

MERIDIAN

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The Quarterly Publication of the Mountain Rescue Association

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It Takes a Village:

Rescuing a Family in Trampas
Lakes, New Mexico

A photograph showing a rescue team in a dense forest. In the foreground, a person in a red jacket with "FIRE RESCUE" on the back is seen from behind. In the center, a person in a yellow shirt is pulling a stretcher with a white sheet. To the right, a person with a large backpack is walking. The background is filled with tall evergreen trees under a blue sky with some clouds.

MRA Spring Conference
Tahquitz Rock Rescue
Lessons from Psychology and Medicine



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Summer2019

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ON THE COVER: From the story: ["It Takes A Village"](#) on page 9.
Photo courtesy of Ojo Sarco Volunteer Fire Rescue Department.

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President's Message Summer 2019

By Art Fortini, MRA President

At the last region meeting I attended, we discussed two large-scale mutual-aid missions: a search for a missing Marine who went for a two-week, solo ski trip in the Sierra Nevada, and a search for two lost people who got separated from their group on a day hike. One of the things that struck me on both of these searches was the number of people wearing the blue-and-white patch of the MRA.

On the first search, which took place in a national park, the search manager was very specific when he put in the request to the state Office of Emergency Services. He wanted teams that could function unsupported for a minimum of two nights in winter conditions with temperatures below zero. What he got were members of the MRA. On the second search, which involved icy conditions, air insertions were precluded throughout the entire search due to high winds. Search crews had to hike several miles just to get to the search area. Those taking on the more challenging assignments, which involved either very long days or overnight gear (or in the case of one crew, wet suits, snow and ice gear, 400+ feet of rope, and overnight gear) were all MRA members.

While there are certainly well-qualified mountaineers on many of the non-MRA teams in the region, when a statewide mutual aid request is made for resources that can function in snow and ice, the request invariably goes first to the MRA teams.

All of us derive some positive inner feeling (joy, pride, validation, camaraderie) when we go on a search and rescue mission—that's why we became involved with search and rescue, and that's why we've stayed with it. Being requested more frequently—at least for some of us—is yet another benefit of being a member of the MRA.

In California, the state Office of Emergency Services is blessed with 20 fully accredited MRA teams and a passel of associate member teams, but even in smaller regions, the MRA teams are invariably the go-to teams when the conditions are verging on epic. For agencies that need mutual aid, having MRA teams available is a tremendous benefit to them. While no searcher is bulletproof, search managers know they can relax at least a little bit when the mutual aid that comes to them is from the MRA. They know that as a fully accredited member of the MRA, you've not only trained for this type of environment, you've been tested in it and evaluated in it by your peers.



MRA President Art Fortini

The same is true when your team requests mutual aid and an MRA team answers the call. In addition to knowing they've been tested, you receive an additional benefit: you were likely one of the teams evaluating them, so you've seen them in action, and you *know* they can handle themselves.

Regardless of whether the requesting agency is part of the MRA or not, the blue-and-white patch on your shoulder gives you instant street cred. People in the SAR community know that you not only train hard, you allow yourselves to be put under the microscope and evaluated by people who are every bit as skilled and talented as you.

One final benefit of being part of the MRA as it relates to mutual aid is use of the national 155.160 radio frequency. All MRA teams can use it, which means it's probably already programmed into all of your radios. So, when you're on a mutual aid mission, you don't have to borrow a radio from the host team to speak to the command post. You can use your own radio—equipment that you know and trust—rather than using a radio that was likely rotated out of service years ago, hasn't been tested recently, and may or may not work when you need it to.

Some of the benefits mentioned here are subtle and likely to be appreciated mostly by the search managers and overhead staff, while others are more appreciated by the field crews (e.g. not having to carry that extra radio in the field). Either way, when it comes to mutual aid, it's good to be a member of the MRA.

Yours in service,

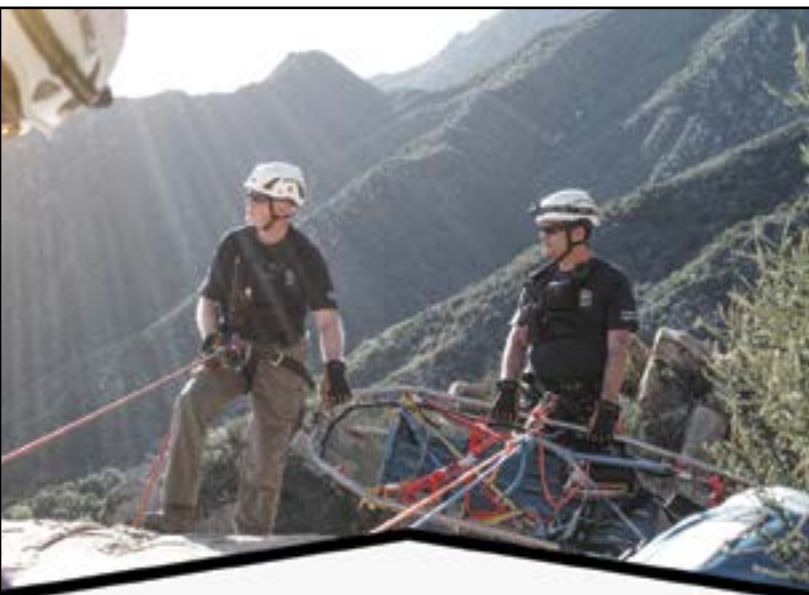
Art Fortini

Art Fortini
President, Mountain Rescue Association
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MRA Video Customization Available for Your Team

Last year, the MRA produced two short videos for its members: [Who We Are](#) and [What We Do](#). The *Who We Are* video, which runs a little over two minutes, describes the MRA and its history, while the three-minute *What We Do* video is a dramatization of a search for a little girl who gets separated from her parents while on a hike. Both videos, which were professionally made in high definition, are available on the MRA website to MRA teams at no charge. You can use these powerful videos for recruiting, fundraising, PR, public awareness, or as an eye-catching opener at any event that your team is putting on.

If you would like to have either or both of the videos customized for your team, the film maker has agreed to do this for a nominal fee: \$200 for one or \$350 for both at the same time. The customization would include showing your team's logo at the very end, and the voiceover artist



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would say the name of your team, so that your logo and team name would be the last things the viewer sees and hears before the video fades to black.

Check out the videos, and if you're interested in have one or both of them customized for your team, send a note to President@MRA.org if you have questions or need assistance, or [contact the film maker directly](#) to get the ball rolling.





MRA Spring Conference Recap

By Shelley Littin, Eugene Mountain Rescue and Southern Arizona Rescue Association

Photography © Portland Mountain Rescue and Antonio Arizo

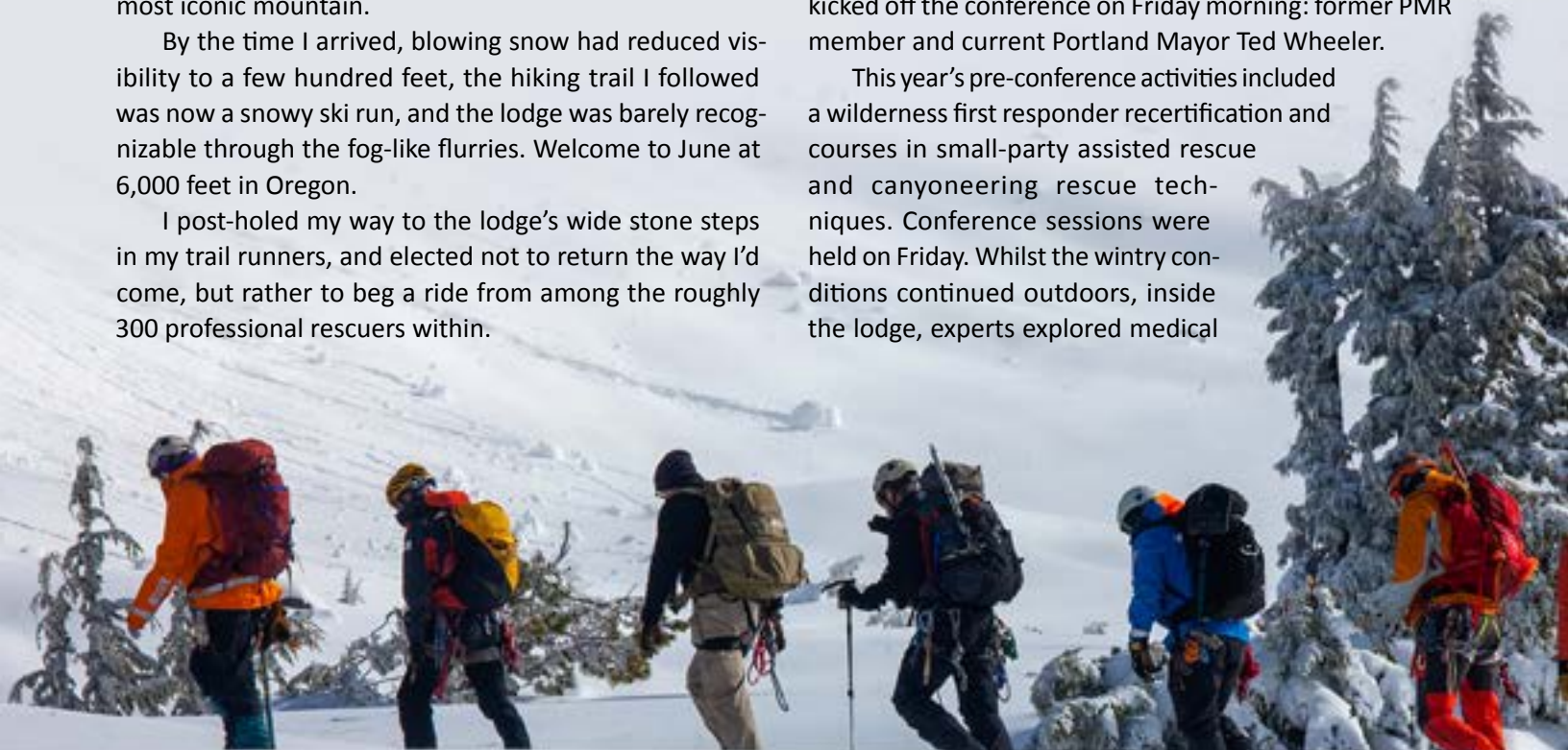
The afternoon was sunny and warm when I left the town of Government Camp. From the condo I shared with another team it was only a three-mile jog to Timberline Lodge, a historic wooden and stone monument nestled at—you guessed it—tree line on the slopes of Oregon's arguably most iconic mountain.

By the time I arrived, blowing snow had reduced visibility to a few hundred feet, the hiking trail I followed was now a snowy ski run, and the lodge was barely recognizable through the fog-like flurries. Welcome to June at 6,000 feet in Oregon.

I post-holed my way to the lodge's wide stone steps in my trail runners, and elected not to return the way I'd come, but rather to beg a ride from among the roughly 300 professional rescuers within.

They were there for the opening of the MRA's 2019 Spring Conference and 60th anniversary celebration, hosted by Portland Mountain Rescue (PMR) at the site where 15 founding teams created the Mountain Rescue Association in 1959: Timberline Lodge at Mt. Hood. A special guest kicked off the conference on Friday morning: former PMR member and current Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler.

This year's pre-conference activities included a wilderness first responder recertification and courses in small-party assisted rescue and canyoneering rescue techniques. Conference sessions were held on Friday. Whilst the wintry conditions continued outdoors, inside the lodge, experts explored medical



assessments and interventions, specialized subjects such as suspension syndrome, psychological first aid, and cognitive bias in rescue, and technical topics including twin tension systems, crevasse rescue, and canyon rescue.

In the evenings, attendees were regaled by the tales of two keynote speakers: Marco Yuracheck and Emily Johnston. Marco, a professional climbing guide and rescuer, shared his experience of an extended backcountry multisystem trauma evacuation with himself as the patient, while Emily discussed her career in mountain guiding and rescue, including her mountainside experience of the 2015 Himalayan earthquake and evacuation.

The blizzard departed by Saturday morning, leaving crisp snowy fields ready for a full day of rescue rendezvous, a good-spirited competition among conference attendees randomly assigned to mixed teams. Competing teams rotated through nine stations with 25 minutes to complete each event under the scrutiny of judges who assessed everything from technical competence to teamwork.

Stations tested rescuers' skills at crevasse rescue, avalanche search, high-lines, guided rappel, systems rigging, trauma assessment, litter carry, line search, and haul/lower systems. The competition resulted in a three-way tie for first place, and the score was finally settled with a

tie-breaking round of high-speed knot-tying by a representative of each top team.

Saturday evening saw some shenanigans in the form of a rappel line rigged from a beam in the lodge's main atrium (MRA past president Rocky Henderson procured permission from the powers-that-be—although on-site management seemed slightly less certain). A good number of rescuers, as well as a few enthusiastic guests and even a

couple of lodge employees, rapped down a stone column by the fireplace amid the cheers of onlookers. This final activity seemed to bring it all together—the 2019 Spring Conference refreshed our skills, reconnected our teams, and reminded us why we do mountain rescue: we do it to save lives, we do it to better ourselves—and we do it because it's really, really fun.

So pack your helmets and headlamps for the 2020 Spring Conference hosted by the Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group in Pittsburgh, which promises to include a cadre of cave and swift water rescue activities. I'll hope to see you all there!

*A video clip showcasing highlights from the 2019 conference [can be viewed here](#).



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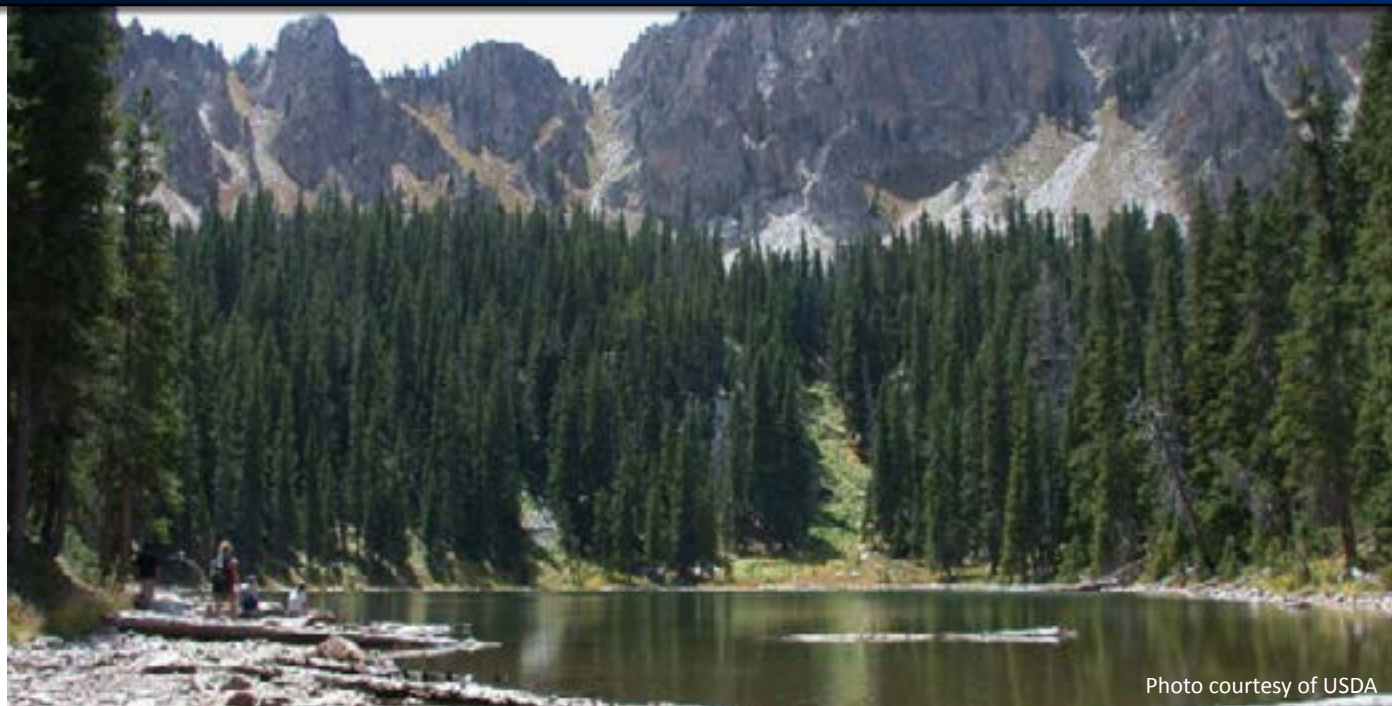


Photo courtesy of USDA

It Takes A Village

By Jon Mark Beilue Amarillo Globe-News; Aimee Adamek, Atalaya SAR, Santa Fe, New Mexico; John Becker, Atalaya SAR, Santa Fe, New Mexico; Andreas Schmitt-Sody, Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council

Editor's Note: This is the story of the Austin family, rescued in the Trampas Lakes area of New Mexico after a 70-foot tall tree fell on Luke and Meredith Austin during a wind-storm. It is told from two perspectives: that of the family and of the rescuers.

It was a family camping trip over a long October weekend in the New Mexico wilderness. Luke and Meredith Austin and their kids—Faith, 17; Adelynn, 15; Katherine, 12; and Blake, 10—were all experienced campers and hikers. So too was their Goldendoodle, Mayday.

The Austins found their way on October 5, 2018 to the remote Trampas Lakes, two lakes in the Pecos Wilderness of New Mexico, 47 miles south of Taos. From the trailhead, where the Austins had to leave their vehicle, it was a challenging six-mile hike around trees, brush, and up and down outcroppings to get to Trampas, which is about 11,000 feet.

They got there late in the afternoon of Oct. 5, a Friday. They made camp with two tents, and for the rest of the day and into Saturday did what they often did—built a fort and a boat out of tree limbs, completed chores, and built

a fire. They explored, and made meals out of summer sausage, beef jerky, cheese and crackers, Ramen noodle soup, tortilla soup, Triscuits, pancakes for breakfast.

By Saturday night, Oct. 6, they were all exhausted, and called it a night about 8 p.m. The kids were in one tent, and 20 feet away in another tent, were their parents. They were maybe 50 feet from the lake's shore, all nestled under 70-foot pine trees.

The wind that night was horrific. It swirled down from the canyons that surrounded the lakes. Luke got up twice

to make sure all was secure. "You couldn't sleep," Meredith said. "The tent was shaking, and the wind was so loud."

About 5:45 a.m. that Sunday, Oct. 7, a huge gust woke them. The pole structure was caving in. Then Meredith heard a distinct crack, and a 70-foot pine went crashing down on the couple's tent.

“Every time I walk around the corner and see Meredith, I can't tell you how it makes me feel. I thought it would wear off in a few weeks, but it hasn't. If the Lord called me to raise four kids without Meredith, I would have done it. But I'm so glad I don't have to.”

~Luke Austin

Snow in the forecast, the first winter storm for this year in New Mexico and of course, a mission. A couple from Amarillo, Texas, is camped near Trampas Lakes when, after a night of high winds, a tree has fallen

on their tent, landing squarely on their midsections. Luckily, they are not alone. Their children are with them, camped in a separate tent close by.

Time and details were foggy in the seconds after the tree came down. Luke screamed "like I'd been sucker punched," he said. He called for his kids. They were unharmed.

But not Luke, and certainly not Meredith. Adrenaline helped him get out from under the tree. He was in pain but could at least move his legs and toes. Meredith was not so fortunate. She tried to move, but felt bones give way in her pelvis.

I'M BROKEN. I CAN FEEL IT

Perhaps it was providence, but there were four campers nearby—Josh Kent, Kirsten Kent, and Jordan Weum from San Angelo, and Samantha Homler from Alamogordo, New Mexico. They were all from military families. Josh had been in the airborne infantry in the U.S. Army.

They, along with 17-year-old Faith, lifted the heavy tree off Meredith. Unknown to Meredith, Kirsten began to pray over her. She also cleaned out the vomit from Meredith's throat. Josh wanted to do a medical assessment on Meredith, but she refused. "Don't touch me," she said. "I'm broken. I can feel it."

They were six miles along a narrow, rugged hiking path to the trailhead. From there it was 15 miles to an asphalt



Photo by Stephen Pakus/Atalaya SAR.

road. There was no cell phone service. It was 6 a.m., and Meredith was dying from internal injuries.

WE HAVE TO GET OFF THIS MOUNTAIN.

Jordan Weum got his keys, phone and water and took off down the mountain trail. He reached a small dwell-

ing about four miles away and got a couple of bars on his cell phone, enough to call 9-1-1 and explain where he was and what happened. He hiked the rest of the six miles to the trailhead, where he met with two volunteer firefighters. Jordan began leading them back the six miles to Trampas Lakes.

It was 8:22 a.m. when the 9-1-1 call came in. Initially, the closest fire department, Ojo Sarco Volunteer Fire Rescue Department, was paged. They arrived at the trailhead by 9 a.m., and faced a 5 ½-hour hike in, with elevations ranging from 8,960 to 11,400. The National Guard Blackhawks and the Los

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Alamos-based Classic Air Medical Emergency Rescue Service were also called, but had to suspend their air-rescue efforts due to high winds, steady at 30 mph, and low cloud cover.

The Austins could see a helicopter above the lakes about 11 a.m., but it couldn't land. "I knew there was no way it could land," Luke said. "About five percent of me thought he could figure it out, but ninety-five percent of me knew it wasn't going to happen."

It was getting bad for Meredith, so bad, in fact, that Josh thought she might die at the scene, and the children didn't need to witness that. So he had them quickly pack their gear and, along with Mayday, follow him the six miles to the trailhead. They said their goodbyes to their parents. "Our mentality was just to react," Faith said, "And not to think about it."

The firefighters and Jordan arrived at noon, now six hours for Meredith and Luke without medical attention. It was 1:30 p.m. before paramedics arrived to start an IV on Meredith.

Without air rescue, it was going to be a long slog out. The female patient was put on a backboard and into the only litter, without a wheel. The impact of the tree shattered her pelvis and she



lost feeling in both of her legs. The male patient was ambulatory even though his pelvis was broken in two places and he had two broken ribs.

Luke was told by paramedics they were going to stand him up and he would have to somehow walk six miles. "My thought was, 'OK, let's try this,'" he said. "What choice did I have?"

They would go 10 to 15 yards at a time, and then stop as Luke would regather himself through the pain. What made it even worse was the weather had turned awful—freezing rain, sleet, north wind and even hail.

"One of the paramedics said the pain won't kill you, but hypothermia will," Luke said. "He said that we have to get off this mountain."

The slow progress, the extent and severity of the couple's injuries, and the failed attempts to airlift resulted in a general call out for more resources. Teams all over the state were activated by 3:30 p.m. Resources included two MRA member

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teams, Atalaya SAR (ASAR) and Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council (AMRC), along with several other SAR organizations, including Taos SAR, Santa Fe SAR, Cibola SAR, and Philmont SAR. Teams were prepared for two litter evacuations, with medical equipment that included IV fluids, oxygen, heating blankets, and vacuum splints.

A team of five members made up of Atalaya SAR, Taos SAR and Dr. John Becker, M.D., reached the subjects at approximately 8 p.m., 3.5 miles up the trail. The more critical female was evaluated by Dr. Becker, fitted with a vacuum splint, and then transferred into the team's litter with wheel. On the transport out, she was given two additional liters of fluid for a total of three, and placed on oxygen. While the evacuation of the female began, four team members of AMRC arrived on scene and took medical lead on the male subject. Shortly behind, a Santa Fe SAR team arrived with their litter and wheel. After applying an improvised pelvic binder, in this case a piece of doubled-up tubular webbing to stabilize the pelvic fracture, the male subject was packaged into a vacuum splint and loaded



Photo courtesy of Taos Search & Rescue.

into the second litter, with his evacuation starting shortly after the female.

During transport, the female's condition was critical but appeared to have stabilized, although she was sometimes responsive only to pain and sometimes not responsive at all. The male patient's condition was stable, but he complained of severe pain to his hips and some shortness of breath and nausea.

Temperatures dropped to the mid-30s, sleet started to come down and trail conditions deteriorated. All hands were needed to evacuate the patients on the narrow and rough trail. It would be another three hours before the patients were en route to Espanola Hospital—a total of 16 hours after the 9-1-1 call.

FOUR SURGERIES IN SIX DAYS

The ambulances took Luke and Meredith to a small hospital in Espanola, 28 miles west but a longer drive in the mountains. It was now around 2 a.m. on Oct. 8, 20 hours after the accident.

An hour later, Meredith was rushed from Espanola to CHRISTUS St. Vincent Regional Medical Center in Santa Fe, 25 miles south. Her injuries: four major breaks in her pelvis, two breaks in her sacrum,



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a ruptured rectum, a ruptured bladder, major internal bleeding, bruising, and cuts.

She would have four surgeries in six days to save her ruptured body. On her third surgery, her gall bladder and appendix were removed.

Because of a lack of trauma space, Luke was transported to University of New Mexico Hospital in Albuquerque. He was there for three days before he was released.

Meredith was hospitalized in Santa Fe for two weeks before she was transported to Baptist St. Anthony's in Amarillo for two more weeks of in-patient treatment and rehab with occupational and physical therapy. She had to learn to function with two external fixators, two rods in the front of her pelvis. She came home to join the family on Nov. 6. The fixators were removed on Nov. 27.

"It feels so good just to put on pajamas and lie on my stomach again," Meredith said.

FAITH, FAMILY, AND FRIENDS

That night, while they were getting off the mountain, unknown to any of them, 40 friends from a Bible study group of Faith's and Adelynn's at Hillside Christian were already praying in the Austin front yard.

The outpouring of family and community support continued: Friends made steady trips to Santa Fe for hospital visits. A friend gave Luke the use of a Santa Fe condo for two weeks while Meredith was hospitalized. Grandparents divided up care of the four children. Luke had to be creative when asked what help he needed; if he said, "We're fine," it seemed to make folks genuinely upset.

After Meredith's return home, she began walking more and more down her street, going a little further every few days. Passersby would roll down their car windows, shouting, "We're praying for you!" or "Keep it up! Good going!"

"Some people have said, 'Oh, you're so fit, that's what kept you alive,'" said Meredith, who lost 25 pounds. "That had nothing to do with it. It was all the Lord and so many people who have set aside their lives to help us."

This was a massive rescue effort that included 15 county volunteers and 49 members of New Mexico search and rescue teams. The litter evacuation was a demonstration of great leadership by ASAR and AMRC, the professionalism of all volunteer SAR teams involved, and great teamwork when it mattered most, among different organizations that usually don't respond together. The physical effort required to make this happen was enormous; even the strongest rescuers were exhausted and sore for a few days afterward.

In December, the four campers—Josh, Jordan, Kirsten and Samantha—drove to Amarillo for a reunion of sorts. They all shared a pew at Hillside Christian.

And in the days to come, the family planned to celebrate Christmas morning. "There are a lot of people worse off than we are—we know that," Luke said, "but the fact we can open presents and worship—the six of us—that's going to be special."

This story combines accounts written by Aimee Adamek and John Becker, M.D., of the Atalaya Search and Rescue Team in Santa Fe; Andreas Schmitt-Sody, of the Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council; and by Jon Mark Beilue, of the Amarillo Globe-News. [Beilue's story](#) was published December 16, 2018 and is excerpted here by permission.

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Tahquitz Rock

APRIL 22, 2018

By Eric Holden

Sunday morning, I had just finished making breakfast for my family when at 8 a.m. the callout came. Two climbers had been stuck on the side of Tahquitz Rock¹ since yesterday. They had been climbing Whodunit, a 5.9, 5-8 pitch climb up the northwest recess and got off route. I quickly tossed all my personal climbing gear and ropes into the car and headed out. I met with Glenn Henderson at Keenwild Fire Station-Heliport. We got information from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department's Aviation Unit (Star-9), which had flown over the subjects. They were approximately 200-300 feet from the summit and under a roof.

We came up with a plan to move personnel and gear to the top of Tahquitz Rock via helicopter, and then to perform a pick-off once on top. I would go over the side and Glenn would run the operation. Ray Weden was down at Humber Park with binoculars to run communications and Incident Command.

Glenn grabbed some gear and was the first to be inserted. While Glenn was being dropped off, Mike George and Pete Carlson arrived at Keenwild. After Star-9 returned to the heliport, I loaded it with more ropes and gear. A quick flight later and Star-9 was expertly hovering above Tahquitz for a "Hover Step" of about 5 feet.

A couple more trips and we had all the ropes, gear, and personnel at the top of the rock. Anchors were set up and I rappelled down to the two subjects.

¹ Tahquitz Peak is a granite, 8,846-foot-tall rock formation located on the high western slope of the San Jacinto mountain range in Riverside County, California, above the mountain town of Idyllwild. Tahquitz Rock is an 800-foot granite face.



Zach Ikeda, top, and Tom Kalmikov spent the night wedged in a crack. Photo by Eric Holden

Since we didn't know their exact distance from the top, I had an extra 200 feet of rope on my back in case I needed it. Turns out, they were almost exactly 200 feet over, and we could perform the rescue without having to tie ropes together. The two subjects, Zach Ikeda and Tom Kalmikov, had spent a cold, sleepless night wedged in a crack about a foot wide. They'd been climbing on a route called The Consolation, a 5.9. They'd been doing well, but got off route and onto The Consolation Direct, a 5.10b that involves a big roof. They wound up in the crack and didn't feel confident enough to complete the climb.

After a quick assessment—neither was injured and they were both well hydrated and fed—I attached Tom to our two rescue lines and we had him start climbing up, while Glenn, Pete, and Mike used a 3:1 haul line with backup belay line to assist. While Tom was being raised, Star-9 came in and dropped off Tony Hughes (one of our two Yosemite big wall climbers on the team).



Eric Holden rappelling, trailing two ropes.
Photo by Glenn Henderson



Eric Holden on the face with Tom climbing up and rescue members on top. Photo by Eric Humman, Technical Flight Officer, taken from the helicopter.

Once Tom was successfully raised, Tony was able to get both rescue lines back down to me. I hooked Zach up and he retraced his partner's climb to the top of the rock. Hooking up my ascenders, I began the fun process of jumaring back up the rope carrying a full pack, an extra rope, and the rope I was jumaring on. Once back on top I learned Corey Ellison had arrived and was making his way up the climber's trail to assist with carrying gear out. Corey quickly met up with the team and we all made the hike back down to Humber Park.

What went wrong? Our subjects got off route, which put them in terrain that was beyond their abilities. They didn't feel they could safely descend, ascend, or get back



Rescuers and subjects at base. From left, Tony Hughes, Corey Ellison, Raymond Weden, Pete Carlson, Zach, Eric Holden, Tom, Michael George, and Glen Henderson. Photo by RCSO deputy

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on their target route, and called 9-1-1. Having personally pulled two fatalities off the rock in less than nine months, I am very glad they chose to sacrifice some pride instead of risking the consequences.

Things to learn? Always carry a good route description. A quick beta printout weighs next to nothing and can be carried by the lead climber to answer any questions that arise. Have a bailout plan and know where good rappel stations are. Know that on any climb you may have to sacrifice gear to make the bailout plan work.

RMRU Members Involved: Pete Carlson, Corey Ellison, Glenn Henderson, Eric Holden, Tony Hughes, Michael George, and Raymond Weden.

Riverside Sheriff's Aviation: Andy Rasmussen (Pilot) and Eric Hannum (Technical Flight Officer).

<https://rmru.org/missions/2018/2018-006.html>

INTERVIEW WITH TOM KALMIKOV

It was 10:30 p.m. when Tom Kalmikov and Zach Ikeda finally decided to stop climbing. They'd found a chimney, wedged themselves inside, and built an anchor to secure themselves 600 feet up on Tahquitz Rock. Then they called for help.

Cell service was spotty and unreliable. Over and over again, the call dropped. After 30 minutes of repeated attempts, they finally reached the Riverside County Sheriff's Department. "They said, you have food, you have water, and you're not hurt. See you in the morning," said Kalmikov.

They built a second anchor, characterized by Kalmikov as "ultra-redundant but safe," and hunkered down to face the night.

They'd set out earlier in the day to climb Whodunit, a 5.9. "We reached a point in the climb where it looked like we had two different ways. It looked like it would be slightly easier terrain if we veered right instead of staying left, and looked easy enough to go back left after that section. So we veered right and kept going in search of a way to go back left to get back on route. We reached a few parts that didn't seem right. Then sun started to set."

They were off route, on The Consolation Direct, a 5.10b with a big roof, and had climbed well into the night, trying to find a way out. "We got to a point where we couldn't go further. We realized we were unable to backtrack left, we could not go up, and we didn't have enough gear to get all the way to the ground."

Night climbing had its advantages. Their headlamps lit only a small 10-foot area, effectively hiding how high they were and masking the sheer drop beneath their feet. "That helped because one of the escape routes we attempted was pretty scary, but all I could see was the area in front of me. Our headlamps sort of covered the danger instead of revealing it," Kalmikov said.

Fear wasn't a factor because the pair had, by luck or happenstance, found themselves in a chimney. They had a floor beneath them, and when they realized they'd be spending the night, tied themselves in. The worst part, Kalmikov said, was the cold. The winds were up, the temperature dropped to 40 degrees, and the granite was like ice. They had no warm clothes because, like most people, they didn't expect to spend the night outside. One takeaway: They are now huge fans of emergency blankets.

"Our situation wasn't all that dire to begin with. It was tricky but it wasn't deadly. We weren't hanging in the air. We felt pretty secure. We knew SAR could get us the next day, so we kind of adopted this 'we got this' mentality, and that helped us get through the night."

In the end, the pair spent 28 hours on the rock, from the start of the climb to their rescue.

Six months later, they tackled Tahquitz Rock again. "It felt like it got the best of us, so we had to come back and conquer it," Kalmikov said. "We completed that route without any hiccups or issues. The sun didn't set on us again. We came back and did it right."

**Photo Contest Winner:**

San Bernardino County
Cave and Technical
Rescue Team – Dan
Sherman discusses anchor
building techniques in the
Mitchell Caverns.

Photo by Jennifer Hopper

Saving Lives and Each Other: Lessons Learned from Psychology and Medicine

Cassie Lowry Edmark, DO; MRA MedCom

INTRODUCTION

Rescue and medicine are similar in many ways, one of which being that we strive to contribute to a community that supports one another. This article is a small collection of concepts rooted in psychology, gathered with the intent of reducing the burden on the individual and the systems in which they operate, whether that be in medicine, rescue, or a combination of both.

“THE EXPERT HALO”

The concept of “expert halo” is well recognized within the climbing world as a false sense of comfort and trust in another’s expertise. That person may look and sound like an expert but does not have expertise to the degree one might infer. This leads people into trouble when they fail to be accountable for their own safety and risk mitigation,

and instead rely on the so-called “expert,” with or without the expert’s awareness. Most of the time people get away with this, but when things go awry, it can fall on the “expert” to get the followers out of trouble, and he or she may not have the capacity to do so. Mountaineers, for example, often are dubbed as experts after accumulating many lifetime hours in the mountains and surviving, rather than being measured on the basis of mountain wisdom, skills, and safety margins. Unlike unequivocally high-risk sports such as base jumping, the odds of survival for standard mountain pursuits are generally rather high. Thus, living through mountain activities does not correlate with the degree of intelligence applied.

People are also profoundly capable of falsely assigning themselves as experts. This is seen in the setting of relative incompetence, where lack of objective awareness serves as fuel for one’s own imperception of him or herself. Improved skill generally leads to an increase in perceived



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competence; paradoxically this improvement in awareness helps people recognize their own limitations, yet they are less likely to hold themselves out as experts despite being objectively more skilled. This has come to be known as the Dunning Kruger Effect, with reference to a groundbreaking psychological study published in 1999 (2). True experts are more likely to perceive themselves accurately, while those less competent are less aware and more prone to claiming unwarranted expert halos for themselves.

This is a dangerous combination in our environments where lives are at stake and we rely heavily on each other. False experts have the enhanced ability to attract unaware followers and to assume the care of others. False experts ultimately have the power to make unskilled and unthoughtful decisions that put the lives of their followers at risk, often without the knowledge and consent of the followers. This is particularly problematic in a system that lacks an objective measurement of the individual's competence; teams that attempt to employ systems and education based on qualification without objective measurements will be inherently inaccurate.

OVERCLAIMING

Another phenomenon that gets people into trouble is overclaiming. Overclaiming knowledge of a subject is proportionate to one's self-perceived expertise on the subject. If an individual perceives that he or she is an expert in a domain, when presented with fictitious information, he or she may claim to know this information because it is associated with the domain. In another study (1), individuals were asked about nonexistent places. Those with inflated self-perceived expertise in geography claimed to be familiar with the places, despite that these places did not exist.

Putting the two concepts together in a rescue scenario, that of the "expert halo" and overclaiming, a medically trained member of a team may assume medical leadership by virtue of having the highest medical certification of the available personnel. However, this individual may not be a regular practitioner and may rarely use medical skills. This person may think he or she is the expert with a great track record because events have not proven otherwise. Worse still, the more unskilled this person is, the more likely he or she will assert their expertise. The patient is none the wiser as the individual appears to be a medically trained member of a rescue team who looks and sounds like an expert and is operating in an official capacity, endorsed by a life-saving agency. When the patient seeks guidance from

this medical leader, the rescuer may create false answers instead of simply answering, "I don't know."

We'd prefer to think that this does not happen, however the potential exists as a result of inherent biases that are simply a matter of being human. So how do we improve our functioning and eliminate downstream effects of these biases? One simple solution is objective feedback. If the team provides medical care, follow up with the subject and reflect on the management provided in the field while considering the outcome. Do more training and allow for correction, because training is the ideal setting for mistakes. Develop a team with members who are honest with each other and in which everyone has the right to stop another's action if they have a concern about harm or danger. Debrief as a team each time you complete a significant action. Measure your team's competencies at various tasks and provide training in the areas that are weak. Use the data to drive appropriate team assignments. Train with other rescue agencies and contribute to the collective wisdom of the rescue community.

One of my friends and fellow rescuers has a practice she employs every time she goes into the field. After a mission or trip, she asks whether the team was right in their decisions, or whether they just got lucky. The answer, despite her many years of experience, is rarely (if ever) "Yes, I was right in all of my decisions today." Simply asking the question validates the possibility that the team may have made mistakes from which they can improve, but it does not imply ill intentions. Rather, the aim is to acknowledge and reinforce the awareness of our fallibility as humans and strive to do better. It's a small, singular step toward self and team metacognition. But like all things, it starts with that first step.

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Editor's Note

The call was for a car-over, a typical call for us. People drive off the mountain all the time around here. But this one said, "Bring your brush gear." That means somebody drove off the mountain and their car started a fire. But this time there were two fires: one started by the car (which wasn't actually "over" at all), and another started by a couple of arsonists.

Welcome to fire season in Southern California.

To me, there is nothing quite as terrifying as a fire. We train for these things, of course. Every year we watch the videos. We marvel at how fast a wildland fire can spread. We are awed by fire tornadoes that lie down across a road and leap back up on the other side. We are fascinated by the dark beauty of a fire cloud, which can make the sky look like it's in flames. We follow up on other fires, reviewing after-action reports to learn more about fire behavior and safe operations.

It's one thing to have all of that classroom information in your head. It's quite another to be face to face with a wall of flames, to watch it race from the road where you are standing to the top of the hill in front of you, in mere seconds. To see it burn across the hill and begin to melt the power lines under which you are standing. To see the families playing in the waters of the San Gabriel River, and know that you may have only minutes to get them out.

Such was my first fire. There were four of us on patrol that day. It was one of our regular Sunday activities; we spend a few hours driving the mountain roads to check trails, look for berm damage (a hint that there might be a crashed car below), and get a head start on SAR calls.

The fire had just started underneath a car when we rolled up. We bailed out, checked the vehicle to be sure nobody was trapped inside, and went to work. One person moved our truck to a safe spot, if there is such a thing with a fire. Two of us started evacuations, ordering people out of the river, into their cars and out of the canyon. The fourth person called the world. That means everybody rolls: law enforcement, county fire, USAR, forest service, camp crews, hotshot crews, water-dropping helicopters, fixed wing aircraft.

Nine years and many fires later, nothing scares me more than working a fire. But I've learned a few things since then. I don't stand alone, terrified and awestruck on the side of the road. We're a team. We watch each other's backs, not just for one another's physical safety but for signs of dehydration and heat exhaustion. We rely on one another to facilitate a safe evacuation for all of us.

So welcome to Summer—to fire evacuations, to calls for lost and injured hikers, cliff hangers, car-overs, rock rescues, and to yet another season of "nobody in their right mind would do that."

Stay safe. Stay hydrated. Take care of each other.

Lois Grossman, Editor

San Dimas Mountain Rescue Team

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department



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