on this

mission, has been in CAP for three years, participating in six search and rescue missions. "This was only the second time I've found survivors," he said. "So when we heard the ground crew found them alive, we were ecstatic. It made it all worth it."

For Tullo, the bad — and challenging — flying conditions are just part of his job, and he uses every such mission as a way of thanking the helicopter crew that overcame adversity to come to his aid decades ago. "I flew seven years in the Air Force and was shot down over the outskirts of Hanoi in Vietnam," he said. "A brave helicopter crew came in and got me. There was so much ground fire, but they came and got me anyway. Helping with missions like these is my payback for that."

Hofheinz was also thrilled to know Henry and Harvey were alive. "It's so seldom we get that outcome," he said.

"CAP is called in on the extreme cases; we're the pointed end of the spear. This one was so rewarding because we rescued those guys, but I know for sure if Bob Keilholtz hadn't gone in when he did, kept

pushing through the night, those guys really might not have made it."

Tullo also credited Keilholtz with saving the survivors' lives. "Bob Keilholtz drove this rescue though," he said. "He's like a bulldog; once he gets his teeth in something, he won't let go."

And luckily for Henry and Harvey, Tullo's description of Keilholtz is accurate. "I decided I was going to get up there to that crash that day," Keilholtz said.

Both Harvey and Henry are recovering from their injuries and doing pretty well. "I had a broken leg and then an infection in my leg, but I will be fine after some time," Harvey said. "Warner is in rehab at the hospital and seems to be doing good."

When asked if he'll fly again, Harvey didn't hesitate. "Sure. I love flying, and I'll get to do it again, thanks to CAP. Someday I'd like to see those guys again and thank them in person." ▲

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— Rocky Harvey, one of two survivors of a Southern California plane crash