



VX-31 SAR crew saves life of injured driver



During a ceremony at China Lake on June 7, Rear Adm. Brian Corey, right, Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division commander, congratulates members of the NAWCWD Air Test and Evaluation Squadron 31 for being recognized with Navy Achievement Medals for saving a life. From left are Lt. Katy Reichlin, Lt. Justin Powers, Lt. James Aguirre, Hospital Corpsman First Class Jarrod Criss, Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class Douglas Bartone II, Hospitalman Stephanie Higgins and Corey. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR WARFARE CENTER WEAPONS DIVISION, CHINA LAKE, California - En route to complete a training exercise, six members of the Search and Rescue crew from Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 31 at Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division rescued an injured driver in Kern County on June 6.

Headed toward Trona, SAR crewman Lt. James Aguirre spotted an SUV turned over on its side near the intersection of Highway 178 and Randsburg Wash Road. After circling back, the team noticed a woman standing in the vehicle with her head emerging from a side window. Local emergency personnel had not yet arrived, but were onsite by the time SAR landed and approached the scene.

A Ridgecrest resident in her late forties was, for unknown reasons, involved in a single-car accident and struggling to breathe. As paramedics discussed a means of extraction, Lt. Katy Reichlin and Hospitalman Stephanie Higgins were able to calm the woman down enough to help her exit the vehicle through the broken windshield.



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“HN Higgins and I approached the patient,” said Reichlin, VX-31 flight surgeon. “Simply through making eye contact, talking to her, and touching her, we were able to get her to bend her knees and crawl out of the car. She was immediately placed on a VX-31 medical evacuation litter.”

Examination of the woman showed that she’d suffered severe head trauma causing a “step off” or fracture of the skull. Her chest vibrated with each breath indicating that her lungs may have been filled with blood from the impact of the accident.

“The patient was conscious, but in respiratory distress,” Reichlin recalled. “I discussed transfer to a higher echelon of care with the local paramedic and made the decision to have us gain IV access on the ground, then airlift her to the Antelope Valley Hospital due to their trauma capabilities.”

During transport, the patient's condition became critical. She lost consciousness and was no longer able to breathe adequately on her own; her skin began to turn blue. Hospital Corpsman First Class Jarrod Criss facilitated delivery of onboard respiratory equipment while Aviation Warfare Systems Operator Second Class Douglas Bartone II ventilated the patient with an onboard bag valve mask and Higgins made sure that fluids were adequately flowing into her IV.

The team was able to effectively breathe for the woman and sustain circulation so that, upon arrival to the emergency room, she retained a pulse. After initial imaging and briefing with the ER doctor, it was determined that bringing her directly to Antelope Valley instead of the closest hospital was the best choice given her critical condition.

“This rescue was a great example of professionalism and what can happen when a team not only trains together, but works together to make timely decisions,” said Lt. Col. William Rothermel, VX-31 commanding officer. “Missions can change and this was not in their original plan for that day, but they performed as professionals and executed what they were trained to do. As a result, they saved the life of one of our community’s citizens.”

The following day, Capt. Thomas Santomauro, Naval Test Wing Pacific commodore, honored crewmembers Reichlin, Aguirre, Criss, Higgins, Bartone, and Lt. Justin Powers with Navy Achievement Medals in honor of their heroic actions.

“What this crew came together to accomplish was nothing short of amazing and epitomizes the initiative, teamwork, and determination for success that defines us as an organization,” Santomauro said. “I sleep well at night knowing that this SAR crew and others just like them at VX-31 stand to protect our aviators and our community because should there be a next time, the faces may change but the professionalism and the teamwork would be exactly the same. This is a true testament to the leadership of Lt. Col. Rothermel and his command team and just one example of the caliber of our workforce.”



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Because of their quick actions, the woman they rescued was able to leave the hospital about a week after she arrived.