

NAS Meridian fire fighter aids in rescue of child

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Feb. 2 is a day that NAS Meridian Fire & Rescue fire fighter Mark Nixon has etched in his memory.

Nixon, also a volunteer fire fighter with Clarkdale Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, was part of a four-man search team that included Terry Arnsdorff, chief of the Clarkdale Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department; Wayne Robinson, chief of the Meehan Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department; and Allan Dover, Lauderdale County Fire Service Coordinator; who helped rescue a missing child from a heavily wooded area off Highway 45 in Lauderdale County. They were sweeping through the search grid south of the child's grandparents' home where 4-year-old boy, Ayden Gray, had wandered off.

"We received the call approximately 4:45 p.m.," recalled Nixon. "The child had been lost I guess for about an hour at that point. From then, we got a plan together and began the search."

Unfortunately that day, temperatures were in the low 30's.

"It was cold when we started... we were all thinking that when it got dark it would just get colder," Nixon said.

The team and 200 volunteers helping in the search had already spent hours trudging through the woods.

"We decided we would make one last call to the child before we changed our path of direction," Nixon said. "When we did (call), the child actually responded back to us."

Their hopes were lifted when they heard a faint little voice.

"Terry and I took the initiative and went towards the child immediately," Nixon said. "One of the other guys that was with us notified everyone that we had a potential location of the child while we actually went deeper into the woods. After we got down into the woods a little way, we were calling for the child... and heard the child respond... we were at the edge of a beaver dam near a creek. At that point, we told the child to stay put, not to move... he was responding very vaguely back to us."

Nixon said that Arnsdorff wasted no time and immediately waded the water to get to the child while he took a different path as an alternative option to reach the child. They heard the child scream out like he was hurt.

It wasn't an easy task for Nixon and Arnsdorff. They knew

the dangers that surrounded the child. The water was chest deep in places and Ayden was standing on a sliver of ground trying to hold on to a sapling.

"When we got there, Terry said to me 'I'm spent... you're going to have to get him.' We probably waded in waist-deep water for 80 to 100 yards toting the child," Nixon said.

Once Nixon and Arnsdorff got the child to dry land, they wrapped him in blankets to try to prevent hypothermia..

"All I remember is the four-wheelers coming in to get him and taking him to the ambulance. His body temperature was 82 degrees at that point," said Nixon, the man who toted the boy through freezing water and underbrush, but would not call himself a hero.

"I didn't do anything that anyone else would not have done. And I was only a part of the team. There was a team out there -- we were just at the right place at the right time to hear the child and it was definitely an act of God to find that kid that night. Personally, I don't want any of the credit without Him (God)."

Nixon is a father of two -- a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter.

"When I got my hands on that child, I didn't want to let him go because all I could think about was, 'This could be my kid.' That's why when we heard the voice, our parental instincts took over," Nixon said.

NAS Meridian Fire Department Assistant Chief of Operations William Hagwood said Nixon's action brought great distinction to the department.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience that he'll never forget," Hagwood said. "I think it's just great that he was able to use his abilities to help this little boy. It shows the training that we give our guys pays off, not only here but on their off time. It (the training) not only benefits the base, but the local areas and the communities as well."

Hagwood added that Nixon is a great fire fighter and an EMT instructor.

"I can't say enough about him. He just goes above and beyond his everyday duties," Hagwood said. "It's no wonder that when we need something done, he is one of the ones who steps up willing to do whatever."