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CIVIL AIR PATROL NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

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Civil Air Patrol saves 100 lives for the year

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, Ala. -- Civil Air Patrol reached a major milestone earlier this summer, racking up its 100th save for fiscal 2010 ... a year that doesn't end until Sept. 30.

"What an accomplishment!" exclaimed Col. Michael J. Murrell, CAP's senior adviser, operations. "There is no better reward than the realization that your efforts actually made the difference. It is that reward for which we all strive and we succeeded more than 100 times this year. That is an outstanding milestone!"

CAP reached the century mark in saved lives when a Wyoming Wing aircrew found an elderly couple whose vehicle was stuck in the mud in rural Natrona County. The aircrew, acting on information from the sheriff's office and a hunch from Maj. George Twitchell, the wing's director of operations, found the couple safe and sound.

"They were in good shape when we found them, but very grateful and very glad to see us," said Twitchell. "It turned out to be a very lucky find. It would have been hard for the sheriff's ground search teams to find them because where they were stuck was kind of tucked away."

While this particular mission's success stemmed at least in part from Twitchell's intuition, enhanced use of new technologies is playing a large role in many CAP search and rescue missions and has contributed to the high number of saves this year, said John Desmarais, interim missions director at CAP National Headquarters at Maxwell AFB.

"Some changes in how we do business are resulting in many of these searches becoming saves," Desmarais said. "We now have a couple of teams working on utilizing data forensics, both cell phone and radar forensics."

Both techniques help narrow search areas by analyzing data. Several CAP members, including the Arizona Wing's Capt. Justin Ogden, who works with cell phone forensics, are developing these tools and training other members to use them. Ogden was recently selected to receive the 2010 Distinguished Volunteer Public Benefit Flying Award from the National Aeronautic Association and the Air Care Alliance.

"By tightening the search area, they shorten searches for us," Desmarais said. "The quicker we get there, the more likely it is that there will be survivors. Both radar and cell phone forensics can make a significant difference in a search and rescue mission."

The numbers tell the story. Both technologies have been in use for a few years, increasing each year. In 2009, CAP had 72 saves. And while the number has hit 100 before, the yearly average over the last four decades stands at 84.

“I am delighted and very proud of our aircrews and ground teams for the dedication they have to their missions,” added Murrell. “They train long and hard so that they will be ready when the call comes, whether it is in the middle of the day or the middle of the night. They understand any call, at any time, can mean the difference between life and death.”

Increased CAP responsibilities have led to more saves, too. “We are working more,” Desmarais said. “Many saves this year have come on just a few missions, those we conducted after natural disasters like floods.”

But no matter how CAP got to the 100 mark, it’s important not to get lost in the statistics. Every individual life saved matters.

“A save, every save, is the ultimate outcome,” said Wyoming Wing Commander Col. Stan Skrabut. “We spend a lot of time training our crews to do this, so the fact that we bring comfort to folks by finding them safe is the best reward for the time and effort we put in.”

Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, is a nonprofit organization with more than 60,000 members nationwide. CAP, in its Air Force auxiliary role, performs 90 percent of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center and has been credited by the AFRCC with saving more than 100 lives this fiscal year. Its volunteers also perform homeland security, disaster relief and counter-drug missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies. The members play a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to the more than 25,000 young people currently participating in CAP cadet programs. CAP has been performing missions for America for 68 years. For more information on CAP, visit www.qccivilairpatrol.com.