



**HEADQUARTERS
CALIFORNIA WING – CIVIL AIR PATROL
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Press Release

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On an average weekend throughout Southern California, you can observe huge numbers of off-road enthusiasts enjoying the varied terrain and climates that the state has to offer. Some consider these to be some of the best off-road spots in the Western U.S. It is also one of the most dangerous and least forgiving of environments, because of the extreme temperatures and very low humidity. On the morning of Saturday, July 13, 2002, two motorists found out how quickly an enjoyable day in the desert could turn into a life-threatening situation – revealing just how beautiful and dangerous the California desert can be.

Fortunately, on any given weekend, the volunteers of California Wing, Civil Air Patrol can be found working in concert with many government and law enforcement agencies on routine aerial observation and monitoring missions along the U.S./Mexico border. Incident Commander Allen Graff (Squadron 59 – Hemet, CA), Mission Pilot James Hottois, (Squadron 11 - Palm Springs, CA) and Mission Observer William Thacker (Squadron 147 – Merced, CA) were on duty for what would normally be considered a routine, uneventful weekend. During the first flight (or sortie) of the day, a green sport utility vehicle was observed approximately ten miles South of Agua Caliente Airport in the west desert of Imperial County. The aircrew saw two people outside of the vehicle waving their arms in an attempt to get the attention of the aircrew.

Civil Air Patrol Lt. Col. “D” Fringer reported that “the heat index that day was over 120 degrees. Just a few weeks before a couple died when their ‘dune buggy’ broke down four miles from their camp.” This was clearly a situation that could rapidly turn into disaster for the motorists, if they weren’t able to get help. Lt. Col. Fringer added “it was over five miles to the nearest hard surface road.” Recognizing the severity of the situation and consistent with their training, the aircrew contacted base to report their sighting and get further instructions. Shortly after making initial contact, the individuals started to walk West, in an attempt to reach the nearest paved road. In a situation such as this, staying close to the crash site is critical to a successful rescue, as the physical reserves and resources required to get to safety are way more than most normal people possess.

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The aircrew attempted to signal the individuals to return to the vehicle, but couldn't get them to understand. Somehow the aircrew needed to establish communications with the people they were trying to help. By exercising good judgement, a little ingenuity and creative thinking, the aircrew was able to build a container to execute a "message drop." In describing how the crew was able to use commonly found materials to get the job done, Lt. Col. Fringer said that "they used water bottles! They placed the message in one bottle, used another bottle that still had water in it to weigh it down and then secured the two together using a rubber band." Using this makeshift delivery system, the aircrew was able to successfully deliver their message to the stranded individuals, causing them to return to their vehicle.

By this point, the Incident Commander had already activated Border Patrol dispatch and help was on the way. Once the individuals were back at their vehicle, the aircrew remained at the location to coordinate with and guide the U.S. Border Patrol units to the scene, to affect a successful rescue. On 13 September 2002, California Wing, Civil Air Patrol and the aircrew involved in the rescue were recognized at a presentation with an award from the U.S. Border Patrol and from the Imperial County Sheriff's Department. Chief Ken Stitt, U.S. Border Patrol and Imperial County Assistant Sheriff Chuck Jernigan were on hand to present the awards. Assistant Sheriff Jernigan noted that "the aircrew and base personnel's high level of training was demonstrated during this rescue." Civil Air Patrol Col. Larry Myrick, the Commander of California Wing, was present to receive the awards.

Both Chief Stitt and Assistant Sheriff Jernigan commended the actions of California Wing, Civil Air Patrol, the aircrews and base personnel for its continued commitment to humanitarian relief efforts and assisting law enforcement with the security of our borders. Lt. Col. Fringer noted that "communication is the key to working together. We've built strong relations with the other agencies over the past six years." In this case, the investment has clearly paid huge dividends for the individuals who were stranded. Catastrophe was averted and they'll live to enjoy the California deserts another day. Meanwhile, the volunteers of California Wing, Civil Air Patrol remain vigilant and continue to serve our country as the "eyes of the home skies."

Civil Air Patrol, the official Auxiliary of the United States Air Force, is a nonprofit organization. It performs more than 85 percent of inland search and rescue missions in the continental United States as tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. Volunteers also take a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to America's youth through CAP Cadet Programs.

NOTE: Digital photographs (including high resolution images) taken at the award ceremony can be obtained at the following internet address:

<http://www.squadron68.org/cawg/ipl>

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