

# CAL FIRE NEWS RELEASE

## California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection



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**RELEASE DATE:**  
February 28, 2024

### **CAL FIRE HEMET RYAN HELITACK CREW RECEIVES SIKORSKY WINGED RESCUE AWARD**

**McClellan Park, CA** – The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) is honored to announce that the Hemet Ryan Helitack Crew has received the Sikorsky Winged Rescue Award for their hoist rescue at Mt San Jacinto in March 2023.

The award was presented at the Helicopter Association International (HAI) Heli-Expo 2024, the world's largest trade show and technical conference for the rotorcraft industry, held in Anaheim, California, from February 27-29, 2024. “This award honors a group of extraordinary aviation professionals,” said Riverside Unit Battalion Chief, Dave Rodriguez. “Their dedication to their craft and unwavering commitment to excellence were evident in every aspect of this mission.”

On the afternoon of March 15, 2023, the Hemet Ryan Helitack Crew, consisting of Pilot Jesse Greer, Fire Captain Ben Forqueran, Fire Captain Don Kowalski, Fire Captain Tim Ellena, and Fire Apparatus Engineer Adan Castro, was dispatched to a remote area on Mt. San Jacinto in Southern California. A lost hiker had called 911 after becoming hypothermic and disoriented at approximately 7,400 feet. While searching for the missing hiker on foot in icy conditions, one of the ground rescuers slipped and tumbled approximately 200 feet and out of sight.

CAL FIRE Copter 301 launched and located the missing rescuer pinned under a tree and concealed by the snow. He had suffered multiple internal injuries including a punctured lung. Copter 301 inserted Fire Captain Tim Ellena via a hoist. As Captain Ellena climbed to the patient, fast-moving clouds created whiteout conditions forcing Copter 301 to depart the area leaving Captain Ellena with the patient.

While waiting with the patient, Captain Ellena dug multiple snow shelves to provide a stable platform for the rescue. Once Captain Ellena was able to alert the flight crew of improving flight conditions, Copter 301 launched and, battling heavy turbulence, successfully retrieved Captain Ellena and the patient via a 200-foot hoist.

As the flight crew was transferring the patient to a waiting ambulance, they received a rescue request for a ground rescuer who had become severely hypothermic. The crew located the ground rescuer in a steep rocky area near the top of the mountain, at approximately 8,000 feet. Again, faced with challenging flight conditions and mountain turbulence, the flight crew of Copter 301 lowered Captain Ellena via an 80-foot hoist and successfully extracted him and the ground rescuer.

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“We’re honored to receive this award,” said CAL FIRE Pilot Jesse Greer. “The people needing our help had put their own lives at risk in mountainous terrain and severe weather conditions to search for someone else, and we wanted to be successful for them.”

“Beyond their individual courage,” said Chief Rodriguez, “the power of teamwork shines through. Each member of this remarkable team played a critical role and is a testament to their professionalism and dedication to the safety and well-being of others.” The Sikorsky Winged Rescue Award honors individuals who directly perform a lifesaving rescue flying a Sikorsky helicopter.

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