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Five Bureau of Indian Affairs offices have been presented awards for rescue and supply operations following the December snow and rain storms in the Southwest, Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall announced today.

Receiving the unit awards for excellence of service were staffs of the Navajo and Phoenix Area Offices and of the Hopi, Fort Apache and Papago Agencies, all headquartered in Arizona.

"These employees worked long and hard hours, sometimes at risk of their lives, to seek out and rescue those trapped by the storms and to bring food to isolated people and animals," Udall said.

"It would be as impossible to exaggerate the dedication and energies of these people as it would be to estimate the scope of the disaster their timely actions averted," he said.

The Navajo and Hopi areas were covered by snowfalls which ranged from 18 to 40 inches. During emergency rescue and supply operations more than One million pounds of food and hundreds of tons of hay and fuel were distributed by air and surface operations.

Bureau personnel worked to obtain and direct snow removal equipment and rescue planes and vehicles coordinated and guided rescue efforts and provided assistance to more than 22,000 students and school staffs sheltered in Bureau boarding schools.

Bureau personnel at the Fort Apache Agency coordinated several successful rescue missions for persons trapped by heavy snows in the rugged mountain areas of the reservation. One was a daring helicopter flight at treetop level to rescue the watchman at a logging camp 45 miles from the nearest town. Icing conditions forced the helicopter to the treetop level as it flew through narrow canyons.

In the Papago area more than seven inches of rain caused considerable flooding and the collapse of many adobe homes. Papago Agency employees organized many rescue operations and provided six emergency shelters for the 500 Indians made homeless by the storm.

The staff of the Phoenix Area office worked a round-the-clock logistical operation to maintain food and hay supplies for emergency flights, to brief military flight crews, to coordinate incoming supplies of clothing and other materials, and to receive and relay radio, telephone and telegraph messages from all over the distressed area.

“All of these activities reflect a devotion to duty that represents the highest standards in those whose careers are in service to their Nation," Udall said.