

4 climbers rescued off El Capitan

■ Fierce winter storm trapped two groups of climbers on Yosemite's 3,000-foot rock wall.

By Jim Sanders
McClatchy News Service

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK — Two days of terror on a jagged ledge high up Yosemite's El Capitan ended Sunday for two experienced mountain climbers who were plucked to safety by rescue workers braving cold winds and thick blankets of fog.

David Megerle, 32, of Boulder, Colo., and Simon Peck, 27, of Seattle, Wash., said they spent many of the pre-dawn hours Sunday wondering if they would live or die on their precarious perch nearly 1,600 feet above the Yosemite Valley floor.

"I'm not a religious man, but I was praying," Peck said.

Two other climbers, who did not know Megerle or Peck, also were rescued from the 3,000-foot El Capitan on Sunday after one of them complained of frostbite. They were Russ Walling, 30, of Compton and Eric Erickson, 36, of Arcadia.

Both groups of climbers were taken by surprise when a wintry storm poured several inches of

rain onto the dry valley floor and nearly six inches of powdery snow on the Yosemite mountaintops Friday and Saturday.

Megerle and Peck had it worse than the other climbers, however, because they were on a perch more exposed to water, according to park rangers.

The two had been scaling the rock wall for 11 days when they were pulled to safety from a climbing route known as the "Sea of Dreams," one of the most difficult ascents in Yosemite.

They were stranded directly below a rocky crater that collected rainfall from the fierce storm and sent it hurtling toward them in a waterfall that soaked their clothes, equipment and spirits.

'Feared for my life'

"I feared for my life," said Megerle. "Everything we had was totally drenched. We were in a bad spot. It was literally straight down to the valley floor and the wind just hammered us. I was scared."

The two men kept alive by burning their gloves and socks in a little "blue light stove" that they passed back and forth Saturday night and Sunday morning, as temperatures atop El Capitan hit 28 degrees. Their drenched clothes and strong winds made it seem much colder.

They boiled hot water on the mountain, too, while they called down to the valley floor for help and waited more than 24 hours before a passerby heard their pleas and rescue workers were able to reach the precarious ledge.

Megerle and Peck said their climb was going fine until the fierce storm hit. They weren't injured but they had no feeling in their feet Sunday because of the bone chilling cold on the mountain top.

As rescue workers struggled Sunday afternoon to rappel down from the top of El Capitan to the climber's position about 600 feet below the cliff's summit, the trapped climbers sat on aluminum frames protected by blue nylon stretched into the shape of little tents.

No exit up or down

They said they couldn't move down the mountain when the storm hit because they were on an overhang and the ledge curved sharply inward, preventing them from getting safe footing. They couldn't move upward because of the slippery rock face and the sheet of frigid water slapping them from above.

"I've never been so scared in my life," Megerle said. "We were so wet I don't think we could have handled another night up there."

Despite their numb feet, Megerle and Peck were able to pull themselves up by a rope supplied by the rescue team. The process took about two hours to scale the remaining 600 feet of sheer cliff wall. Afterward they were airlifted to the valley floor by helicopter.

Peck said he and his partner had climbed El Capitan four times in the past, but they never anticipated the combination of

cold temperature, torrential rain and ice cold water that hit them Friday and Saturday.

"I'm wet, I'm cold, I'm going to get a hot shower and try to get my feet dry," Peck said. "But would I do it again? Yes. I'd go back in a minute. As soon as [the weather is] nice."

Rescue began early

The rescue operation began about 4 a.m. Sunday when hikers began ascending the sides of El Capitan. At dawn, a National Guard helicopter carried additional climbers to the top.

The effort, the second and third this year and coordinated by the National Park Service, involved more than two dozen hikers and climbers, 20 support per-

sonnel on the valley floor and a helicopter crew from the California Army National Guard.

After Megerle and Peck were pulled to safety about 3 p.m., rescuers turned their attention to the other pair of stranded climbers, Walling and Erickson, — who were a little higher up and maybe a quarter mile to the right of the first group.

Walling said he was in "mint condition" after the rescue about 5 p.m. But his partner, Erickson, was taken to a medical clinic for treatment of frostbitten hands.

"What were the conditions like?" Walling asked rhetorically. "Horrendous. It was grimsville up there."