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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

South Dakota Guardsmen recall search and rescue mission

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RAPID CITY, S.D. – On a cold, wet and windy November evening in 1996, a toddler stood next to a tree, lost in a wooded ravine, after wandering from his parent’s ranch near Chadron, Neb. Not knowing where he was or if someone was out looking for him, the 22-month-old child could only wait, as night approached and temperatures dropped into the low 20s.

But unknown to the child, people were frantically looking for him; family, friends, law enforcement, search and rescue personnel and a few Soldiers from the South Dakota National Guard.

“Helping your fellow citizen is what this whole National Guard business is about,” said Col. Ted Johnson, military support officer for the SDNG at the time. “Whether it’s Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming or North Dakota or wherever, we’re here to help.”

The small child was reported missing at about 4:30 p.m. Searchers began immediately looking for him, and after several hours of searching, with no sign of him and facing deteriorating weather conditions, emergency management officials requested the assistance of the South Dakota National Guard at about 10 p.m.

“We had the right personnel and capabilities for the mission and offered the nearest assets,” said Johnson. “We also brought in an agent from the State’s Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI) with a Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) system to assist.”

Once the call for assistance came in, four members from the Guard and one state DCI agent departed Rapid City for Chadron. The crew made the nearly 100-mile trek in just 45 minutes flying in a UH-1 helicopter. The helicopter and FLIR system combination would prove vital in the search.

“The aircraft provided the speed to arrive on-site quickly and search the area. It also provided the elevation needed for the FLIR,” said Chief Warrant Officer Frank Effenberger (Retired), who co-piloted the aircraft with Col. Dale Clelland (Retired). “We had to move quickly because the high moisture level and the fact it was getting cold would have made it difficult for a young person, or anybody, to survive.”

“We arrived on sight at about 11 p.m. and got the details of the missing boy; we started flying a grid pattern over a mile and a half radius around the ranch,” added Johnson. “We would see deer, rabbits and other animals on the FLIR, but no sign of the boy.”

After searching for nearly an hour, DCI Agent John Walker noticed something on the thermal imaging device that looked like it could be the child.

“Walker leaned over to me and asked me to take a look at the screen to verify what he spotted,” said Johnson. “It looked like a little baby in a cradle or crib, curled up next to a tree. We knew it had to be him.”

Johnson said the entire crew was pretty ecstatic.

“I wanted to jump down a rope right then, but I couldn’t because of the terrain. So we landed in a nearby meadow.”

“We had to land about 200 feet from where we spotted the boy,” said Effenberger. “Johnson and Walker got out along with crew chief Sgt. 1st Class Bruce Abrams who had night-vision goggles.”

After landing they proceeded to the location where they thought the boy was, but due to rough terrain, thick vegetation and poor visibility, they could not pinpoint the child’s exact whereabouts.

“We hurried up to the tree we thought he was at and called out to him, but he didn’t respond. It was so dark and thick in there,” said Johnson. “We thought the helicopter might have scared him, too.”

After no response, the crew called back to the sheriff and requested a bigger search party to move to their location. When they arrived the flight crew took back to the air to re-locate the child’s thermal signature. Within minutes, the ground searchers found the boy.

The boy was located at about 1:30 a.m. and was more than a mile and half from the ranch. With the combined effort of the Guard and emergency management personnel, the child was found unharmed but extremely cold. He was transported to a local hospital and later released.

Upon returning to the ranch, the Guard members were thanked for their assistance in the search and rescue operation.

“It was great to see the boy reunited with his parents. We were thanked by many people,” said Effenberger. “It’s a very gratifying feeling after a successful mission such as that.”

“I’ve gone out on numerous search missions throughout my career,” continued Effenberger, a 39-year veteran. “This was definitely one of the most rewarding.”

The Guardsmen were awarded the Nebraska Emergency Services Ribbon by the state’s governor for their participation in the rescue operation.

Over the years, the South Dakota National Guard has responded to numerous requests for support in state rescue operations from downed planes to stranded flood victims to lost hunters and hikers.

Johnson, who is now the chief of staff for the South Dakota National Guard, said for years the South Dakota National Guard was the only organization in the state that could provide the kind of search and rescue capability needed in situations like these.

Now, other state agencies have those capabilities but the Guard is still standing by and ready to assist.

“The Guard is still an integral part of search and rescue today, because we provide additional personnel, aircraft and equipment to assist our state’s emergency management teams,” said Johnson. “We’re standing ready.”