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POWERED PARACHUTE RESCUE

Unique air patrol finds lost rafters

RIPON — The rescue of two lost and cold rafters on the Stanislaus River was credited to the Ripon Police Department's powered parachute – "Air One."

It was a rescue last Friday evening that would quiet the naysayers who have questioned the need for the Department of Justice-funded observation aircraft.

Patricia Lee Risner, 62, and a 16-year-old adopted nephew and Ripon High School junior, had put into the river from Stouffer Park in Ripon at about 4 p.m. Floating downstream in inner tubes they had purchased from the local Kragen Store, they planned to get out of the river on the other side of the city.

Risner said they had successfully maneuvered around debris on the waterway, and were making the trek without incident until they got stuck near Vera Avenue where the bank was extremely steep and in a place where they couldn't easily be seen. They were lost and didn't know exactly where they were on the river.

She noted that she had "tipped out" of her inner tube and had gotten soaked in the water with the teen pulling her out before calling on their cell phone for help – the phone had been in a water-tight plastic bag. A retired respiratory therapist, she said the ordeal lasted about two and a half hours when she recognized the signs of approaching hypothermia.

The woman said she didn't know how much longer she could hang on as searchers were unable to locate them. Police and fire personnel began their search from the Highway 99 Bridge to the Jack Tone Golf Course on the west. Several other officers and fire personnel joined in a foot search along the banks of the river.

Locates rafters within 5 minutes of takeoff

Shortly before 7 p.m. the police department's powered parachute was ordered into the air to join in the search. One of its pilots, Lt. Ed Ormonde, responded from home and took off from LAN Park on South Highland Avenue within 20 minutes.

It was less than five minutes later that Ormonde located the missing rafters at the base of a sheer bank cliff directly south of Vera Avenue – directing ground and water units to the rafters. Ripon Fire Department personnel picked up the wet and shivering couple in their Zodiac rescue craft.

It was 7:30 p.m. when they were loaded into the fire department's water craft, and shuttled to a river area that would allow them to be transferred to the Ripon Fire Department ambulance.

The rafters appeared to be cold, exhausted and somewhat confused, but otherwise they appeared to be in fairly good condition, police said.

Risner said they were situated under tree branches and the leaves made it difficult for anyone to see them. "As soon as I saw him (the powered parachute pilot), it gave me such relief." She said the craft dropped down to about 100 feet giving the pilot a better view of their location.

Lt. Ormonde said he couldn't see Risner, but the teen was in sight waving his white shirt to gain attention. That was all the powered parachute pilot needed to see, alerting other rescue personnel on the ground and guiding them to the site.

She said she had picked up her nephew right after school to go rafting, saying they were having a wonderful time until they got stuck in the debris. Risner recalled that after she fell out of the inner tube she couldn't think straight, giving her cell phone to the teen who helped her to safety on a log before making their 911 call.

Hypothermia symptoms

Risner said they had made their way to a limited patch of shoreline below the sheer river bank where they sat for about an hour until 6:30 when she felt the symptoms of hypothermia. "I knew exactly what was happening," she said. "I was really feeling threatened that I wasn't going to make it."

She said it took the rescue boat minutes to pick them up. "They were wonderful!"

The boy's dad and another son had floated down the river in inner tubes before, she added. "I thought – what a piece of cake."

She recalled that she and the youth were at the recent Color the Skies over Ripon balloon event at Mistlin Park where the boy spotted the powered parachute on display. She quoted him saying, "Look at that contraption – what will they ever use that for?" Little did he know, he would get a first-hand demonstration of its emergency use on the river.

When Lt. Ormonde returned to LAN Park to land the powered parachute, as dusk had pretty much turned to dark, he used street lights for his approach along with a patrol unit to confirm that the park was clear of any children who might have been playing there. He said the park area is clear of power and telephone lines and that overhead lines were not a concern.

In the recent Bank of America bank robbery standoff, Ripon's powered parachute was at Woodward Park south of Manteca, ready to take off, if and when they were called upon in support of the Manteca Police Department SWAT team.

Ripon officers were on site for about three hours, expecting to take off from the park and cover the scene from above when the parks department helicopter ran out of fuel, but ultimately they were not needed.

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