

ARES/SAR Operations Save Lives in New Mexico

Written by By Michael Daly For the Sun
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Amateur Radio Emergency Services is alive and well in McKinley County, New Mexico. ARES is embedded with the County Search and Rescue (SAR) organization that has 27 active members, 15 of whom are Amateur Radio operators. Also included in the membership is a rope team, two medical doctors, a nurse-practitioner with a search dog, four EMTs and a paramedic. The group is supported by a local Med-Flight helicopter transport service to assist in quick searches of remote areas, and triage.

Four years ago, an incident involving a mountain climber prompted the McKinley County Fire and Rescue Team to invite the county SAR/ARES to join forces to improve on their response and assistance. With this consortium, response times have improved from hours to minutes. The SAR/ ARES members take the same training as volunteer firefighters and rescuers. Training includes radio communication tracking, use of ropes in rescue, emergency medical procedures and wilderness first aid.

To keep in practice, the group works numerous public events each year, providing communications, emergency medical assistance and off-road transport for participants in bike races, motocross events, and the annual Gallup Balloon Rally. The group participated in last weekend's 24-hour Bike Race Through the Enchanted Forest in McGaffey and helped to put out some small fires while they were at the Hilso Trailhead.

The group has participated in searches for lost persons and has provided communications for Fire/Police/Medical personnel and even the FBI in a forensic evidence collection case.

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In February, 2013, a hiker fell off of a cliff, landing on a narrow ledge 30 feet down that was still 100 feet above the ground. He called for help on his cell phone and his approximate location was determined by triangulation on the cell phone signal. Fire Department personnel searched the area, finally locating him high above on the ledge.

Dan Tamminga, KE5FYL, Team Leader of the Rope Team that finally rescued the hiker, studied maps and considered advice of the locals who knew the area, enabling the team to get positioned above the subject. Rescue gear was divided among Dan's five man team: long ropes, short ropes, a pickoff harness, webbing, carabiners, and rappel devices. "I used my 2 meter radio to keep us in contact with the rest of the team via a local repeater during our climb," Dan reported.

Finding a way up to the top of the mesa above the stranded hiker in the dark was difficult and took several tries, backtracking and scouting different approaches each time. The team used a rope to belay members up at a few spots. The most agile climber in the group was sent up a short technical section with a couple of spotters, and then he found a good anchor for himself, wrapped the rope around his body, and belayed the rest of the team as they climbed up.

Once on the top of the mesa, Dan's team moved to the target coordinates, where they could see the lights of the rescuers below the subject, and found the subject's foot prints. "We followed them down the easy part of the cliff, and got to a good spot directly above the subject," Dan said. The subject was on a one and a half to two foot ledge about twenty feet below the team.

It was decided to send one rescuer down to the subject to make an assessment. Another rescuer sat on the edge, talking to the subject, while the rest set up an anchor and ropes. A rescuer took a jacket, the pickoff harness and a helmet, and was lowered to the ledge. He attached the pickoff harness to the subject, and attached it to the rope. Getting the subject down was priority number one; he had fallen so there was a risk of spinal injury, but did not have any altered sensations in his extremities. He was cold. An assessment and plan were quickly adopted, and the rescuer traversed the ledge with the subject to a point directly below the anchor, and they weighted the rope. The rest of the team on top of the cliff lowered them down. The subject was taken to the hospital for evaluation, and did not sustain any substantial injuries.

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Jimmy Graham, K5GRA, president of the ARES/SAR team, said he “got into ARES and emergency rescue services to save lives, and we have saved lives.”

Story edited by Tom Hartsock.