

Courageous PJ saved 18 from wilds of Alaska

SCOTT AFB, Ill. (MNS) — Eighteen people are alive today because MSgt. Terry L. Wetzel, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, helped them safely out of the Alaskan wilderness in 1978.

His heroics earned him a place of honor as one of the Military Airlift Command's five top airmen of the year.

Now the 71st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron member has earned an even greater award as one of the 12 Air Force Airmen of the Year. He was the only MAC recipient of the honor.

Sergeant Wetzel received the Airman's Medal second oak leaf cluster, Air Medal fifth oak leaf cluster and Air Force Commendation Medal for pararescue exploits last year.

OFF DUTY, he is a guest lecturer for the Alaska State Parks Department Avalanche Awareness Course, provides survival training for local residents, teaches guitar and carpentry to school students and advises the Anchorage Rescue Council.

Sergeant Wetzel received the Air Force Commendation Medal for his successful extraction and treatment of six aircraft crash victims March 30, 1978.

In sub-zero conditions and deep snow he chopped through wreckage to reach survivors and treat their paralysis and concussions.

Medical authorities said he used "super-human effort" to save all six people.

HIS MOST HARROWING adventure began the afternoon of June 24. He and SSgt. Daniel L. Hodler were alerted to a life or death emergency at the 17,000-foot level of Mt. McKinley.

Two climbers were seriously ill with cerebral edema — swelling of the brain. The condition can kill a person in a short time. One climber was already unconscious.

Helicopter rescues at that altitude are very risky even in the best conditions. Sergeants Wetzel and Hodler were experienced in the accident area, but weather conditions deteriorated with clouds layered up to a 19,000-foot solid overcast with blinding snow squalls.

Nevertheless, the Air Force pararescue specialists boarded an Army Chinook helicopter at 7 p.m. for the flight to Talkeetna, Alaska, near Mt. McKinley's base.

They delayed the first rescue attempt to wait for more favorable conditions. At 12:30 a.m. their observation aircraft reported a break in the weather. The sergeants were on their way by 1 a.m.

However, the clouds up to 18,000 feet obscured everything below. Rescuers hoped for

improvement as their helicopter circled the area. Before long their fuel supply ran low and the attempt was abandoned.

They tried again at 11:30 a.m. only to be turned back by severe turbulence from a mountain storm.

Late that afternoon the rescue party left Talkeetna for the third time to fly up between the mountain's treacherous ridges and crevices.

BECAUSE THE AIRCREW needed oxygen to fly the mission, the para-rescuemen chose to do without their share. It would make their part of the operation more difficult as they worked in evening darkness, their vision hampered by lack of oxygen.

With the sunlight almost gone and in light turbulence, the helicopter began its final approach to the accident scene. It was a normal descent to 300 feet.

Then a furious wind let loose. The chopper was violently spun around and around. The spin's force pinned people to the walls and broke restraints on equipment.

Before anyone could react, the aircraft crashed on the steep, snow-covered ice field. No one was seriously injured and the Chinook could still fly. They had come down 400 yards below the intended landing zone.

It took an extra effort for Sergeants Wetzel and Hodler to clear an opening from the helicopter in minus-20-degree temperatures and blowing snow.

The climb combined with the low oxygen level fatigued and weakened the sergeants, but they reached the climbers who were alive and semiconscious.

Sergeants Wetzel and Hodler treated the climbers, fitted them with oxygen packs, wrapped them in sleeping bags, placed them on fiberglass sleds and pulled them to the helicopter.

THE PARARESCUEMEN were exhausted when they reached their aircraft. They had traversed the deeply creviced ice field and steep terrain in a 20-minute round trip.

Take-off was almost as hair-raising as the landing. The helicopter hovered, moved toward a 5,000-foot vertical face, dropped over the side to build airspeed and left the area.

The helicopter and crew arrived at Elmendorf at 1:30 a.m. June 26. The climbers recovered from their injuries and the sergeants were credited with two saves.

Sergeants Wetzel and Hodler received Airman's Medals as a result of their actions.

Airmans Medal was downgraded to Commendation Medal