

# Busy group of rescuers

The frantic mother shivered as blizzard conditions raged outside her snowbound pickup. Her 6-month-old child was dressed in pajamas in the car seat.

The mother knew they were in a life threatening situation and the vehicle's heater was not working. Her voice had an edge of desperation as she called the 911 dispatcher in Watertown at 3:24 a.m. pleading for help.

Eventually, a snow cat carrying Codington County Search and Rescue members would arrive. These volunteers already had been on Interstate 29 for nearly two hours as more than 200 vehicles were caught in a sudden blizzard Feb. 3.

"We were the only ones out there moving," said Pat Culhane, commander of the volunteer rescue squad. "Even the troopers were stuck in it. It was zero visibility with 12 to 15 feet drifts in places."

It would take another nine hours to finish bringing everyone to safety.

A little over a month later, another sudden blizzard would hit. From 7:30 p.m. until about 3:35 a.m., volunteer rescuers would respond to more than 50 calls for help.

Those two events would play a large role in a record-setting year for a volunteer rescue organization that has grown in size and importance every year. Already, the rescue squad has logged more calls than all of last year.

And the snow cat, given to the rescue squad by the state of South Dakota a few

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years ago, was needed to shuttle dozens and dozens of people to the hospital during the many snow storms that snarled streets so often this year.

What started in 1993 as a dive rescue team prompted by several tragic water deaths has blossomed into a volunteer organization that demonstrates how government, businesses and volunteerism can combine resources and talent to save lives and money.

The team has grown from two people to nearly 40 and from a dive team to a diversified rescue squad with dog and horse teams, dive and water rescue squads, ground search capabilities, hazardous material response capabilities, and much more.

It has become so important and well respected and its volunteers so skilled that it responds throughout eastern South Dakota and sometimes farther.

The combination of severe winters and flooding has made the team indispensable.

Just ask the two fishermen stranded

on Bitter Lake in a New Year's Eve blizzard. Lost in the middle of the lake, rescuers worked with communication experts and zeroed in on their cell phone signals and used global positioning technology to drive right to them.

Or ask city and county emergency officials about the critical role the team played moving sandbags, barricades and alerting people of threatening flood waters.

Or the individuals who have been pulled from freezing water over the years.

And if you could, you could ask the German shepherd mix that was rescued from thin ice on the gravel ponds north of Lake Kampeska a couple of Sundays ago.

The scared pooch somehow had wandered onto the ice but was afraid of the swim to shore. Normally, dog rescues aren't part of the deal. But the dog's predicament was along a busy state highway and calls for help were incessant. At least eight team members would interrupt their Sunday mornings and four would take to the water to eventually bring the dog safely to shore.

The team's dedication deserves a big thank you from all of us and I'm certain the mother who was stranded with her small child will be eternally grateful to this team.

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