

DENVER & THE WEST

Injured climber rescued

80-mph winds, darkness braved

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Rescuers fought fierce winds, extreme temperatures, darkness and dangerous terrain for almost 24 hours this weekend to save a Denver man who fell and was critically injured while climbing Longs Peak.

Climbers who watched the 21-year-old man tumble some 70 feet Saturday afternoon notified authorities with an emergency radio, then helped rescuers inch the stretcher-bound victim to safety through the pitch black of the night.

In serious condition

The climber, whose identity was not released, was in serious condition last night at St. Anthony Hospital Central after a Flight-for-Life helicopter took advantage of a break in 80-mph winds to reach him about noon yesterday.

The man fell about 12:30 p.m. Saturday on the Narrows, a 13,800-foot elevation portion of the popular trail up Longs Peak, the highest mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Another climber issued the first distress call, picked up by amateur radio operator Stan Hunting as he worked in his Boulder home.

'Mayday! Mayday!'

"I heard this call of 'Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! This is a medical emergency. Someone help us, please,'" said Hunting, who is also an experienced climber.

He alerted the Park Service by phone, then maintained contact with the radio operator on the mountain, offering medical advice, moral support and tips for conserving the radio's batteries.

Meanwhile, a helicopter dropped Longs Peak Ranger Jim Detterline on the summit of the 14,255-foot mountain. Detterline climbed down to

Injured climber saved despite night, winds

RESCUE from Page 1B

the injured hiker, reaching him about two hours after the accident.

What he saw gave the ranger pause.

"It was the first time in my career as a ranger that I was really concerned I might lose a patient," he said. "When I got on the scene there, he was still bleeding from the head. On his scalp, you could see the skull."

The victim also sustained serious back and leg injuries. "He really beat himself up. His fall was a tumbling fall," Detterline said.

The hiker was "real lucky" to land on a ledge below the Narrows, because a longer fall almost certainly would have been fatal, he said.

The man faded in and out of consciousness and was losing a lot of blood.

"I couldn't even get his full name. His vital signs were really weak. His blood pressure was collapsing. His pulse was weak and racing. He was not doing good."

More rangers and an Estes Park paramedic were shuttled in by helicopter, and they administered first aid. But as Saturday afternoon progressed, the winds kicked up, grounding the aircraft and

spoiling plans for a helicopter evacuation from the summit.

"We had quite a problem. Here's a guy on the side of the mountain who's in trouble, and these winds are being very erratic," Detterline said.

As daylight faded, a team of eight rescuers began the arduous task of hauling the hiker down the mountain. "This meant a lot of tricky maneuvers," including lowering the stretcher over vertical drops, Detterline recounted.

"The whole time we were being hit by these winds," he said. "One of our people was knocked over six times. Everyone got knocked down. We were getting tossed around like we were bean bags up there."

By 2 a.m. yesterday, they reached a mountain landmark called the Keyhole, still hours from the trailhead. By dawn, they were in the Boulder Field. And about noon, the winds receded enough for the helicopter to retrieve the man from Granite Pass.

"Talking to one of the rescuers, they indicated to me it was one of the most hazardous rescues they'd been in, simply because they kept moving the patient through the night," park spokesman Jim Mack said.