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Chief Warrant Officer Dominic Anderson with the New Mexico Army National Guard is the pilot of the UH60L Black Hawk and led a search and rescue team that saved two men and a woman off La Luz Trail in the Sandia Mountains earlier this month.

# HEROICS AT 9,600 FEET

## Search and rescue teams battle elements to rescue three Sandia hikers

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**W**hen a person is stuck 9,600 feet up a mountain and hears nothing but their own thoughts, it can be a paralyzing, harrowing experience. But it is also intense for search and rescue crews desperately trying to find that person.

When 35 mph winds drop the temperatures into the single digits

and make it close to impossible to hoist someone — or people have to climb more than 9,000 feet through 2 to 3 feet of snow — the experience can border on frightening.

But for first responders like New Mexico Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer 3 Dominic Anderson, battling the elements and the clock to save someone is a gratifying experience, a thrill, a rush.

“Knowing somebody needs our help

gives us that motivation, that drive, to want to volunteer,” he said.

Anderson and his medical evacuation unit were among the many search and rescue team members to come to the aid of three stranded hikers on La Luz Trail in the Sandias two weekends ago.

### ‘Ill-fated’

At 2 p.m. Jan. 6, a 24-year-old woman and two men in their 30s planned to hike up the Sandias to get to the tram, then take the tram down before they got stuck on the trail, said Bob Rodgers, New Mexico State Police Search and Rescue resource officer.

Because of recent snowfall, their decision to go hiking “was definitely ill-fated, especially with the temperatures dropping to zero after nightfall,” said Chris Starr, a sergeant with the Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Office’s Open Space Unit.

At about 9 p.m., search and rescue crews including the BCSO and Albuquerque Police Department’s Open Space units, Bernalillo County Fire Rescue,

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## RESCUE >>

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Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council members and New Mexico State Police responded to a call for help received by the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office, Rodgers said.

The rescuers climbed about 6 miles from the base of the mountain before finding the hikers, who were experiencing mild to advanced hypothermia. The woman needed to be carried down because of frostbite, Starr said.

At that point, Rodgers said the rescue team brought her down to 9,200 feet.

A request was made for aircraft help, but because State Police isn't certified to do night-flight operations, Rodgers said, and the National Guard was unavailable, the woman couldn't be moved by air. "There was no way she could move under her own power."

Rescue team members stayed with her on the mountain.

### 'Extremely blessed'

At about 5 a.m. the next day, Anderson said he was asleep when he received a call about the three hikers.

About an hour and a half later, Anderson, the pilot in command, said he and the other four crew members from Golf Company, 1st Battalion, 168th Aviation Regiment arrived at the Army Aviation Support Facility in Santa Fe.

Once they learned about the mission and understood the potential risks it involved, they were ready to go, Anderson said.

At 7:25 a.m., the crew took off in a UH-60L Black Hawk helicopter at the same time



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**The New Mexico National Guard used this UH60L Black Hawk to rescue two men and a woman off La Luz Trail in the Sandia Mountains.**

the New Mexico State Police launched its Able 7 chopper. When they reached La Luz Trail, Able 7 tried to bring someone down to the snow-packed trail to help, but it was not able to fly low enough because of high winds, he said.

The Black Hawk, equipped with steam gauges, an iPad with flight applications and a mounted hoist with 300 feet of cable, flew around until its crew found the hikers.

Anderson said the crew located the hikers after first spotting ground rescue team members wearing "bright-colored" clothing.

His crew then discussed whether its aircraft would be able to come down. The winds that were "rocking" the aircraft prevented a landing, but it

managed to get within about 150 feet of the hikers and rescue teams, Anderson said.

"We were ensuring we can manage a safe distance as the altitude was challenging for the entire crew," he said.

After medic Sgt. Connor Verploegh was brought down to help the woman, Anderson said Cibola Search and Rescue asked him "to orbit the area" so the medic and the ground rescue teams could hear each other.

Shortly after, Verploegh "packaged the patient in a warming bag" and put her into a skid basket, and the cables hoisted her up into the Black Hawk, state Army National Guard spokesman Douglas Mallary said.

The Black Hawk left about 8 a.m. and landed 27 minutes

later at the University of New Mexico's Johnson Field, where the crew handed her over to Albuquerque Ambulance to transport her to a local hospital, Anderson said.

"As a crew, we're extremely blessed to have it turn out well," he said.

The two male hikers were able to walk down the mountain with ground rescue team members, Rodgers said.

### 'We were able to help save somebody today'

The Jan. 7 mission was not Anderson's first.

"I would say I have done five or six (searches) and rescues," he said. He says he has gone on calls to help with fire emergencies as well as other

rescue missions in the Sandias, especially during the Balloon Fiesta.

A majority of the calls from stranded hikers who were unprepared and/or were not used to the elevation, Anderson said.

One thing people may not understand, he said, is the "high degree of difficulty and the amount of risk" that goes into each search and rescue mission.

"We, at a moment's notice, put our lives on the line to get them," Anderson said. "Sometimes it could be taxing on us or our families (when we) leave to take care of these people."

Search and rescue missions are just as challenging for other agencies, such as the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office.

"The sworn officers and volunteer rescuers can sustain any conceivable injury from a twisted ankle to a fall off of one of the many cliffs along the La Luz Trail that have already claimed lives," Starr said. "People don't seem to fully respect our mountain. It seems inviting and there are so many stories of people enjoying a challenging hike to the crest or along its winding foothills trails."

"However, it is very deceptive and enjoyable outings regularly turn life-threatening for the unprepared, the unequipped and the inattentive."

Despite the risks first responders take during each search and rescue call, the rewards for a successful mission remain greater.

At the end of the operation, crew members take a deep breath and, Anderson said, tell each other, "Congratulations, we were able to help save somebody today."