

crested butte magazine

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COMPLIMENTARY

Through Hell and Paradise

Crested Butte Magazine Summer 2002
by Susan Purvis

It had been a lovely day to fish - overcast with aspen leaves turning colors all around me. As I packed up my fishing gear and headed back up to the car, I looked, once more, at the beautiful terrain around the riverbed - bright yellow aspens, cliffs dropping off to the river - and savored the cool fall scent in the air. What could be better than this? My backyard was indeed a paradise.

3pm, September 17th

Hours later, John Spencer was curled up in a ball and shaking uncontrollably in the midst of an aspen forest that now closed in on him like a jungle. The night was so dark that he could barely see his outstretched hand. Relentless mountain weather had dropped heavy rain on the Ruby Anthracite Range over the past twelve hours and the temperatures were near freezing. John's mind waned towards negative and irrational thoughts. His feet were numb and his body was soaked and chilled to the bone. What had happened?

Although this was John's first time fishing in the area, he logically thought that the way to his car was a straight shot up the same drainage he took down to the river. After bushwhacking for some time, John noticed that the aspen forests were beginning to look alike and the road was nowhere in sight. With time against him and no topographic map, he was forced to reconsider his situation.

By the time I should have reached the car, I had no idea where I was. There were many small drainages and they all looked the same. At one point, I thought that I should have seen Kebler Road, but the ups and downs tricked me. There were no recognizable landmarks. As darkness became imminent, I grew more cautious. I slipped, fell hard and hurt my ribs. With the cliff bands nearby, I wondered if another fall could be fatal. It was then that I decided to stay in one place. I couldn't help asking, what went wrong? Why was I not at home with my family?

John Spencer, evening, September 17th

Although a variety of people are involved in a mountain search and rescue mission, they fall into three main groups -- the victim, the friends and family of the victim, and the professional search and rescue team. A successful search depends upon the ability of each group to make the best individual decisions as well as work together as a team. While John Spencer was trying to stay alive out in the middle of the Ruby Anthracite Mountains, certain people in the Crested

Butte community were beginning to take action. The first person was his wife, Haden.

Though it wasn't something that John always did, that day John decided to leave a note telling me where he was going and when he planned to return. His note said that he would be back around 4:30 p.m. By 6 p.m., I knew something was wrong and called his friend, Rod Cesario, who owns a fishing shop and guiding service. John and Rob are good fishing friends and often plan excursions together.

While I waited at the house with the kids, Rod drove up Kebler Pass to check for John. When Rod returned, he told me that he found John's car several miles beyond the place John originally planned to fish. Rod stopped, honked the horn, and spent some time yelling. There was no response. We decided that it was time to call the professionals. We knew that we need help.

Haden Spencer, 10 p.m. September 17th

The most crucial part of activating a professional search and rescue team into the field is an immediate call out from the victim's family and/or friends (reporting party). A delayed response can cause the victim to travel further away from the point last known. In addition, the victim's footprints can be destroyed, and an unprepared victim may succumb to changing mountain weather. Most searches are considered urgent until proven otherwise.

A mountain search and rescue team's work is not limited to day searching. Many times the urgency to deploy a SAR team at night is a matter of life and death. It can take several hours for a team to gather its resources, both people and gear, and formulate a plan for the mission. Mission coordinators are always balancing the risk involved in deploying searchers at night. And on this particular night the decision to deploy even a search dog team was not easy. Sue Purvis, the local owner of a certified search dog, received a phone call soon after Haden and Rob made the decision to report John as missing.

I was in a dead sleep when something woke me up; it was the telephone. It was Paul Hird, mission coordinator of Crested Butte Search and Rescue (CBSAR), asking me if I wanted to deploy my search dog, Tasha, immediately to look for a missing fisherman. Now? In the dark and pouring rain? My immediate thought was: Oh he's just lost he will make it out in the early morning.

As I tossed and turned that night, I wondered if I made the right decision. I knew that if I used the search dog tonight I would have to get to the bottom of Ruby Anthracite Creek immediately to take advantage of the down sloping winds. This search strategy allows the fisherman's scent to flow towards Tasha, my search dog, so she could hone in on his body. By the time I packed my gear,

drove to his car, and hiked through the Devils Staircase in the dark, daylight would be right around the corner. The risk of hiking into this area in the dark could cause more injury.

Sue Purvis, CBSAR member and search dog handler, 10:30 p.m. September, 17th

Because of the harsh mountain weather as well as the confusing and dangerous terrain in which John might be lost, CBSAR, the local mountain search and rescue team, made the decision to wait until early morning to deploy people to search for John. At this point, Haden had done all she could, and both she and the CBSAR team were helpless to do anything but wait until daybreak. It was up to John to make it through the evening by himself.

One would think that all you needed to do is stay warm, but no. Controlling my mind was my ultimate challenge that night. I found salvation in my sports watch -- its luminescence provided a focal point for all my irrational thoughts and illusions. I used the watch all through the dark hours to focus and live thirty minutes by thirty minutes. At certain times, I had to fight off the urge to get up and start walking. I saw headlights and a bridge, for example, and struggled hard to convince myself that they were illusions and that I should stay put.

John Spencer, midnight, September 17th

The near-freezing temperatures, rain, and John's lack of warm clothing other than his Gore-Tex jacket all contributed to his hypothermic condition. Although hypothermia is commonly associated with a decrease in body temperature, there is much more to it than being cold and miserable.

Hypothermia can really affect your mind and your ability to make clear decisions it is one of the major killers in backcountry accidents. The usual case, however, creeps up on you because you allow yourself or someone else to be just a little cold for a long time. This can occur slowly over hours or days. Hypothermia can lead to errors in judgment resulting a fall while climbing up hill, or going overboard while working on a slippery deck offshore. The most obvious outward signs of mild hypothermia are mental status changes and shivering. The patient may be lethargic, withdrawn, confused, or exhibit personality changes. Beware of trying to produce heat without calories to burn. Living outside in a cold environment can require more than 6000 calories a day. Get out the dry clothing, eat, and exercise!

Jeff Isaac, CBSAR President and Author of the Outward Bound Wilderness First-Aid Handbook

As the night wore on, John struggled to stay awake and remain in one place without food, shelter or dry clothes. He formulated a plan, knowing that

someone is going to be searching for him. The only familiar landmark to him, in what seemed so long ago, was the river where he had fished. If he could somehow work his way down to it, avoiding all the cliffs, there was a chance that he could be seen from the air. No doubt his friends who have airplanes would be part of the search effort.

Someone was going to be looking for me. Early in the morning, a change in the weather set me in motion. The clouds broke and starlight provided enough light for me to move down a nearby drainage to the river. I got up but found my toes were too numb for balance in the low light. So, by sliding feet first, I started the slow journey to the creek.

John Spencer, 4:30 am September 18th

Within an hour of John's decision to start to the river, the CBSAR team devised a search strategy while packing up their gear at the cache. Fifteen people were about to be part of the search, ranging from long-time veterans of the team, to the newest member, Shawn Williams. An additional twenty-one searchers from nearby Western State College SAR team were called in for supplementary manpower. Searching for a person in dense underbrush over miles of terrain is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The team needed all the help possible -- especially since their request for airplane assistance had been denied due to the events of September 11th.

Gathering information from the victim's family and friends is an important part of any search. Not only must the search team know the victim's age and physical description, they must address questions such as: Is he simply running behind schedule? Did he leave a note? What is his backcountry experience? What gear does he have with him? Does he have any medical history? It's even important to ask the sensitive questions. Could he have run off to another town with a lover?

While Paul Hird, CBSAR member for over 12 years, was organizing the people search, Sue Purvis gathered information for searching with her certified SAR dog, Tasha. At 5:30am, Sue arrived at John and Haden's house.

Haden was so happy to see us. It was as if we lifted her spirits and hopes ten-fold. I was at her house to ask her a few questions about her husband and collect a scent article, an article of clothing that contains the scent of the lost person, for Tasha. I have Tasha sniff the scent article right before I give her the command to go Search. This way, she will be looking for John, the missing person, and not the other 30 searchers in the field.

I left Haden and John's house and headed up to the CBSAR deployment area, near John's car. My husband and I went into the field. Three hours later Tasha

located John's scent and tracks halfway between the creek and his car. This was the first time we confirmed that he was in the field. The big question I asked myself then was, "why wasn't he out yet? He's already had 4 hours of daylight to reach his car that morning." I feared that he had fallen in the cliff band and was either seriously injured or dead.

Sue Purvis, CBSAR member and search dog handler- 11am Sept 18th

Shawn Williams decided to skip the last day of an eight-day wilderness medicine course and join CBSAR in the search efforts. He recently joined the team and was anxious to use his new skills. Both Shawn and another member were equipped with a radio and given an area to search between Horsepark Ranch and the river.

We set out, yelling for John with a bit of trepidation. Our instructions weren't only to look for a live person; they were also to look for a dead or seriously injured person. We spent the next couple of hours searching under bushes, around rocks, and even strainers in the river. I got so creeped out that I began to see things - was that a hand over there? Was that someone's foot? A head? By close to noon I was totally stressed out. My search partner and I had been searching for four hours. Then we saw a person coming up the river towards us. My first thought was that he's another searcher. But why was he searching alone? As he got closer, his face lit up. He came up to us gave us both huge hugs. My god, this was the lost fisherman, John. He's alive! I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I still feel it to this day.

Shawn radioed in their good news to the mission coordinator. Soon, the news was relayed to Haden and others anxious to know the outcome. But, back up on the river, John found himself completely enveloped in the moment. For close to 24 hours he had been through more than he ever thought possible. Now it was time for someone else to take care of him.

When the sun came out that morning I knew that there was a strong chance I'd make it to the finish line. My body soaked in the sun's heat, and gave me the energy to begin walking upstream to the area where I had written Haden I would be. I knew that I could not survive another night out and it was important to be careful. I concentrated on this goal so much that when I saw the two searchers all I could think was "what the heck are kayakers doing way down here?" Then it hit me that they were searchers. I almost collapsed in relief. I had made it.

A 'live find' is a rarity for mountain search and rescue teams. Most people traveling in the mountains tend to get into trouble quickly when something goes wrong. For example, a person may get lost, disoriented and or confused when

changing weather approaches and he or she is unprepared for the elements. Many times the unprepared victim, in his state of confusion, can die of exposure or injuries. By the time a SAR team is called, it is often too late.

In retrospect, this search has continued to have long lasting effects on all members of the mission. One month after this search Sue and Tasha found a missing 12-year old hunter alive in a snowstorm. Shawn has continued to devote much of his time to CBSAR and is currently training a search dog, while Haden and John are beginning work with non-profits to give back to what they believe is an extraordinary community. xxxx But before that, the members of CBSAR were treated to pizza, beer, a donation, and a wonderful note from John Spencer that ended:

I ain't what I want to be
And I ain't what I gonna be
But thanks to your grace
I ain't what I used to be.