

Helicopter pilots rescue hunters

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Northern News Services

Published Monday, March 29, 2010

PAULATUK - If Brian Simms hadn't answered the 2 a.m. knock at his hotel room door last Wednesday, a group of polar bear hunters might not be alive today.

Simms, a pilot with 30 years experience, helped rescue three hunters who were stranded all night on the Beaufort Sea, trapped on an ice floe east of Paulatuk.

"It was a wake-up call," he said. "This is the first time I've ever been asked to pull somebody off the ice like this."

Simms happened to be in Paulatuk doing land surveys for an exploration company called Sander Geophysics. Along with Brad Macrae, another pilot who was surveying for Geo Tech, and an RCMP officer, he set off around 7:45 a.m. March 24, after re-fuelling the two helicopters.

"There was a bit of an issue getting fuel because they were working on the pumps overnight and they hadn't been fuelled yesterday," Simms said Wednesday evening.

"We went out fearing the worst," he added. "We weren't sure what to expect when we got there, but we were really happy that they were OK - nobody had succumbed to hypothermia."

An American sport hunter, Brian Trapnell, from Utah, had been travelling with Paulatuk guide George Krengnektak and George's son-in-law, Yuichiro Koniya, about 130 km from Paulatuk when the ice pan they were on broke away a few kilometres from shore and his snowmobile fell off the edge of the ice floe up to his shoulders and Trapnell pulled him up, though Koniya would suffer minor hypothermia. Trapnell was able to notify police of the group's whereabouts by pressing a button on a SPOT satellite GPS device that sends a 911 call to a dispatch centre, which then notifies local police.

Paulatuk's RCMP detachment received the call around 1:20 a.m.

"We were lucky to have them in town," said Cpl. Damon Werrell, of the helicopter pilots. "They actually helped out quite a bit. Without them we would've been still undergoing rescue efforts right now."

The helicopters landed on the ice near the shore and rescued the three men - Krengnektak opted to be dropped off at his cabin to stay with his dogs - and arrived back in Paulatuk before 10 a.m., passing the C-130 Hercules aircraft from the Canadian Forces base in Trenton, Ont. that was also sent to rescue the men.

"I think it was two or three hours behind us," Simms said. "If we hadn't been able to get out there, they would have landed or parachuted in."

The hunters were all treated at the health centre and released.

Cpl. Werrell said the satellite device was "instrumental in a quick rescue effort."

"We knew exactly where to go," he said.

The hunting group had left Krengnektak's cabin around 10:30 a.m. March 23 and were expected to return by 8 p.m. that day, but they did not.

Less than 12 hours after being rescued, Trapnell was scheduled to fly out of the community.

On Jan. 25, David Idlout, a hunter from Resolute, Nunavut, was rescued after three nights spent on an ice floe drifting away from his community.

He used a satellite phone to call his wife, who then called police and set the rescue mission in motion.