



Updated: Mon., Feb. 21, 2011, 10:06 AM

## Life from above

By SELIM ALGAR, LARRY CELONA, JOHN DOYLE and BOB FREDERICKS

Last Updated: 10:06 AM, February 21, 2011

Posted: 2:55 AM, February 21, 2011

NYPD cops yesterday pulled off a death-defying rescue of two West Point space cadets who got stranded on a razor-thin rock ledge 800 feet above the Hudson River after ignoring 50-mph winds and subfreezing temperatures to practice rappelling.

The daring cops, using the Aviation Unit's Bell 412 rescue helicopter, activated infrared and night-vision devices to spot the freshmen cadets, who had desperately roped themselves to a small branch sticking out from between the rocks to keep from being blown off the 18-inch-wide ledge on Storm King Mountain.

The cadets were already suffering from severe hypothermia after being stuck on the nearly vertical mountain face for 12 hours clad only in camouflage fatigues, light fleeces and baseball caps.

As veteran NYPD pilot Steve Browning, 52, battled howling winds to hold the hovering chopper steady, Detective Chris Condon, an Emergency Service Unit medic, was lowered 80 feet and managed to squeeze himself onto the ledge next to the cadets in pitch-black darkness at about 2:30 a.m.

"I'm not going to lie to you, it was pretty scary out there," Browning, a former Army pilot, told The Post last night from his Long Island home.

"The helicopter was shaking, and it was completely dark.

"I've been a pilot for a long time, and this was definitely the most difficult thing I've been involved with."

Condon, 40, later told a pal that when he reached the young cadets, "They were very happy to see me," sources said.

"They were shivering and very lightly clothed. They kept saying, 'Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir,' over and over . . . If you looked down, it was [an 800-foot] drop," Condon said, according to the sources.

The drama began at about 6:30 p.m. Saturday, when the duo became stuck and one of the cadets used his cellphone to call for help.

Local and state authorities launched a search for the young men in Storm King State Park, about 40 miles north of the city.

At about 7:10 p.m., the crew of a New York State Police helicopter spotted the two cadets, and searchers debated whether to rescue them from above or below the 1,348-foot peak.

As the hours passed, temperatures plunged into the teens and wind gusts topped 50 mph, creating near-zero wind chills.

By midnight, the rescue team, which included Park Police, State Police and the Cornwall Fire Department, determined the two would have to be rescued by air.

The NYPD was called in because its chopper is larger and more powerful than the State Police Bell 407, and the bigger craft would be safer as the weather deteriorated.

The cadets used the light from one of their cellphones to help guide the helicopter closer.

Then Condon, a father of five, was lowered down on a rope to the ledge and calmed the frightened, 20-year-old Army cadets.

He placed a rescue collar around one of the students, and the young man was hauled into the chopper and flown to a landing zone at West Point and rushed by ambulance to its medical center.

The chopper then flew back to get the other cadet, and finally, Condon.

"This was like hovering three-quarters of the way up the Empire State Building and picking you off a window ledge in the darkness -- and the winds being very turbulent because they are bouncing off the surrounding buildings," said Capt. James Coan, commanding officer of the Aviation Unit.

The cadets were admitted to the Academy's Keller Army Medical Center..

The NYPD suggested that the cadets had strayed from an earlier training exercise, but West Point spokeswoman Theresa Brinkerhoff said they were on their own time.

She added that the cadets broke no rules.

*selim.algar@nypost.com*