

MOUNTAIN-TOP RESCUE

IBEW apprentices retrieve citizen stranded in snow storm

The snow was deep and still coming down when Tim Nickols and Justin Biondini got the call.

The two IBEW apprentice linemen for Pacific Gas & Electric had already put in 24 hours or more working storm response in the Ruth Lake area of northern California, but sleep wasn't in the cards. Not tonight.

The storm had trapped a citizen in a tent in the Jack Rabbit Valley area of Buck Mountain, about seven miles up an impassable mountain road. The Sheriff's Department rescue party tried to navigate the road in a cat, but broke down about half way up.

PG&E dispatched Nickols and Biondini to bring everybody down the mountain.

"It must have been 9 pm when we got there," recalls Nickols. "I knew the area, I actually hunt up there, so that was a bonus."

The snow, already deep, became even deeper as they headed up the road in darkness. Halfway up they found the sheriff's cat, blocking their way. One deputy had continued the rescue mission on foot; the other one was staying warm with the cat's heater.

"We pulled their rig out of the way and continued up to the top of the mountain," recalls Nickols. "It was snowing hard, about 11, 11:30 at night. It was amazing to see it with that much snow."

How much snow?

The PG&E cat will do 27 mph on pavement. Five-feet of snow will come about half-way up the cat's tracks.

But not tonight.

"The snow was so light and fluffy you couldn't even see the tracks—that's how deep it was," says Biondini. "We were probably going 5 mph."

They passed one spot Nickols was familiar with where seven-foot manzanita trees would normally be visible. The trees were completely buried under snow.

By the time they reached the stranded citizen, it was nearing midnight. The deputy who had plodded up on foot was there, too.

"They were very happy to see us," says Nickols. "The guy said he had been in his sleeping back for two days." They could see the man was shivering. "We gave him some water and food and continued back down with him and the other rescue member."

On the way back down they picked up the deputy who had stayed with broken cat.

"We wanted to tow it, but we weren't going to risk breaking our rig. We got the people out," says Nickols.

It was about 1:30 a.m. by the time they got back to the road, happy to see their line truck waiting for them.



Tim Nickols, left, Justin Biondini, and the cat they drove in their mountain-top rescue. Photo: Rich Cowart

“We had to load up the snowcat on the trailer and drive on back. It was a pretty slow drive because there was still a foot of snow on the road,” Biondini recalls.

It was close to 5 a.m. before they could call it a day. Well, more like two days. But they didn’t mind being sent out on the rescue mission.

“We were all for it. There were people up there who needed help,” says Biondini. “If they had stayed up there another night it wouldn’t have been good.”

Thanks to the efforts of two IBEW apprentices, no one was spending the night on the mountain.