

“Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer Saved 165 Children”

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By Jaime E. Galvan

KERRVILLE—On his very first mission, a young Coast Guard rescue swimmer became a symbol of bravery and compassion during the catastrophic Fourth of July flooding in Central Texas.

Scott Ruskan, a rescue swimmer with the U.S. Coast Guard, helped save 165 children and staff from rapidly rising floodwaters that surrounded Camp Mystic, a century-old girls’ summer camp on the banks of the Guadalupe River. The mission was part of a massive emergency-response effort that has seen more than 850 high-water rescues across the Texas Hill Country.

The Department of Homeland Security called Ruskan an “American hero,” but, in an interview with CNN, he downplayed the title.

“I’m just a guy . . . anyone can do this if they raise their right hand,” Ruskan said in an interview with CNN.

Called into the storm

Ruskan told CNN that on the morning of July 4, his crew was launched from Coast Guard Air Station Corpus Christi following an urgent request from Task Force One, a Texas-based search-and-rescue unit.

“We were flying through the same storm that was causing all the flooding,” he said—“some of the worst weather I’ve ever flown through.”

It took four separate flight attempts before they could reach Kerrville, finally breaking through with the help of the Air National Guard.

Camp Mystic: A desperate rescue

The crew’s mission was clear: Reach Camp Mystic, where around 200 campers were trapped. Ruskan said bridges and roads had been washed out, and boat rescues weren’t possible.

Once on the ground, the crew made a bold decision—leave Ruskan behind so the aircraft could carry more children to safety. As helicopters came and went, Ruskan became the only triage coordinator on site.

“There was no communication for about three hours,” he said. “My job was just to comfort the kids and keep them calm until help could get to them.”

Many campers had no shoes, and counselors were seen carrying children barefoot over rocks to helicopters. Ruskan said one counselor told him they were “throwing kids out the door” to get them away from the floodwaters.

“They were so brave and tough,” Ruskan said. “It made me a better rescuer.”

Rising toll and ongoing danger

The flooding has left at least 102 people dead, including 27 from Camp Mystic, according to Kerr County Sheriff Larry Leitha. Eleven remain missing, including 10 girls and one counselor.

“Texans always come together in tragedy,” said Sen. Ted Cruz, who praised Ruskan and others. “Stories of heroism include Eagle Scouts saving others and a counselor holding up two mattresses with campers on top.”

Gov. Greg Abbott has warned that the danger isn’t over. With more rain in the forecast and the ground already saturated, the threat of additional flash flooding remains high through Tuesday.

‘I’m just a dude’

Though hailed as a national hero, Ruskan told CNN that what matters most is the example set by everyone—from military responders to civilian survivors.

“Anyone can do this,” he said. “You just have to be willing to help.”