

The Calabasas Crash

A Team Member Recounts the Tragedy that Claimed Nine Lives, and how SAR Teams Stepped Up.



Hypothermia Decision Making



Spring 2022

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President's Message

In the Spring of 2021, we created a Leadership and Relationship Development committee. This committee was created because leadership and relationship development are skills and like all skills they require development, training and practice in order to maintain and improve.

In the corporate world I have had the opportunity to experience both good and bad leaders. One particularly bad experience was with a boss that was all about managing up. His priority was what upper management thought of him, disregarding his team or developing relationships with other teams. This was apparent to everyone on the team causing them to lose unity, respect and trust for their manager. The dysfunction this manager created eventually caused team members to either leave the company or seek out other positions. The team became a revolving door. The lack of leadership this boss displayed became well known throughout the company, but it took a long time before this boss was removed from the leadership role which damaged the organization for some time.

In this case, the boss was good at his job. His work was respected and was recognized with a promotion into a management role. However, once the boss was in the management role, likely lacking management knowledge, the wheels came off and his focus was inadvertently misdirected. While it would be easy to blame this new manager, it also would've been easy for upper management to train and develop this manager to be successful rather than expecting leadership skills to come naturally. This scenario plays out across all kinds of organization. Those who

exhibit skills in one area get promoted or elevated into a leadership role where they are suddenly expected to be good leaders without any leadership training.

An example of a good corporate leader I have experienced is where the boss identifies the skills of each team member, delegates appropriately and helps develop each member. He fosters trust and allows each member to work with autonomy vs micromanaging. The boss develops relationships across the organization and promotes the team instead of himself. Most importantly, the boss always has your back and will always go to bat for you. I've never heard this boss raise his voice, he doesn't have to because he has set clear expectations of the team, provided consistent coaching and follow-up. When those expectations aren't met, he effectively communicates with the team by asking for input, actively listening and facilitating safe conversations. Usually, the team already has a corrective action plan ready for review. This manager is open to feedback, and has earned the trust of his team.

I know that the boss received leadership training in the past, and that he practices his leadership skills daily in his executive leadership role. No matter how good someone is at leading people naturally, they can always improve.

Is leadership training the answer? Not solely in my opinion. While it can provide tools to help newly promoted leaders develop a foundation, I don't think any single leadership training is a "silver bullet." Leadership examples and training can come from various areas; following a mentor, reading biographies about well-known leaders, reading

history (I prefer military history), and books on mountaineering or expeditions. The point is that leadership is a skill that requires consistent practice and development. If you aren't fostering that skill, it is the same as not practicing the many technical/tangible skills required in search and rescue.

Mountain Rescue requires a complex set of skills before, during and after a rescue. Leadership & Relationship development are some of those skills that I highly encourage every MRA member to continue to develop.

Respectfully,

Doug McCall
President

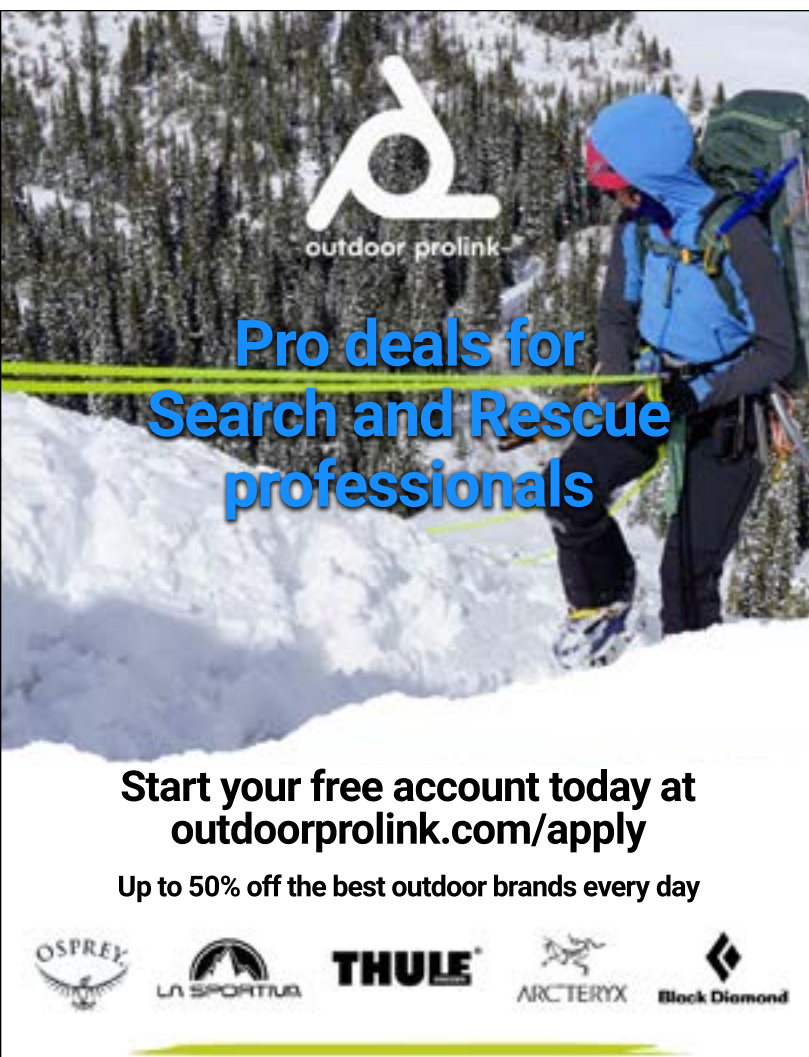


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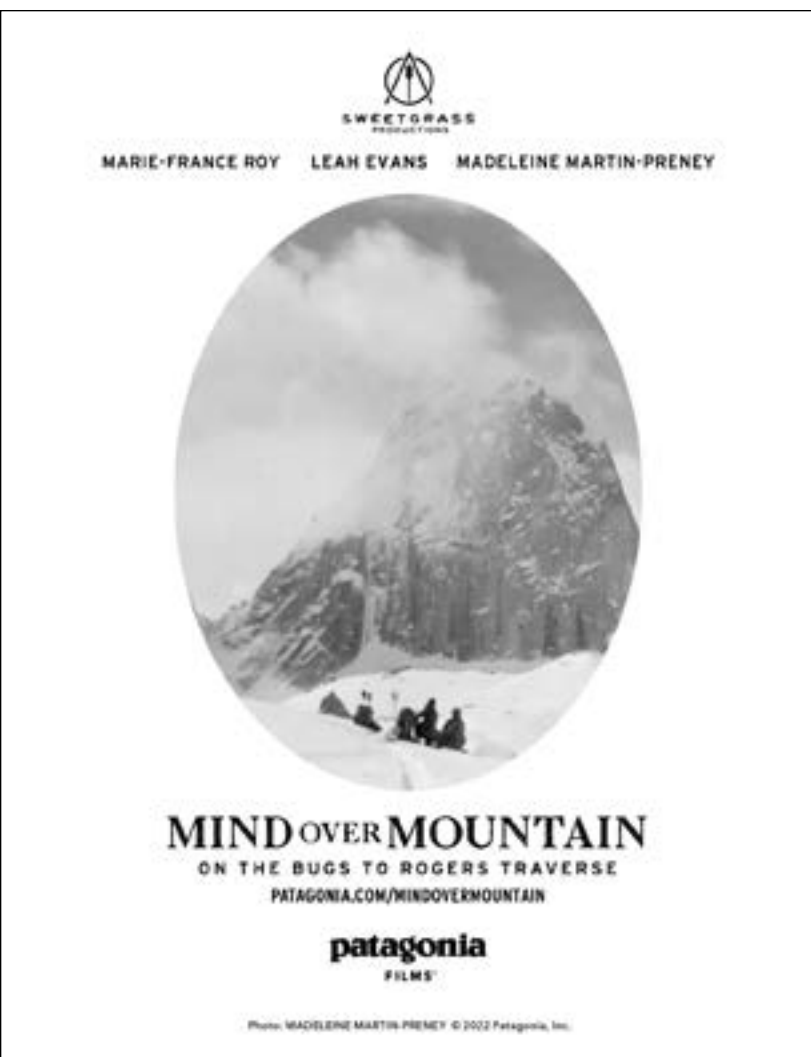
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Debris field - Investigators survey the site of the helicopter crash in Calabasas, Calif (NTSB)

The Crash and the Team:

VOLUNTEERS IN A HIGH-PROFILE MISSION AND AFTERMATH

Rick Lindfors - Meridian Editor in Chief

Calabasas, Calif - David Katz knew something was up when a teammate on Malibu SAR called him. It was January 26th, 2020, and his teammate told him there was a call for a possible aircraft down near Malibu Creek State Park. Katz made a series of phone calls to see where other Malibu SAR teammates were and dispatch additional assets. Katz happened to be ten minutes from the crash site and heard a flurry of police and fire traffic when he turned on his radios. Katz parked, grabbed his gear and gathered with other rescuers, seeing a plume of smoke coming from the mountains.

An LA County Fire helicopter was over the site and firefighters were hiking into the scene. Fortunately, the crash hadn't caused a brush fire with flames contained to

the wreckage. Fire radio traffic indicated no survivors at the site and at least three fatalities. A total of nine people had died in the crash, including basketball legend Kobe Bryant and his daughter, Gianna.

Katz decided to return to the sheriff's station a mile away and retrieve ATV's. While filling his ATV with gas, news began to spread that Bryant was among the fatalities in the crash. "We knew that this would not be a normal recovery and we needed to get back on scene and secure it," said Katz.

Katz and his team drove their ATV's back into the hills. As they progressed, more news began to break about the number of fatalities. It took about 20 minutes for them to make their way into the site. The crash was a horrific

sight with the helicopter wreckage scattered across the hillside. Katz, who had been with the team since 1990, had never seen anything like it. He and a teammate parked their ATV's 200 yards away and walked in, making their way past pieces of the helicopter and to the fuselage, where they saw the bodies of passengers nearby. Some of the wreckage was still on fire and sent smoke into the low-lying fog just over the top of the hill. The landscape smelled of jet fuel and magnesium.

Katz and his teammate met an LASD deputy at the other side of the crash, separated by more molten wreckage that they could not step across. He had located additional fatalities. The SAR volunteers continued to move around the site, determining its size and what they would need to recover the bodies.

Specialized hazmat teams were called in to extinguish the fire while additional deputies along with federal and local investigators secured the area and processed the scene. The coroner authorized the removal of three bodies on the first night after the crash, with Malibu SAR bringing them out with a litter and wheel. The rest would be brought out the next day. Rescuers were already strained since they had just completed a two-day snow and ice training. Montrose Search and Rescue was called in to provide additional support. Malibu SAR requested six rescuers and Montrose sent 11 bringing the total number of SAR volunteers to 34.



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Day two of the recovery was much more coordinated and calm compared to the chaos of day one. Some of the bodies required technical rope systems to move. Because of a lack of anchors in the hill, rescuers hammered mountaineering pickets into the dirt for rigging. Some team members were tasked with a fine grid search, making sure all human remains were accounted for.

After the recovery was complete, Malibu SAR found themselves caught up in the scandal that followed. Allegations surfaced that some responders had taken or shared photos of the crash site. "Within a couple of days of the incident, everybody that was on scene of the incident



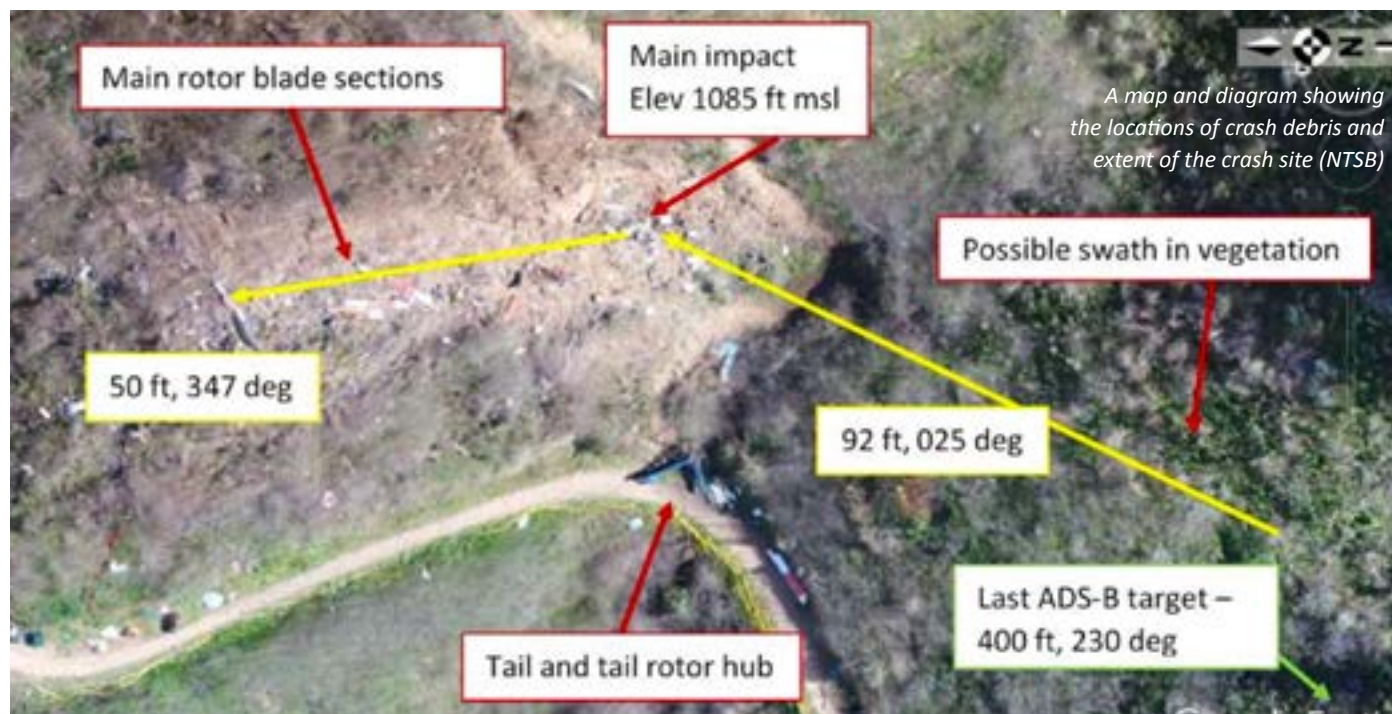
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was called in to the station,” said Katz. “Everyone was interviewed with regard to whether or not they took or received any photos or video of the scene. We really didn’t know what was going on at that point.” Katz was later called in for a deposition, recounting the operations as well as any instructions he gave or received. Katz, a corporate lawyer by day, was no stranger to depositions. He had been told on day one of the mission that no pictures were to be taken. According to Katz, about 50 people were deposed. Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva later reported that eight LASD deputies had taken or shared photos of the site. Lawsuits over the photos are still playing out in court. None of the Malibu SAR members were implicated in the scandal.

While the immediate gravity of the situation of the crash to the general public was the passing of Bryant, the involvement of children also weighed on Katz and his team. Katz and many of his colleagues are parents. Three of the crash victims were 13 years old. “There was a lot of mental, emotional baggage related to it,” said Katz, noting the intensity of the search for human remains on day two of the operation. “The fact that Kobe was involved made it a more noteworthy incident. It didn’t change the fact that... families had this horrific situation.”

An LASD psychologist spoke with the team as a group and with individuals. One member considered retiring. Another sought help after lashing out at a team member. Almost two years later, Katz doesn’t have flashbacks of what happened anymore.

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MEDCOM

HYPOTHERMIA RESCUE DECISION TREE:

This is a tool that was piloted in the Washington MRA region last winter; a gear and resource decision tree to support our operations both at command and in the field. The concept is a loose algorithm to guide gear and resources *in prep and during* the mission, so it's a dynamic scheme to apply to conditions as they develop.

This decision tree avoids an all-inclusive algorithm that incorporates clinical assessment and treatment since that already exists in a nice concise format, such as the Wilderness Medical Society Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Out-of-Hospital Evaluation and Treatment of Accidental Hypothermia: 2019 Update and the Hypothermia "Cold Card." Some of our existing hypothermia tools are limited in that they apply to generalized field applications or EMS and not the rescue environment. This one is designed for mountain rescue.

This decision tree is thereby a supplement to address rescue specific needs to support both operations and field teams to conduct a mission for a cold subject. The emphasis here is on the management consistent with the 2019-2020 updates for accidental hypothermia in the wilderness, relying on generalizable concepts, gear, and resources.

There are 2 versions:

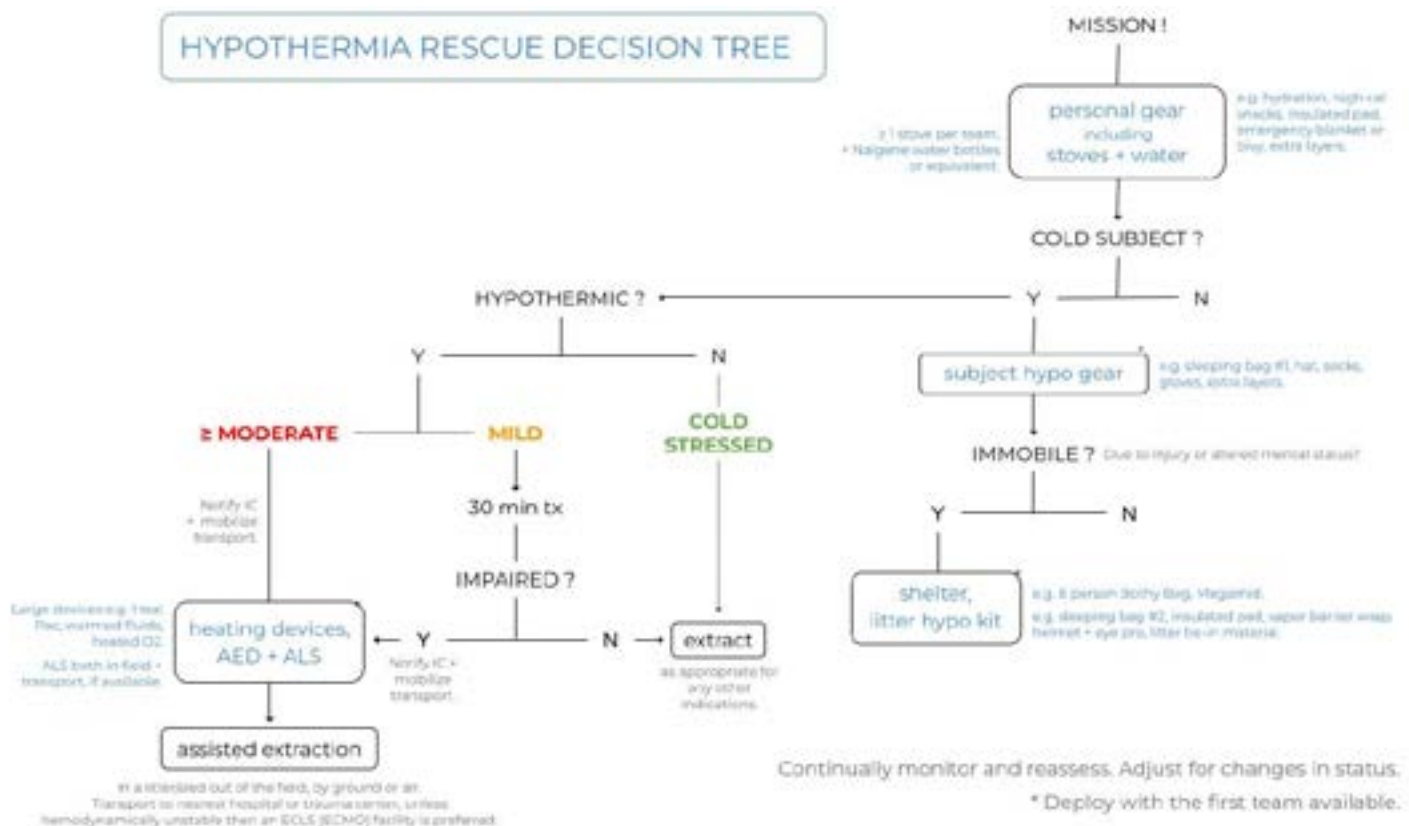
1. **Slim tree:** which is the simplified version without annotations.
2. **Detail tree:** includes annotations and more details examples and explanations.

This tool is in concept phase and hasn't been largely validated. That being said, you're welcome to adopt it for your team to use at any time as a reference. Please send feedback on what your team thinks and how it works out for you.

References

Wilderness Medical Society Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Out-of-Hospital Evaluation and Treatment of Accidental Hypothermia: 2019 Update ([wemjournal.org](https://www.wemjournal.org)).

"Cold Card" to Guide Responders in the Assessment and Care of Cold-Exposed Patients - Wilderness & Environmental Medicine ([wemjournal.org](https://www.wemjournal.org))



MRA MEDCOM 2022 BIOS

The MRA Medical Committee, or MedCom, is a group of medical experts that are active field responders and medical advisors of MRA teams. The original chair was Dr. Bill Clem, followed by Dr. Ken Zafren, and Dr. Skeet Glatterer. Dr. Christopher Van Tilburg is the current chair.

Among other activities, MRA MedCom attends and speaks at conferences such as those organized by MRA, Wilderness Medical Society, and International Commission for Alpine Rescue. We wrote COVID-19 guidelines for MRA teams. We contribute a quarterly story to Meridian. We do have the ability to help MRA teams answer related to medicine, medical advising, and medical direction. **Queries to MRA MedCom can be sent to Dr. Van Tilburg at van-tilburg@gorge.net.**

MRA MedCom 2022 Bios

J. "Pearce" Beissinger, MS, PA-C, FAWM, DiMM, AMGA-SPI (Portland Mountain Rescue) is a physician assistant in critical care and cardiothoracic surgery in Portland, OR.

Bill M Campbell MD FAWM DiMM (Appalachian Mountain Rescue Team) is a physician from Tennessee.

Anna Condino, MD, MPH, (Seattle Mountain Rescue), is an emergency physician in the Puget Sound region, with EMS fellowship training and board certification.

Chris Davis MD (Appalachian Mountain Rescue Team) is an emergency doctor and paramedic currently based in North Carolina.

Benjamin Lantow, RN, EMT-P (Alpine Rescue Team) is a nurse and paramedic based currently in Denver.

Cassie Lowry Edmark, DO, W-EMT (Everett Mountain Rescue) is resident physician from Washington State currently training in Montana.

Skeet Glatterer, MD, FAWM (Alpine Rescue Team) is a cardiothoracic surgeon.

Seth Hawkins, MD, MFAWM, FAEMS, FACEP (Appalachian Mountain Rescue Team) holds dual board certification in emergency medicine and EMS.

Timothy R. Hurtado, DO, FACEP (El Paso County Search and Rescue) practices Emergency Medicine in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Jeff Isaac, PA, (Crested Butte SAR) is an emergency medicine PA and the director of the GVH Mountain Clinic in Crested Butte, Colorado.

Roger Matthews, DO, ABFM (Park County Search and Rescue) is a family physician and co-owner of Conifer Medical Center.

Will Pettitt PA-C (Douglas County Search and Rescue) is a physician assistant for at a level one trauma center in orthopedics in Denver.

Todd Shechter, (Corvallis Mountain Rescue Unit) is a Wilderness First Responder.

Alison Sheets MD, FAWM, DIMM (Rocky Mountain Rescue Group) is an Emergency Physician in Boulder, Colorado, and vice president of MRA.

Dan Sherman, RN, BSN, CCRN (Corvallis Mountain Rescue Unit), is a RN, working in ICU for the past 5 years.

Will Smith MD, Paramedic, FAWM (Teton County SAR and Grand Teton National Park SAR) practices Emergency Medicine in Jackson Hole, Wyoming

Don Slack, MD, (Skagit Mountain Rescue and Bellingham Mountain Rescue) practices Emergency Medicine in Mt Vernon, Washington

Christopher Van Tilburg MD FAWM (Crag Rats and Portland Mountain Rescue) works in the Emergency Dept., Occupational and Travel Medicine Clinic, and at Mountain Clinic for Providence Hood River Memorial Hospital.

Janalee Whalen, RN (Rocky Mountain House), is an emergency nurse, instructor for TNCC and ACLS in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta.

AJ Wheeler, MD. (Teton County SAR and Grand Teton National Park SAR) is an Emergency Physician in Jackson Hole Wyoming.

Ken Zafren, MD, FAAEM, FACEP, FAWM (Alaska Mountain Rescue Group) is an emergency physician in Anchorage, Alaska and a Clinical Professor of Emergency Medicine at Stanford University in California.

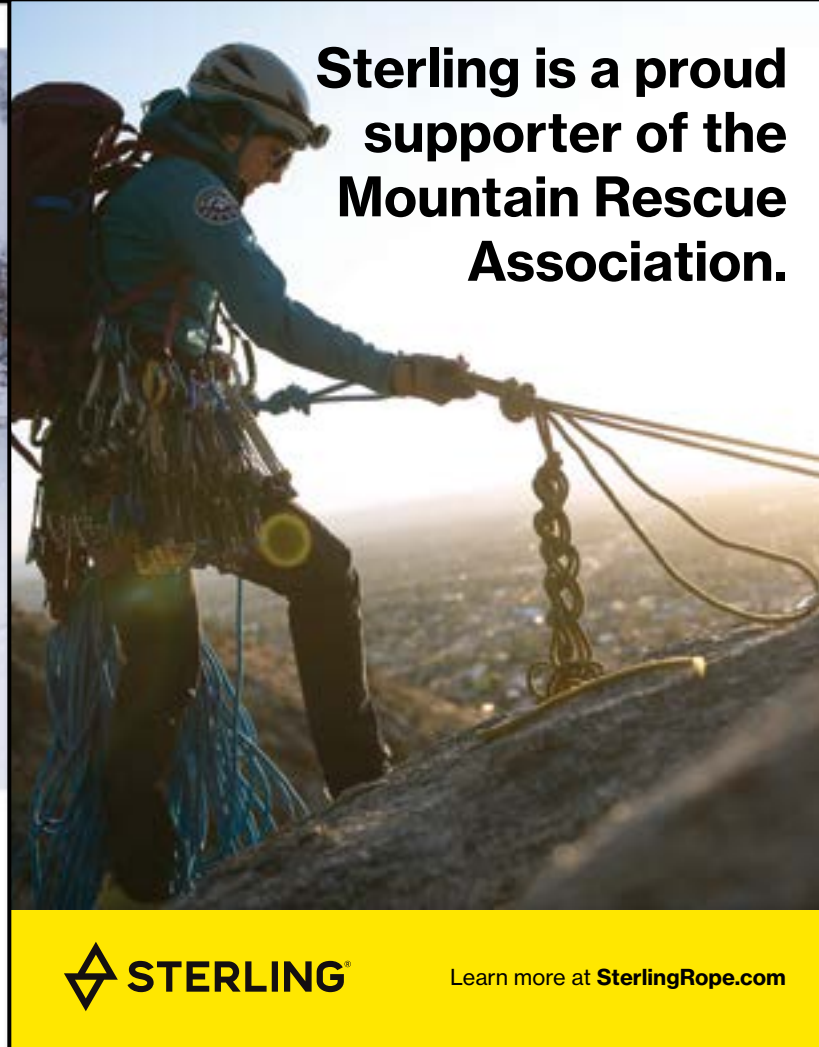


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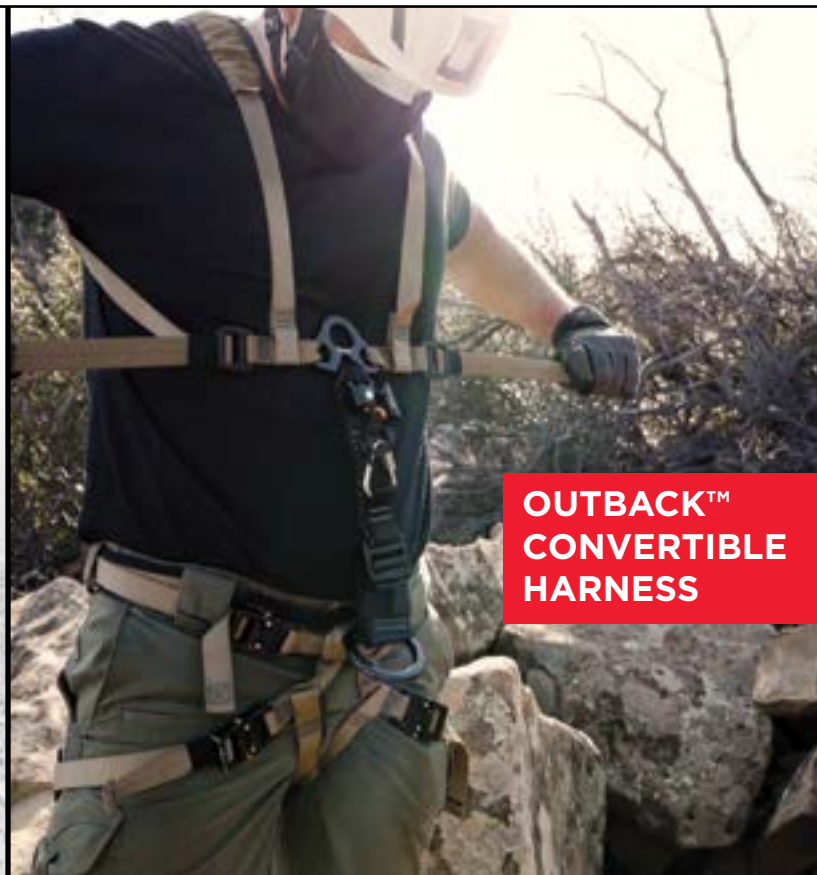


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Meet the Rescuer: Jack Mitchell

Linda Wacht - Meridian Contributor

The MRA DEI Committee is proud to introduce Jack Mitchell, a member of Atalaya Search and Rescue in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Jack has been a member since September 2016. He attends the University of New Mexico, majoring in Emergency Medical Services.

Jack doesn't remember a time where he wasn't outdoors. He has been climbing since he was five years old, skiing since he was four. He was an alpine ski racer until last year when he made the decision that the risk of falls and injuries was not worth it. He has gone white water rafting and kayaking in New Mexico as well as the Adirondacks. He's worked as a guide the last couple summers in New Mexico as well. He is known by his coworkers as the "Jack of all trades", for his rescue knowledge and life experiences.

Jack has dreamed of being on a team since he was a kid. As a toddler absorbing picture books, learning about helicopters and first responders, to books, TV and movies as an adult. When he was in high school, he found out that his computer science teacher was on a search and rescue team. "On a school camping trip, I asked him if I could join, given my age of 15. He didn't know."

The teacher followed up and found that there was no age restriction. Apparently the topic of age had not come up before. Atalaya is under the State Police and the Department of Public Safety. The state established that the incident commander of any given mission would be Jack's guardian until he reached 18. The state also required Jack to always be fielded with a teammate. It was understood that Jack would only attend missions where he and his parents were both comfortable.

His biggest challenge: he couldn't drive. "If it was a two AM mission, I had to wake up my mom and ask her to take me," he said a bit abashedly, "but then it was a good excuse for when I was tired in class."

Jack is a rescue level member and one of the more senior members. He has held the record for the most missions attended in a year. He is currently serving as the secretary/treasurer of the Rocky Mountain MRA Region. He is also a task force leader for the state of New Mexico, serving as an in-the-field incident commander and directing the use of resources in the field.

Atalaya sees between twenty and thirty missions a year, mainly searches with a handful of technical



rescues every year. In the winter, the searches are complicated by hypothermia.

The team responds to missions all over the state. Jack once drove five or six hours to a mission. "It was a team of six. We were looking for a missing plane on property owned by a secretive private organization. We found the plane and we went home. It was an odd mission." It was also his first mission dealing with a fatality, something he found difficult to deal with at age 16.

Jack's most impactful mission was a recent one. What he remembers are the physical and mental difficulties of it. It was a swift water recovery of a subject about Jack's age who had been missing for several months. "The Taos Bridge is a suicide destination. There are plaques for all the deceased." Jack was the youngest responder and was in charge. There were five rescuers, one raft and one kayak. "How do I stay safe" was his top priority--and not just him, but the deputies with him. By water, it was six miles to the subject, then another six miles out. The low level of the water didn't help the situation. It ended up being a ten hour experience.

"We didn't find out about the nearby mountain lions until later. The cats perhaps thought we'd brought lunch," he said.

As sometimes occurs, the appreciation and the relationships that come out of these ordeals are the rewards. Jack didn't know everyone he was working with beforehand,

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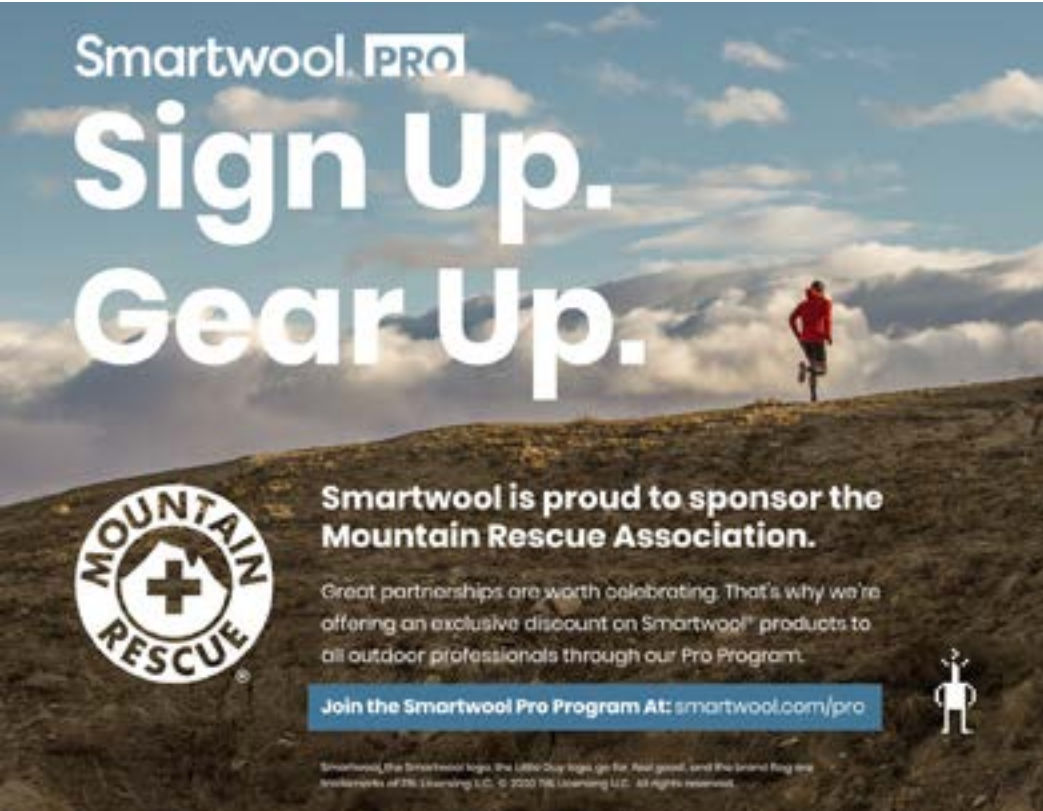
but now “we are all best friends.” The parents were understandably appreciative. “I don’t speak Spanish, but I didn’t need to, to understand.”

Jack took on his first team lead role at the age of fifteen. “I was the youngest and most senior person there,” he explained, “and I had the trust of all my team members, which is huge.”

Trust, respect and teamwork are ideals that Jack returns to repeatedly when discussing his teammates. It is why diversity and inclusion are important to him. “I am who I am because of mountain rescue. And I would not be here today if I hadn’t been let in and seen as an equal person.” His team has given him the tools to help others. “What I do—turning someone’s worst day into something a whole lot better. I could not do that alone.” And he wants that for others. He speaks of a teammate who goes out of her way to make newer people feel included. “When it’s your first time at a meeting and people are using big words and acronyms, it can be weird.” The example has inspired him to be more of a “mother hen” and check in with teammates, which he feels is an important part of being on a team. “More people should get that experience.”

He also talks about a team member from another team whom he met because he couldn’t rent a car to drive to the national MRA meeting in Mt Hood, Oregon. Jack finds that the mountain rescue community is always willing to step in and help, no matter the situation.

Atalaya is a small team—about thirty field active team members, with a fairly high turnover rate, which can contribute to the diversity of the team. Jack feels diversity is important to the success of his team; People



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with different backgrounds, communities, perspectives and ideas. "There is a place for everyone in mountain rescue, but not enough people know we're out There."

Financial challenges are an area where Jack feels teams can help in creating inclusion. This includes having team gear that can be borrowed when personal gear either isn't available or has been damaged. He also feels it important to reimburse members for training they take on outside of the team. Unfortunately, there is one group of people that don't seem to accept Jack because of his age. "Subjects. I've learned not to tell them my age. They feel embarrassed, it just gets weird, so it's better left unsaid."




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Letter from the Editor

"Yeah, we're getting OT for this."

"Oy! What's one and a half times... zero?"

Such is a common joke shared among rescuers during missions. I usually hear this one when the mud reaches a certain depth, a hill takes a certain incline or if our team has been out past zero dark thirty. Occasionally I'll chime in. "We pull this off, we're eligible for dental!"

SAR for many people becomes a commitment reaching that of their day job. Some would call SAR a lifestyle since we're at a state of readiness at all times and we bring our expertise and lessons into other sectors of our life. I've known some retirees who stack up responsibilities in SAR because it's something they enjoy and they treat it as if it were a job. Many of us think about our volunteer commitments several times a week and do some sort of task around it whether that's checking a radio battery, refilling and cleaning a hydration reservoir, making sure our K9 bag has enough treats in it or wondering whether or not to retire a prussik.

It certainly is a job/lifestyle. We train for it, condition for it and budget for it so we can be ready for that middle-of-the-night hasty mission or that right-after-work standby call. But unlike most day jobs, would we tell stories or laugh about that time we got called in to work just before going to bed and got back home the next afternoon? Most of us probably wouldn't.

But like our day jobs, there's a point where we need a vacation. Eventually, we need to recharge and realign ourselves after taking in our share of work. This is often signaled by a change in how we view what we do; is it something we enjoy and hope to do or something we just have to do? That's the point where stepping back and calibration is needed whether that comes in the form of taking time off, or changing how we fulfill our commitment. Remember, taking care of yourself is one of the best ways to take care of your team and subjects.

Cheers,

Rick Lindfors

Meridian Editor in Chief

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