She Had What it Takes

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April 2010

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SHE HAD WHAT IT TAKES
By Dan Burnett, Anna DeBattiste, Summit County Rescue Group (CO)
And Elaine Grosso, the victim

This incredible story needs to start with the patient’s medical condition at the time that rescuers found her.

1. A fractured spinal processes from T-7 thru T-12
2. compression fracture of T-9
3. two fractured eye sockets
4. a fractured nose
5. a scapula fractured in two places
6. 10 broken ribs
7. a lacerated liver
8. a punctured lung
9. a concussion, and
10. hypothermia and mild frostbite to her hands and feet.

And now, the story of her rescue...

On February 7, 2009, the Summit County (Colorado) Rescue Group responded to a call for a missing female snowmobiler on Vail Pass. This is the story of what they found that night, and the amazing survival of a courageous woman.

Dan Burnett, Summit County Rescue Group Mission Coordinator, 5:00 pm

It really speeds things up when you know the reporting party, because part of a Mission Coordinator’s job is to evaluate the credibility of the person who called 911. So I was glad when I arrived on Vail Pass and had Scott Wilson to talk to. Scott’s been running his snowmobile rental operation for a long time, and he knows the difference between a missing person who probably went to a bar, and a missing person who is probably in real trouble. Because I was dealing with Scott I had been able to put out a page for the team right away, before I even arrived on scene.

“They were going to Red Cliff,” Scott told me. “She was following her husband, and at one point he looked back and she was gone. He went up and down Turkey Creek Road looking for her, but there was no sign.”

“What’s the timeline?” I asked.

“She disappeared at about 1:00 pm. Husband looked until about 3:00, then I joined in with a couple of my staff members. Then Vail Mountain Rescue was called at 4:00, and they have two rescuers out with the husband on the Red Cliff side.”

I got on the radio and called the Vail team. “I need you guys back down here on the pass, with the husband,” I told them. “We’re going to organize search areas from here.”

Members of the Summit County Rescue Group had begun to arrive by then, and I started sending them out by snowmobile in teams of two. “I want everyone to stop every five minutes, turn off your sleds, and yell,” I told them. “If she was visible from the trail she’d have been found already. She’s obviously off the trail somewhere.”

I held a medical team back, ready to go into the field when we found her. Mark Svenson, another Mission Coordinator who showed up to help me run the mission, put the Flight for Life helicopter on an airborne standby
so we’d be ready for anything when we found her. Lifeguard 2, the helicopter based in our county, was past its service hours so he got Lifeguard 1 from Denver. Lynn Schlough, my efficient scribe, organized teams to go into the field while I mapped out the search areas.

The husband seemed calm, although worried, so I invited him to sit in the command post vehicle with us. “What’s your plan?” he asked me.

“We’re going to find her in the next hour,” I said confidently, hoping I was right.

And I was. A radio call came in from the Vail team a few minutes later and they had found her, badly injured, lying in Turkey Creek ravine. We sent the Summit teams toward her, and launched the medical team that had been waiting by the command post. Radio reception was poor from her location, so we posted a radio relay about halfway up the trail. With perfect timing, the Flight for Life chopper landed on the pass and waited for my instructions. Within five minutes, we had gotten coordinates to the pilot and the chopper launched again.

Anna DeBattiste, Summit County Rescue Group rescuer, 7:30 pm
I stood in the deep, untracked snow between the edge of the snowmobile road and Turkey Creek ravine because from there I could see everything: the crew on the road, preparing a landing zone for the helicopter, and the crew in the ravine, working quickly to package our patient.

“Get an ETA on the patient reaching the road,” Glen Kraatz called over to me. “The Flight for Life chopper is at the Vail Pass parking area, and they don’t want to launch until we have a time estimate.”

I called down to the medical crew and was told it would be about 10 minutes. I relayed the estimate to Cale Osborn, our Sheriff’s Office liaison, and heard it repeated by our radio relay person.

Our patient was screaming again. “I can’t breath!” she shrieked.

“Hang in there,” Scott Young said as he and the other four rescuers tried to shift her position. I felt bad for Scott. He’d been one of the first arrivals, but his paramedic training wasn’t much use without any medical equipment. We hadn’t even had oxygen until another team arrived from command, many minutes later.

The medical team must have found a better position for our patient because she was quiet for a few minutes. I resumed tramping a path between the ravine and the road with my snowshoes, while the rest of the road crew
readied a rope to haul her up. We didn’t have a litter, so she would be on a backboard with the rope attached and haulers on every side.

I tried to figure out how the accident had happened as I tramped back and forth. The snowmobile road was groomed, straight, wide and flat. It had still been daylight at the time of her crash, nearly six hours ago. Her tracks went at a gradual angle off the road, across twenty feet of flat ground in untracked snow, and then down another forty feet into the ravine. Her sled lay mangled in the creek, and she had been found lying on the bank. We didn’t know the extent of her injuries yet, but we knew they were severe, perhaps even critical. I’d heard one of our more experienced snowmobilers speculating that something must have happened to make her panic and hit the throttle as she dropped into the ravine.

There was a commotion from the ravine as the patient began to scream in pain again. There were no words this time; just deep, guttural expressions of agony.

“She’s going red!” Scott yelled, letting us know that our patient was indeed critical and every second would count. “What’s the chopper’s ETA?”

“It’s in the air!” I shouted back. “Are you ready to move her?”

Someone handed me the end of the rope, and I tossed it down into the ravine. We lined up and got ready to haul. My five teammates in the ravine clearly had a tough task ahead of them; despite our efforts to stomp out a trail leading up the embankment, the snow was deep and there wasn’t much room to maneuver.

They started by trying to carry the backboard, but the two rescuers on the outside kept falling off the trail and back into the ravine. Then they began to heave our patient up the trail, one throw at a time, breathing heavily. She screamed with every heave. We hauled on the rope as hard as we could, but it didn’t seem like we were helping much. When she reached the top, we were able to carry her the rest of the way to the snowmobile road.

Glen had arranged a couple of snowmobiles facing each other to light up a landing zone on the snowmobile road ahead of us, and he stood in the middle, waiting to land the chopper. While we waited, I took a good look at our patient. Packaged in a full body splint and propped on her left side, little of her was visible but I could see that she had broken bones in her face. Her eyes were closed, and she appeared to have lost consciousness. I hoped that meant she wasn’t still in pain, at least for the moment.

Red and green lights appeared in the sky from around the corner of a high ridge. The chopper made a wide circle above us, and then disappeared behind the same ridge. We waited in tense silence. After a few seconds, someone said, “He didn’t like the landing zone. He’s not coming back.”

We were silent again, absorbing this tragic possibility. I knew she would not live through the eight-mile trip behind a snowmobile.
After another few seconds the red and green lights reappeared. The relief was palpable. I think a few of us even smiled. As the chopper landed, we started up the snowmobile and towed the patient very slowly up the road. The flight nurse jumped out and greeted us, briskly sizing up the patient as she approached.

“We’ll have to take her to Summit Medical for assessment,” she said. “We can’t do anything here with her packaged so tightly.”

I didn’t care where she went; I was just relieved to have her headed for a trauma center. As the chopper took off with our patient, I crouched in the blowing snow, head between my hands, wondering if she would make it.

Elaine Grosso, the patient, Turkey Creek ravine, FL 9:00 pm

As I went over the ravine all I could think was, “How am I going to get out of this alive?” I blacked out sometime during the fall and woke up just as my head hit the rocks in the running creek. I tried to breath and realized the chin strap from the helmet was forced into my throat. It took three tries to finally start breathing again. I was bound and determined that I was not going to die, not by myself, not like this.

I was lying in the freezing cold water; I knew I had to get out of the creek. The impact to my head had been so severe I’d heard a snap in my neck, so my next step was to make sure my legs moved and they did. The snowmobile had landed suspended over the creek with part of my legs under it, and I knew if it fell, I’d never be able to move. My right arm was embedded up to my shoulder in the snow with my forearm down in the water. I dug my arm out and realized that it was badly damaged; I had to use my other arm to move it. Then I started scooting myself out of the creek and onto the snow. Once I started moving I knew I was injured pretty badly, but I had no clue just how badly.

I tried my best to crawl up the ravine, but every time I tried, I just fell right back to where I was. The snow was so deep that I just didn’t have the strength I needed to continue the climb. As night fell, I decided to pack down the snow as best I could so I could lie down, and then I tried to make a wall around me to keep my body as warm as possible. By this point I was completely exhausted and dozed off.

I awoke to the sound of snowmobiles in the distance, and as soon as they stopped, I heard the rescue worker call out my name. He sounded just like my husband, so I called out--“Jack, Jack, I’m down here”. It seemed it was a matter of seconds before the rescue worker reached me, and the first and only thing I could say to him was, “Thank you for saving my life.”

The Summit County Rescue Group, November 4, 2009:

Today, Elaine Grosso is almost fully recovered with the exception of a nerve problem in her right deltoid, for which she has undergone one surgery with a possible second surgery scheduled in eight months.

The final medical report from that night was so incredible that it has since been used by our medical director for case studies. Her injuries included fractured eye sockets, a fractured nose, fractured spinal processes from T-7 thru T-12 with a compression fracture of T-9, a broken scapula in two places, 10 broken ribs, a lacerated liver, a punctured lung, a concussion, hypothermia and mild frostbite to her hands and feet. What does it take to keep fighting for survival with injuries like that?

We continue to keep in touch with Elaine and ask for reports on her recovery. Recently she told us in a letter, “I know I would not be here today if it weren’t for the valiant efforts of all the rescue workers. I will forever be bonded to this wonderful group of men and women.” And we, in turn, feel inspired by the courage of a woman who survived one of the worst ordeals we’ve ever seen.
REMEMBERING A FALLEN HERO

By Cindy England

There is little water flowing in the riverbed. Soot and ash cover the ground. The oak trees that previously offered shade to the banks of the river are now only blackened sticks of charred wood, reminders of the Station Fire last year that destroyed greater than 16,000 acres of our response area – our forest. No reminders of the tragedy that occurred 41 years ago remain at the scene.

I have seen pictures of Chuck Rea. I have heard pieces of the story...... the only Search and Rescue member to have lost his life in the line of duty in LA County history. But when Honor Guard wanted to add a streamer in his name, I wanted to know more about the story, about the person that I would never know.

It was a time before VHF radios, PFD’s, swift water rope bags. It was the week of the “One Hundred Year Rainstorm” that struck Southern California in January, 1969. On the 26th day of that month, there was a call to Montrose SAR involving an evacuation of 32 residents who were stranded by Big Tujunga River in the canyon of the same name in Los Angeles County. The river reportedly had fast-moving waters which trapped families, including an ill, 11 year old child who required emergent care. The bridge allowing exit had washed out. One of the residents used his CB radio to request help. Fourteen MSAR members responded.

Dan Hensley, a current member of our team and the only remaining member who was on scene at the time, described the situation upon arrival: “There were at least 100 waterfalls flowing where before the storm there were none. Rocks the size of VW’s could be heard being pushed downstream. We could see the west bank of the canyon, but not the other side. Our radios did not work all the time and we needed a bullhorn to talk to the victims”.

Dennis Kelly, a former member present at the time, wrote “You could watch full grown trees float by, and you could even listen to the rumbling of the huge boulders being washed down the stream by the 20 mph raging waters”.

Once the team arrived on scene, they divided into 2 squads. Team One was assigned to set up a Tyrolean system to cross the river near the stranded families. Team Two was deployed upstream to locate a safe crossing whereby members could reach the victims.

Team One’s first attempt to get a line to the far side using a bow and arrow was unsuccessful. A rope eventually was sent across the rushing waters using a fishing reel borrowed from a resident who was observing the operation. A Tyrolean was rigged and the team captain was ferried over to the stranded families. Care was provided to the ill child.

Team Two, ¼ mile upstream, had intermittent contact with the IC due to the torrential rain pour, broken transmission of the “lunch box” radios, as well as loss of visual contact. They had located a crossing that divided the muddy swift water into 2 segments. The first was more easily managed as it was criss-crossed with trapped logs and boulders reaching an island formed by a few still-standing sycamore trees causing a log jam. The second leg of the crossing was more tenuous, a 20 foot span of fast-moving water to the other side. One of the Team 2 members broke the span by felling a sycamore with an axe, bridging the gap. A rope was rigged as a safety hand line. Most of the team had crossed to the far banks when they were made aware that the victim had been treated. Chuck Rae, being the last member to cross, turned direction on the felled log to make the traverse back. No one on the team was initially aware that Chuck Rae had turned to cross.
The creek BEFORE the accident...

Chuck Rae had been with the team for 3 years, was a team instructor and information officer. During the operation and his turn to cross, he had safety tied into the handline with a caribiner attached to a chest harness. As he turned direction halfway across the log, he slipped on the slick wood surface and fell into the waters. The nylon climbing rope stretched to such a length that he was unable to extend a grip to reach the log. The rushing water covered his helmet, keeping his face submerged. A fellow team member scrambled to pull Chuck to safety but was unable to overcome the forces generated by the water pulling Chuck away from his grasp. With the river rising, the log dislodged, carrying the rescuer to the far river bed ripping Chuck’s hand from his own.

Over the following 4-5 minutes, a horrific yet heroic effort was made to keep Chuck from being dragged underwater. A fellow team member scrambled to pull Chuck to safety, gripping clothing, webbing, anything to lift his nose and mouth from the waters. Chuck would gasp for air for a few breaths before the rescuer’s grip would weaken from the frigid, rushing waters. Hensley recalls: “There became multiple times where Chuck was able to breathe as the rescuer re-gripped, alternating with Chuck’s face falling below the water’s surface”. Eventually, the team member was unable to overcome the water’s force. With the river rising, the log dislodged carrying the rescuer to the far river bed and ripping Chuck’s hand from his own.

The body recovery was on January 27th, 1969. Chuck Rae, 34 years old, left behind a wife and 4 young daughters.

There were several changes, at both a team level as well as county level that occurred subsequent to this tragedy. The team assigned a task force to evaluate and implement new procedures regarding swift water safety. The Sheriff’s department issued department radios to each team in the county, insuring communication between squads.

Our team now awards the “Chuck Rae Memorial Award” to that member recognized for outstanding dedication to duty and contributions to the Montrose Search and Rescue team. Beginning this year, Chuck Rae will be remembered beyond our family, when the streamer embroidered with his name, is placed on the MRA Honor Guard wreath.

IN THE NEWS?

The MRA web site has a new portion wherein MRA teams can post news stories and other pertinent information. This can include links to local television web sites and/or newspaper stories.

To have a look at this new feature, see http://www.mra.org/drupal2/content/news

If you have anything to post, sent it to Neil VanDyke at neilvd@stoweagle.com

... and AFTER the accident
Exhibitor and lodging information has been posted on the NASAR web site. The room rate is $65 per night plus tax. Check the [conference website](#) for pre-conference workshops and track workshop details. Pre-conference workshops will be held May 11-12, 2010.

### A Heartfelt Note From a Subject

The following message was sent to Grand County SAR (CO) and Alpine Rescue Team (CO) from a man they rescued.

```
To the whole team who came out to search for me on March 2nd & 3rd:
Thank you for staying up all night looking for me.
Thanks to the guys who camped on top of Mt. Mines on the night of March 2nd to wait for my appearance.
Thanks for coordinating other rescue teams, clinics and helicopter.
And thanks for the red gloves, and I’ll keep them as a memory of your kindness and tireless effort.
Saving lives is a simple cause, but a great one.
The mountains are beautiful because of your actions.

Guang ming Lang
```

### Back to Alaska!
The MRA 2010 Conference

**June 17-20, 2010**

The members of Juneau Mountain Rescue are putting together plans for the MRA Spring Conference June 17th-20th in Juneau Alaska. Come experience the beauty of Southeast Alaska. In June there is sun light 20 hours a day. Juneau is located in the Tongass National Forest. The largest intact temperate rain forest in the world, so bring your rain gear, but hope for sunshine.

There will be classroom and general sessions on Thursday, a helicopter supported glacier day on Friday and more field events on Saturday. Bring your rain gear, mountaineering boots, helmet ice axe and crampons.
The Friday glacier day will feature ice climbing, crevasse rescue and glacier trekking. We are currently looking for presenters for the conference. Those interested in presenting contact either Steve Lewis or Doug Wessen.


"MOUNTAINS DON’T CARE"
THE VIDEO

By Rick Lorenz

At the winter MRA meeting in Salt Lake City the Board voted to spend $1,000 to make 120 copies of the DVD available free of charge to libraries, museums and historical associations in the areas where MRA teams operate. With this email I am asking your help in developing the mailing list that we will use to send out the DVD’s.

The DVD contains the 2009 film “Mountains Don’t Care, But We Do!” (29 minutes) and two additional historic films. Each MRA team was provided with a free copy of the DVD and additional copies of the original DVD can still be purchased from MRA stores, see the link at http://www.mra.org/drupal2/content/mra-history-dvd

Mountains Don’t Care plays well on the big screen; it received great reviews at the Tacoma Film Festival and recently won the Best of Category Award at the Mountain Film Festival in Mammoth Lakes, California.

We just finished some technical improvements to the 2009 film, this includes a few more historic photos and photos submitted by MRA teams, and we now have a “final cut” of the film for the next printing of DVD copies for distribution. The new DVD case will have the ISBN number and a logo with the award from the Mountain Film Festival. You can find more detail about the DVD at the following link, including a "press kit" for download.

http://www.topographmedia.com/mra_project.html

Remember that there are two additional historic films on the DVD, including a 1953 Ira Spring film and the 1948 Austrian film with English subtitles, by mailing a “hard copy” to libraries and museums we can help preserve this important part of mountain rescue history. Any MRA member or team can nominate a particular local library or museum for the mail list, please send me an e-mail and provide as much detail as possible.

Each DVD will be accompanied by a cover letter describing the contents of the DVD, the ISBN details, and suggesting the terms to be used in the library catalogue. At the end of April we will compile all the library and museum nominations into a single list and mail the DVD’s during the month of May. Your assistance in creating the list will be appreciated.

OUTDOOR PROLINK
SUPER PRO DEALS FOR MRA MEMBERS

Outdoor Prolink has pro deal discounts on equipment from over 50 high quality brands. They recently launched Rab clothing, Scarpa and La Sportiva footwear, Outdoor Research clothing, Deuter backpacks and Camelbak on the site! Each month they off some “super pro-deals” on OutdoorProlink.com. MRA members can become a member by going to www.OutdoorProlink.com and click on the “Apply Now” link and follow the easy instructions. Make sure your group has a roster on file with us. You may also follow Outdoor Prolink on Facebook and receive regular updates about new brands & special deals from Outdoor Prolink on twitter.
INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL RESCUE SYMPOSIUM - 2010

Come join us on November 4-7th in Golden, CO for the 2010 International Technical Rescue Symposium (ITRS) event. The yearly symposium is the leading forum for up to date, state-of-the-art, technical rescue information. Rescuers representing mountain, cave, fire, industrial, and swiftwater gather to discuss ways to improve safety and performance, and answer questions. MRA Members receive a special $45 discount.

Register Online Today!

CALL FOR PAPERS

Have you done a presentation at ITRS? If not, you might want to think about it. You could be the next presenter to be awarded the Best Overall Presentation, Most Practical Presentation, or Best New Research! It is the ideal place to share your testing and information. For more information, contact Loui McCurley and/or Tom Vines:

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For years, ITRS has been sponsored by two companies that have invested heavily in the success of the program as well as the continuing research by the rescue community. Thanks to Steve Hudson at PMI and Jim Frank at CMC Rescue for their commitment, investment, and leadership! Go buy some of their stuff!!!

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

EARLY BIRD DISCOUNT (Paid before May 1, 2010):
$215.00 for AAC, MRA, NASAR, NCRC (NSS) SPRAT Members
$260.00 for Non-Members

REGULAR REGISTRATION (Paid after May 1, 2010):
$300.00 for AAC, MRA, NASAR, NCRC (NSS) SPRAT Members
$345.00 for Non-Members

FEES INCLUDE:
A copy of the conference papers, coffee and afternoon refreshments, a continental breakfast on Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning, and dinner on Saturday night. Lunch and remaining evening meals are not included.

PAYMENT DEADLINE:
Any registration for which payment in full has not been received by September 1, 2010 will be automatically cancelled. Members of government agencies, who must attend the symposium prior to making payment, must submit an approved purchase order prior to September 1, 2010. Payment will be due 15 days after the symposium. The cancellation and refund policy below will also apply to these participants.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Hotel reservations are being taken directly by The Marriott Denver West. To make your reservation online, click here. To make your reservation by phone, please contact the Marriott Denver West at: (303) 279-9100.

NOTE:
Reservations must be received by Friday, October 22, 2010 to receive our special Group Rate and are subject to prior sales of our reserved room block.

If you are making your reservation by phone, reference group code: itritra
Mountains Don’t Care, But We Do
An Early History of Mountain Rescue in the Pacific Northwest and the Founding of the Mountain Rescue Association

By Dee Molenaar

Dee Molenaar, author of The Challenge of Rainier, has written fascinating accounts of the legendary mountain rescues and recoveries in the Pacific Northwest. In telling these tales of triumph and tragedy, he has also traced the formation and evolution of the mountain rescue groups that carried out these missions.

“The old master has done it again, pulling from personal experience and scholarly research, a vital and vibrant history of mountain rescue in the Pacific Northwest to celebrate the Mountain Rescue Association’s 50th anniversary.”
—Tom Hornbein

“Mountains Don’t Care, But We Do, by Dee Molenaar, is a must read for those who enjoy high adventure and want to know the history of the Mountain Rescue Association.
—Jim Whittaker

“Mountains Don’t Care, But We Do, is a modest way of saying ‘thank you’ to the hundreds of mountain rescue volunteers who have come before us. We hope that they would be as proud of today’s groups as we are of them.”
—Charley Shimanski, President
Mountain Rescue Association

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The Mountain Rescue Association is an organization dedicated to saving lives through rescue and mountain safety education

www.mra.org