

MERIDIAN

Fall 2021



The Quarterly Publication of the Mountain Rescue Association

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The New Team: Cochise SAR to Join the MRA



How Teams Work Around COVID
MEDCOM: Patient Privacy



Fall 2021

[President’s Message.....](#)4

[Navigating the Pandemic: How MRA Teams Pushed Through Covid](#) 6

[The New Team: Cochise County SAR Joins MRA](#) 9

[Meet the Rescuer: Paula Bindrich.....](#)11

[MEDCOM: Protecting Patient Privacy in the Backcountry](#) 14

[Letter from the Editor.....](#)17

ON THE COVER: Members of Cochise County SAR during training in March 2021

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President's Message

The 2021 MRA Spring Conference, hosted by Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group was a huge success. The road to getting to this in-person conference was not easy and there were several points along the way that we may not have been able to make it happen. Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group handled each of these twists and turns with ease.

The Mission of the MRA is, to save lives through rescue and mountain safety education. The Spring Conference plays a key role in our mission of providing mountain safety education. The Spring Conference is also one of my favorite things about the MRA. Every year we bring rescuers from around the country and around the world to learn about the latest rescue techniques. We also get to talk about and hear personal stories of rescues past. The information sharing and wealth of knowledge are world class. Next year's Spring Conference will be hosted by Larimer County Search and Rescue at Estes Park, CO June 10, 11 & 12, I am looking forward to going and hope to see you there.

Many of you may be aware of our Third Thursday virtual trainings. This is a monthly zoom training that was developed by Michael St. John and Charley Shimanski and includes a wide range of mountain rescue topics. Also, once a quarter on the Third Thursday Michael is conducting a MRA Major Mission review. Think of this as your normal lessons learned mission review, and you get to learn some cool stuff from other teams.



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Can't make the Third Thursday? No problem, the MRA launched a YouTube channel where we post the recordings. If you subscribe to the channel, you can get a notification when a new recording has been added.

Also on the YouTube channel you will find the MRA's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Webinar. This is a 90 minute webinar that covers the aspects of DEI and is a start to help us be purposefully mindful as our team's demographics grow and the subjects we rescue mindset and expectations are changing.

Beyond our venture into YouTube, the Education Committee

continues to develop and deliver world class training through our Base Camp learning management system (LSM). The Education committee recently launched 3 programs.

1. Know Before You Go - Avalanche Safety
2. General Backcountry Safety
3. Working with the Media in Rescue

Also the Meridian our quarterly Mountain Rescue publication has been delivering solid and compelling content thanks to Rick Lindfors and the editorial staff. This team truly does an amazing job producing this publication and I'm super proud of the work they do.

As we move into fall we have started a new Leadership & Relationship Development committee and I have appointed Steve Smith from Salt Lake Co. Sheriff's Search & Rescue to be the chair person. The purpose of this committee is to identify and make available leadership and relationship development material so that MRA teams will continue to have strong leaders supported by sound leadership principles as well as develop powerful long-lasting relationships across all aspects of their operations from

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the Agency Having Jurisdiction, to local Fire/EMS, to air support units, to community & donors/sponsors and more. Leadership and Relationship development are skills that require on-going training just like rigging, medical or any other aspect of rescue operations and I'm excited to see the outcomes of this committee.

I want to welcome Chris Ruch (Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group) as the new Secretary/Treasurer and Andreas Schmitt-Sody (Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council) as the new Member-at-Large to the MRA Officer's committee. We have a lot of work to do and I'm looking forward to working with Chris and Andreas.

Finally, I want to thank Antonio Arizo (Ventura County Search and Rescue) and Pearce Beissinger (Portland Mountain Rescue) for serving on the MRA Officer's committee as Secretary/Treasurer and Member-at-Large respectively.

Doug McCall
President



Navigating the Pandemic: How MRA Teams Pushed Through Covid

By Steve Larese – Meridian Editor

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 impacted the national search and rescue community like no other incident before. SAR teams had to quickly adapt their trainings and mission responses to protect their health while meeting the needs of a public more eager than ever to venture outside.

But SAR teams found ways to adapt to Covid-19 the same way they find ways to adapt to operations.

The Pandemic shutdown offered a lot of people who were thinking about joining a search and rescue team the opportunity and time to explore the opportunity. Stories of search and rescue incidents were in the news, further increasing awareness and interest in joining SAR. However, many SAR teams cancelled or delayed their 2020

recruitment drives and classes. “We ended up with a record number of recruits,” said Doug McCall of Seattle Mountain Rescue. “We had to turn away a number of applicants and worked to ensure our new recruits felt like part of the team given the initial virtual environment.”

For some teams, cancelling the 2020 recruitment cycle didn’t pose a major issue for team readiness. “We never have trouble recruiting, so this wasn’t a huge issue for us,”

said Anna DeBattiste of Summit County Rescue Group in Colorado. SCRG cancelled its recruitment class for Fall 2020. “We have 65 operational members, so we had plenty of people to respond to missions and get us through to our next class.”

“Our recruiting wasn’t really affected because we do our new member classes in the fall,” said Krista Driscoll of Vail Mountain Rescue Group. “For our Fall 2020 new-member class we were doing two training sessions on each topic, each week to keep class sizes small and minimize interaction between members. This put a strain on our instructors because we have to either double the amount of instruction time for an instructor or find twice as many instructors for each topic.”

Other teams had just started their new member classes in early 2020 only to have them abruptly come to a stop in March or delayed. “We had a couple of people in the 2020 class opt to drop out due to personal or professional commitments related to Covid,” says Logan Heath of Larimer County SAR in Colorado. “What was supposed to be a three-month class became a nearly seven-month program. However, we started incorporating those people on missions much earlier than we would have in a ‘normal’ year and they have all been rock stars. That entire class outperformed many of our long-time team members on mission response in 2020.”

Re-accreditation events were also delayed for MRA teams. The MRA board of directors voted to push the recertifications due for 2021 to 2022. Teams typically don’t



hold new member classes during test years. So as 2020 classes finish in 2021, recruitment may stagnate, resulting in some teams potentially not having new members for several years.

"Our MRA recert was originally scheduled for 2021 but was postponed until 2022," said Driscoll. "We also could not schedule avalanche rescue, Wilderness First Responder and recerts or CPR classes during spring and summer 2020 due to Covid-19. Our training team is currently very fatigued due to all of the extra new member sessions and trying to cram everything that was postponed into the next few months so certifications don't lapse."

Missions were, predictably, down at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown in March 2020, but as the year wore on some saw record high call outs while other teams dipped below their annual averages.

"We set a record in 2020, and are setting another one this year," says DeBattiste. "In 2019 we had 144 calls, 185 in 2020 and [July 2021] at 106."



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"Initially we had fewer missions," said McCall. "But once the trails opened back up we ended the year with more missions than the previous year."

For Albuquerque Mountain Rescue Council, the expected rush of callouts never came, ending 2020 with a workload similar to 2019.

All MRA teams enacted Covid procedures as directed by their medical directors and overseeing agencies. "We do have the county's lead infectious disease specialist as a team member and our medical officer," said DeBattiste. "He was pretty darn busy and couldn't respond to many missions, but he was a wonderful resource for us in terms of Covid-related trainings, crafting our protocols and advocating for us to be vaccinated early."

She credits her team's protocols with keeping members safe and able to respond to Summit County's record number of missions. "We did have one member who tested positive after a mission," she said, adding the member wasn't infected during



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The challenge of the rescue professional is the need to adapt, especially when facing unexpected situations. In order to be ready for the unexpected, members of the Davis County Search and Rescue team train often in places like Farmington Canyon, Utah.



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the mission. "Several of us, including myself, were on a litter team with [them]. But we were all wearing masks, and we all tested negative."

Online meetings and training events also became the norm and are likely to continue in some manner beyond the pandemic. Team members agree there's no substitution for hands-on field trainings but for medical, administrative, and technical system and classroom overviews, remote meetings can allow more people to participate and may be continued.

"We missed each other," DeBattiste said, "We trained virtually until about June, then began some limited-size in-person trainings. We continue to be affected by the fire department's policies in that we used to borrow their classroom for indoor trainings and still can't because of Covid. We've been doing indoor trainings in our garage bay with lawn chairs."

McCall says that team members of SMR took it upon themselves to continue their training.

"Our team conducted online Zoom trainings which included medical and rigging," he says. "Some members on our team set up rigging systems in their garages and in backyards for lack of better things to do. A lot of our members took to the trails and backcountry to stay fit and focus on climbing."

Driscoll said in-person meetings and trainings are convenient for VMRG, but have some serious downsides.

"There is a convenience factor to virtual meetings, and we're having great attendance," she says. "But we missed

that in-person connection component. Lack of connection to the team is difficult to ascertain."

Driscoll says her team would check in on members to make sure everyone was doing Okay. "This has led to a larger conversation about psychological first aid and how we approach mental health as a team," she said. Still, Driscoll says being on her team made her pandemic experience that much more tolerable. "For me, and probably others, search and rescue was one of the bright points of the pandemic lockdown," she says. "It made me feel valued and gave me a purpose. It gave something positive to focus on when everything else seemed so bad."



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The New Team: Cochise County SAR Joins MRA

By Rick Lindfors – Meridian Lead Editor

A new team is joining the ranks of the Mountain Rescue Association. Cochise County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue is the sixth team to join from Arizona and is on track to test for their accreditation in technical rock and search.

The team has about 50 members on its roster, with 25 being active, according to Sgt. David Noland, the SAR coordinator for the Cochise County Sheriff's Office. The team includes volunteers who are K-9 handlers, swiftwater rescuers, and practicing healthcare and EMS workers.

With a main office in Sierra Vista, the county's elevation goes from 3,500 feet to 9,800 feet, with the Huachuca and Chiricahua Mountain ranges within the county boundaries. The county borders both Mexico and New Mexico, with about 6,400 square miles of territory. Arizona isn't the first place many people would think of for snowfall, but winter rescues are a common scenario for the team. "We had a guy hiking the Arizona trail and he was prepared at all," said Noland. "He was only three

miles in but where he was at was almost 9,000 feet, he was in 50 feet of snow with 50 mile per hour wind gusts," he said. In that case, the team hiked in, taking several hours to reach the subject in the deep snow.

The team faces a unique mission set due to its location: rescuing immigrants. By late June, the SAR team responded to more than 20 missions involving undocumented migrants crossing the U.S. – Mexico Border. Common issues involve dehydration and hypothermia. "They all carry cell phones and they make 911 calls," said Noland. The county team has worked with search and rescue teams from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, but federal teams mainly work in the Tucson area. Agents usually meet the team at the scene post-rescue, but sometimes agents will hike in with rescuers. Migrants crossing the border also encounter the harsh wintertime conditions at the county's higher elevations. In February 2019, the team was called to rescue five undocumented migrants from Guatemala



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who were stranded at Parker Canyon Lake on the west side of the county. “We had a massive snowstorm come through. It was about two feet of snow and 13 to 14 below zero and they’re in tennis shoes and all from Guatemala so they’ve never seen the white stuff before.” Rescuers were able to find the group after several hours. They found the migrants suffering from the exposure to the extreme conditions. “Their tennis shoes were actually frozen to their feet,” said Noland.

Cochise SAR will certify in rock and search disciplines for MRA accreditation. There was some discussion about testing for avalanche, but that has been tabled for now. The team does not have the equipment for avalanche rescues, and avalanches themselves are not something the team encounters, according to Noland. The team plans to test in early 2022.

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Thank you to everyone who participated and submitted images.

Paula Bindrich and her K-9, Phoebe

Meet the Rescuer: Paula Bindrich

Linda Wacht – Meridian Contributor

The MRA DEI committee is excited to introduce Paula Bindrich for this quarter's Meet The Rescuer. Paula has been a member of Alpine Rescue Team in Evergreen, Colo. since 1997. Her adventure in mountain rescue began with Alpine's Adopt-A-Highway road sign off 103 in Colorado, near Echo Lake Lodge. She and her sister stopped to take a photo and it got her thinking. It seemed like a natural next step in her life.

Paula grew up camping and kayaking; her parent's honeymoon had been a camping trip. In Georgia, she was an avid climber, confidently climbing 5.11 and 5.12 routes. One of her first ascents is named "Thirty-Something" after the TV show and her birthday that year. Once her and her friend's fingers tired, they would switch to mountain bikes and tire the rest of their bodies. Sunday and Wednesday evenings were devoted to competitive soccer. In Wisconsin, she would cross country ski. "I just prefer to spend my time in nature. It's easier for me to slip into that space," She said. "Mondays were the only days I would rest. It was my 'collapse day'."

Paula joined ART and loved it, but soon began to regret the time away from her thirteen year old dog, Maggie. She learned about dog handling through another team member, who worked with dogs. Two or three years after joining, Maggie died, giving Paula the opportunity to adopt Phoebe to train for search and rescue. Brokenhearted over the loss of her black lab, Paula has had yellow labs ever since.

"It is a different way to look at searches, working with dogs. You work as a team--you cannot tell the dog what to do. There is a strong camaraderie, I almost prefer them to humans," she laughs. "Searches are a big puzzle, with a lot of complex layers. You are reading the dog, the air, the weather, the time of day, slope angle, altitude, wind direction--and you try to piece it all together in order to put the dog in the best location for the search."

"There is a scent here and not there--what does it mean?"

In addition to dog handling, Paula enjoys the public education side of search and rescue, especially working

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with kids. She loves passing along information and seeing the “Ah-ha!” moment in the kids as well as when she is training dogs. “It’s fun to watch them learn.”

One teaching point she utilizes is asking the kids what subjects they’re good at such as math and art. She explains how dogs are similar in that some are good at some skills and not others, emphasizing that one skill isn’t any better than another; all are needed.

Passing along information is something she is looking to implement in her “real life” as well. Paula recently purchased 37 acres in Westcliffe, in the Sangres. Her goal is to build a sustainable home and teach others how to do the same. She is learning about solar power, building cordwood masonry homes, gardening, among other skills. She plans to hold classes and create a blog to show others how fun, cool, and possible it is to lessen one’s footprint on the world.

Her most impactful mission came early in her mountain rescue career. It

was towards the end of a crappy work day in her advertising job when the page came: someone had punched through a cornice between the two 14,000ft peaks, Greys and Torreys, and had fallen dozens of feet, smashing his ankles and legs. She was able to delegate the remains of her workday and escape to help. She remembers the low clouds obscuring the view. The Flight For Life helicopter was able to drop someone on the saddle above the subject. The plan was to lower the subject down to the bowl at the end of the slope and hope that the weather allowed for the helicopter to return. The other option, a more than two-hour carry-out, was looking to be the solution as the clouds continued to hang around.

“I remember glancing down the valley and seeing the clouds lift. I heard the chop-chop-chop of the helicopter coming up the valley. We loaded the subject, the helicopter left, and the clouds returned.”

“There have been more dramatic rescues, but this was the most impactful because of the life lessons involved, and just about the universe cooperating at the right time. I



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went from job misery to helping save a life. I drove home, thinking about the important things in life. And those did not include beer advertisements.”

Another mission that Paula remembers was for a suicidal subject. The man had left a letter and no one expected a good outcome, but the family at least wanted his body returned. Paula had looked at a map before taking Phoebe out and had a gut feeling she knew where the body was. When she was in the field, that was the direction Phoebe headed, showing signs that the subject had at least been there. But a body was not found.

“At the debrief, we were all in a big circle--everyone was there, the family, rescuers, the sheriff. Phoebe walked into the middle of the circle, laid down and fell asleep. After the debrief, the family went up to pet her. She brought a certain calm to them. It shows the power of animals.”

Diversity and inclusion is important to Paula in part because of her dog handling specialty. “Some see the value, others do not. I’ve been on missions where I was told ‘Go do your dog thing,’ with no direction and no resources.”

As a strong female climber, Paula has encountered her share of bias. “The men who paid attention to how women climbed, using leverage and climbing with skill over muscle in order to climb longer, benefitted from those lessons. Learn from each other and move everyone forward.”

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“It doesn’t matter if it’s race, gender or age. It doesn’t do any good to lump people together. I’ve seen teenagers with more maturity and skill than adults. They step up. They teach.”

“Open your eyes, take off your blinders” is the advice she offers other mountain rescuers. “We grow up and are taught by our elders. If we can put aside that programming and look past our first impressions, then we can see there is more to everyone, we can truly see what people are capable of, what they are really about.”

“You don’t know what someone is capable of until you give them a chance.”

MEDCOM: Protecting Patient Privacy in the Backcountry

By Joseph Farrell, Osteopathic Medical Student, El Paso County Search and Rescue

Your SAR team has responded to a rescue request on a popular local trail. As the 63-year-old cardiac patient was carried out, the media were waiting. Reporters' questions peppered the rescuers as they formed a human blockade to protect the patient's privacy.

In the current era, when information is shared so easily across multiple social media platforms, privacy has become a commodity. In order to protect patient privacy, the Federal Government passed the "Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996" (HIPAA). These rules protect the patient by limiting the amount of information passed on by medical personnel to the public.

Under HIPAA, health providers are required to share only the "minimum necessary" information needed to provide health services. Patient health information should only be shared for the purposes of treatment and operational needs.¹

What does this mean for SAR personnel? If a SAR team is not affiliated with an EMS organization (i.e.-associated only to the local sheriff's department), HIPAA regulations do not apply. However, though some SAR organizations are not bound by HIPAA, it is not the only privacy law governing in many states. Good privacy practices should be maintained regardless. It should be part of standard procedures within all facets of SAR operations. The clearest way to demonstrate how rescue crews should practice patient privacy is to walk through a "normal" operation.

Confidentiality begins with the initial dispatch. An appropriate call screen should only relay the minimum, de-identified information. For example, "25 year-old male with a possible ankle injury on ABC trail" is appropriate. Although it might be convenient to convey more information, these are public transmissions. Any additional information should be

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights BULLETIN: HIPAA Privacy in Emergency Situations. *hhs.gov*. Published November 2014. Accessed February 23, 2020.



Courtesy El Paso County Search and Rescue: Ankle injury evacuation on lower Barr Trail working with the Manitou Springs Fire Department.

communicated through secure channels or directly with the responding team members.

Upon encountering the subject, rescuers should introduce themselves, identify their affiliated organization, ask for consent to treat, and permission to speak with family and friends who are present (if applicable). Information should then only be shared with the pertinent parties, those essential to handling the patient's care. Any further telecommunications regarding patient information should be kept to the minimum necessary to provide patient care and transport to the nearest medical facility.

Patient privacy laws typically do not make provisions for sharing information with local law enforcement who are not specifically dealing with patient care. This means rescuers cannot tell police if the patient was found with a needle in their arm.



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This helps to further build trust between the rescuer and patient. However, exceptions are made for circumstances such as the mandatory reporting of criminal activity, abuse, neglect, or information related to public health and safety.²

The most common patient privacy violations arise after a rescue is complete. Even with close friends and family, discussing operations using patient information is a violation. As a general rule of thumb, if a subject can identify themselves from the information provided, this could be seen as a patient privacy violation. This includes social media and news media posts, even if no images of the patient or names are used. These violations could result in monetary penalties and incarceration. It is best to leave social media and news media to the team's Public Information Officer.

As rescuers, it is our responsibility to care for the health and welfare of our patients. This includes being stewards of their personal health information, especially when they are incapable of caring for themselves. If ever in doubt regarding patient confidentiality, consult your team's governing officers regarding team protocol. Adhering to patient privacy and providing as much confidentiality as possible is an essential part of patient care, for both our subjects and their families.

- 2 *Ocr. 505-When does the Privacy Rule allow covered entities to disclose information to law enforcement. HHS.gov. <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/faq/505/what-does-the-privacy-rule-allow-covered-entities-to-disclose-to-law-enforcement-officials/index.html>. Published July 18, 2017. Accessed February 23, 2020.*

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INTEGRATING CIVILIAN SAR INTO HELICOPTER HOIST RESCUE PROGRAMS



These days we are seeing more military, state, county, and private helicopter hoist rescue programs integrate civilian SAR members into their operations. To do so safely, these programs employ a wide variety of trainings, certifications, and currency requirements. In this program, we will profile a number of programs that have effectively utilized civilian SAR members in complex external load helicopter rescue operations.

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2021
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9PM EST**



FACILITATED BY:

Øyvind Henningsen: Team Coordinator & Rescue Technician with Snohomish County Helicopter Rescue Team

Dale Wang: Rocky Mountain Rescue Group and Colorado Hoist Rescue Technician with Colorado National Guard

Jason Williams: Director of the International Mountain Medicine Center at the University of New Mexico & formed their helicopter rescue team with Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office Air Support Unit.

Charley Shimanski: Mountain Rescue Program Coordinator of Flight For Life Colorado & collaborator with Air Zermatt for training programs

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Letter from the Editor

About this time last year, I was editing the Fall 2020 edition of Meridian while on a summer vacation with my family in Grand Marais, Minnesota. Mask mandates had gone into place across the country, and Covid-19 vaccines were only talked about in reference to their trial progress and moves towards FDA emergency use authorization. Now, I'm writing this to you while watching the Olympic games that had been delayed a year, but also while reading news about the resurgence of coronavirus, driven by the spread of the delta variant. This LFE is being written only a short time after the CDC issued new mask recommendations.

MRA teams have had quite the time in the past year. We've navigated higher-than-normal mission loads, changing training and mission protocols, delayed and canceled training and community events, and the additional impacts of the pandemic on our day jobs. We helped vaccinate our communities through mass clinics and found other ways to help our local health departments. MRA volunteers who work day jobs in healthcare deserve the highest praise for their increased work commitments, taking additional measures to keep their families safe and spending countless hours in the vaccination campaigns.

I can imagine that at this point many of us are feeling a bit of fatigue and even angst. I encourage all of us to keep our heads high and maintain the grit and spirit that carried us through 2020. All of us will be much wiser from what we've learned in the pandemic year, which will soon become plural. What lessons we learn in this time will be passed to the next generation of volunteers. This experience of shared struggle, recalibration and forward movement will ultimately make all our teams better.

There will surely be more changes to come as we continue to grapple with covid, but change is something to be taken in stride and ultimately something to appreciate. For instance, I never imagined in my younger years that skateboarding and surfing would be Olympic sports, and now I'm watching people slam rails and swells for gold medals. That's pretty rad, dude.

Stay sharp,

Rick Lindfors

Meridian Lead Editor

Eugene Mountain Rescue

Pacific Northwest Search Dogs.



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