

Nomination for the 2010 Valor Award of the National Association for Search and Rescue

Nominees: Colorado's Alpine Rescue Team, Custer County Search and Rescue Team, Douglas County Search and Rescue Team, El Paso County Search and Rescue Team and Rocky Mountain Rescue Group and their members that performed a remarkable nighttime rescue July 27-28, 2009.

Executive Summary: July 27-28, 2009, 26 members of Alpine Rescue Team, Custer County Search and Rescue Team, Douglas County Search and Rescue Team, El Paso County Search and Rescue Team and Rocky Mountain Rescue Group, all in Colorado, conducted a high-altitude rescue that was above and beyond the call of duty, exemplifying the selfless, perhaps risky commitment to others embodied in the NASAR motto, "That Others May Live." The rescue took place entirely at night on the traverse between two of Colorado's most dangerous 14,000-foot peaks, Crestone Peak and Crestone Needle, in a gully notorious for rock fall and surrounded by 70° rock faces of 1,500 feet. Rescuers had to climb nearly 4,500 vertical feet, ascending more than 3,000 vertical feet to the summit, then perform a technical lowering for 1,700 vertical feet and then climb back up 1,500 vertical feet to a pass before descending another 1,500 feet. Ten successive lowering stations were required to lower the injured climber from 14,000 feet to a helicopter at 12,300 feet — all before severe summer thunderstorms developed over the peaks. Command and coordination was by radio from 15 miles away.

Background on the Crestone Peak - Crestone Needle traverse

Stabbing the sky in Colorado's rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the jagged summits of Crestone Peak (14,298') and



The famed Crestone traverse follows the ridge between the Peak and Needle. The dotted yellow line shows the rescue evacuation route. (Photography courtesy of Wojtek Rychlik, www.pikespeakphoto.com.)

Crestone Needle (14,201') were the state's last 14,000-foot summits to ever be climbed. Once thought to be unclimbable, these peaks are considered the state's most difficult "fourteener" summits to reach. Between these two spectacular peaks — the 7th and 20th highest in the state — is a famed traverse; described in Gerry Roach's Colorado's Fourteeners climbing guide, "The traverse of the Crestones is one of Colorado's

four great fourteener traverses". This climb is listed as a Class 4 *Classic*. The most difficult part of the traverse is the 500 feet on the Needle's north side. Knobby conglomerate rock delights climbers, but occasionally it lets loose rocks that will damage anything in its path.

The morning of July 27, 2009, two climbers were attempting the Peak-to-Needle traverse when a hold broke. One climber fell, fracturing his leg. Now stuck at nearly 14,000 feet, the climber needed rescue.

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The rescue

The Custer County Sheriff's Department received the emergency call from the two climbers late that morning. Knowing the extreme difficulty of the location, Custer County Search and Rescue Team requested additional technical rescuers from the Colorado State SAR Coordinator. 26 rescue mountaineers from five teams — Alpine Rescue Team, Douglas County Search and Rescue Team, El Paso Search and Rescue Team and Rocky Mountain Rescue Group — responded to assist. The Air Force Rescue Coordination Center was contacted and high altitude helicopter support was requested, in the hopes the rescue could be completed before nightfall.

Rescuers from as far as 175 miles away responded to the command post in the small town of Westcliffe. The Incident Commander and Operations Chief put together a nighttime rescue plan in which rescuers would attempt to reach the injured party by climbing to the summit of Crestone Needle (14,201') and then rappel off onto the traverse to the injured party.

Additional rescuers would also hike in from the southeast side and climb from below via Cottonwood Lake. Flight For Life – Colorado's high-altitude AS350 B3 helicopter was called to shuttle rescuers to the mountain, to avoid the long, slow drive on a 4x4 road. Before dark only one team of rescuers could be flown from Westcliffe to the mountain. All the other rescuers drove the 1-2 hours up the 4x4 road to the trailhead. While rescuers had begun their climb (around 21:00 hours) of Crestone Needle, the US Air Force Rescue agreed to attempt a nighttime hoist operation. Two HH-60G Pave Hawks and a C-130 airborne refueling plane were dispatched from Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, NM, home of the USAF's 58th Special Operations Wing. As reported by USAF Lt. Col. Thomas D. Humphries, who was the flight lead for this mission:

*"All I needed was a site larger than my 53'- 8" rotor diameter to be able to hover in-ground-effect that was nearby the objective and I would have shot my approach to that site and let my PJs recover the objective from there. However, what we both found when we assessed the objective's location were **70-degree rock faces towering 1500-2500 feet from the lower terrain**, requiring an out-of-ground effect hover capability to stop in open airspace to hoist the objective.*

While my wingman was assessing the site, we looked at all we carried to see if we could download enough to get light enough and determined that site required us to lighten our aircraft 1100# below the zero fuel weight of the aircraft to be able to hover out-of-ground-effect at 14,000' MSL.

Neither of us, when we assessed the site separately, found anything even close to the objective that would have afforded a rescue of the objective any faster than the climbing teams."

At 14,500 feet in the dark at 01:00, the Air Force had to give up their rescue attempt, leaving the 26 rescuers on the mountain to compete the mission. A predicted threat of significant daytime thunderstorms meant the rescue be done that night.

In addition to personal gear for a high alpine peak, rescuers carried 1,600 feet of rope, anchor slings and



The Crestones as seen from the west. The rescue evacuation route is marked in yellow. (Photography courtesy of Wojtek Rychlik, www.pikespeakphoto.com.)

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hardware, a litter and medical supplies up a very complex and extremely rugged mountaineering route. The first team of rescuers reached the injured climber around 01:30 that night and began what would become a 1,700-foot evacuation of the injured climber.



Eighteen of the rescuers climbed to the summit of Crestone Needle that night to reach the injured man. Meanwhile eight other rescuers crossed the 12,900' Broken Hand Pass and circled 1-¹/₄ mile around to the mountain's west side where they met the litter and injured subject about half way down a gully called Asteroid Alley — so named because of lots and lots of rock fall.

Working through the night entirely by headlamp rescuers rigged 10 successive lowering stations through vertical rock cliffs, steep scree fields and icy snow. After five strenuous hours, the injured climber was carried to a helispot at about 12,300 feet.



Medevac helicopter to transport subject to a Pueblo hospital.

A Flight for Life helicopter was able to land and transport the climber to a hospital in Pueblo, Colorado, 56 miles away. Rescuers then faced a hazardous 1000-foot climb back up over a pass and 1,900 feet again down the mountain, and all arrived back at the trailhead before the start of the forecasted afternoon thunderstorms.

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An unusual mission

This mission was unusual from typical high-mountain missions in several ways:

- To avoid dangerous, forecasted afternoon thunderstorms this entire mission was completely performed during the night on one of the most notorious and severe 14,000' peaks in Colorado.
- Rescuers from five SAR teams had to work together in severe technical terrain with very difficult route finding, which was all done by headlamp.
- Radio communication and rescue coordination was spread across two sides of a large mountain; the command post was 15 miles northeast of the accident site, ground access was from the southeast and the lowering to the helicopter was on the southwest flank.
- The technical evacuation involved creative and improvised anchors requiring expertise far above the norm.
- Rescuers' efforts were physically demanding, requiring rescuers to climb over 4000 vertical feet. Rescuers ascended more than 3000 vertical feet to the summit, performed a technical lowering for 1700 vertical feet, and then climbed back up 1000 vertical feet to a pass before descending another 1900 vertical feet to the trailhead.

Agencies involved

Custer County Search and Rescue Team	www.custersar.org
Alpine Rescue Team	www.alpinerescueteam.org
Douglas County Search and Rescue Team	www.dcsarco.org
El Paso County Search and Rescue Team	www.epcsar.org
Rocky Mountain Rescue Group	www.rockymountainrescue.org
Colorado State SAR Coordinator (CSRB)	www.coloradosarboard.org
Custer County Sheriff's Department	www.custercountygov.com/sheriff.htm
Air Force Rescue Coordination Center	www.1af.acc.af.mil/units/afrc
512 Rescue Squadron, 58 SOW, Kirtland Air Force Base, NM	www.aetc.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=6195
505 Special Operations Squadron, 58 SOW, Kirtland Air Force Base, NM	www.aetc.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=6190