

CLOSE CALLS

**Edited by
Geoff Bennett**

This is a series of articles which originally appeared in the monthly Island Bushwhacker Newsletter from March 2012 to October 2013. It was inspired by the annual AAC publication "Accidents in North American Mountaineering." The contributors hoped that, by telling these stories, other alpinists would learn useful lessons and avoid similar "close calls" during their mountain adventures.

This collection is now accepting new articles. If you have a story that you'd like to tell, please contact geoff.bennett@shaw.ca.

The Blue River Blues Geoff Bennett March 2012

We stood in our skis at the top of the hill and looked down at a perfect run through a thousand feet of trees. After supper the night before, one of our group had studied the map and found this long south-facing slope a couple of miles from the cabin. None of us had skied there before. It was February, 2002 – ten years ago – and we islanders were spending the week at the Monashee Chalet above Blue River on the Yellowhead. We had already climbed the summit of the local peak and had explored the rather lumpy ski terrain to the north. This new slope looked much more promising.

The sky was blue, the sun shone brightly and we were a strong well-equipped team of sixteen. Our packs bulged with warm clothing. Shovels were strapped tightly to the outside. We checked our avalanche beacons. Somebody had a look at the map and suggested that we all meet at the bottom before climbing back up for another run. We nodded impatiently as we selected our favourite lines and eagerly shuffled into position. I picked a spot on the far left of the group to get out of the scrum. There sure were a lot of us.

The run was fabulous, swooping around the trees in the kind of deep, forgiving snow that makes you feel like an expert. We hollered at each other as we barrelled down the slope. I stopped to take a breath and heard someone on my right calling my name. "I'm here!" I replied, and then plunged downward. The trees grew denser and the slope steepened. I did a few more turns and then stopped. The voice called again and said it was better to the right. I said, "I'm coming!" I put on my skins and started to traverse back up.

The trees closed in thickly around me. My skis sank into tree wells and I floundered in the deep snow. The slope was much steeper than I thought. I tried different angles but failed to make any progress either sideways or uphill. After a few minutes I called out. No answer. I thrutched uphill for a while longer but then realized it was hopeless. The voice had said it was better on the right. No doubt the others were at the bottom of the run by now, waiting for me. I looked downhill and saw a vague line through the trees. I started side-stepping and soon realized that I could get down this way, slowly.

I must have side-stepped for at least half an hour. It was a long way down. The others are worried by now, I thought. Finally the slope eased off and I reached a streambed criss-crossed with deadfall. I called out several times. The trees, the slope and the snow swallowed my cries. No sound but my heartbeat. Where is everybody?

I couldn't see a thing in the narrow streambed so I crossed to the other side where the trees were thinner. After a few minutes I turned around to get a good look. My heart sank. I had slithered down the only possible route on a massive cliff that extended up and down the valley as far as I could see. Everyone must still be up there, at the top of the cliff. I called and waved but there was no other sound, no sign of life.

So what to do? It was late morning and I would have light until about five. I decided to work my way down the streambed until I could find a way around the cliff. And so down I went.

You know what streambeds are like at the base of steep wooded slopes. I stepped over huge logs and sometimes skied along them, worried that I might slip off and break my leg. Now and then I removed the skis and tried to walk but the snow was too deep. After a while I realized this was too hard and that I should take my chances in the other direction. I would head up the streambed until I could find a way to get around the cliff high up on the mountain. And so I turned around, retraced my steps and started trudging uphill. Now and then I looked up to see the grey cliff walls leading relentlessly higher with no end in sight. It looked cold and cloudy up there. I had no map. What if the cliff never ended? What if there were other cliffs up there, between the cabin and me? I stopped, turned around and sat down on a stump. Geoff, you're in big trouble, I thought. The temperature was well below zero. Make the wrong decision and you could be dead by morning.

I had warm clothing, a candle and matches, and a shovel to dig a cave. But no bivy sack. If I went downhill I would eventually reach the highway in a day or two. Someone might follow my tracks and come looking for me. If I were really lucky, I might find a gap in the cliff. And so down I went again, determined not to change my mind no matter what the obstacles. The streambed was horrible but I persevered for a long time. The vegetation changed, meaning that I had lost a lot of elevation. The cabin must be two or three thousand feet above me, somewhere. Out of the silence, two small birds appeared. They were redpolls, tiny, pink, and cheerful. A good omen, I thought. With renewed vigour, in Sam McGee style, "...on I went though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low..." The cliff loomed above me on the right, remorseless.

A logging road crossed the streambed. I cried out in joy and skied down the road to the right. Within minutes a gently-angled clear-cut appeared above me. Should I continue down the easy road or go up this huge slope in the general direction of a warm cabin and friends? I skinned up and headed home.

Up and up and up through the endless clear-cut. I looked at the sun, now low in the sky behind me. I decided to keep going until sunset, then stop and dig a snow cave. My nemesis, the cliff, was now below me on my right. At the top of the clear-cut I saw a few tracks, then dozens of them in all directions. Bits of granola bar here and there. Eureka! All I had to do now was find the up-track and head home. But I had a nagging thought – is anyone following me? Why is nobody waiting here at the lunch stop, on the lookout?

There were tracks everywhere in the trees. I found an apparent up-track and followed it for a minute until it started weaving straight uphill. I returned to the lunch spot and found a much better track which I followed for hundreds of metres until it too thinned out and headed uphill. Should I head back and try again? Was the real up-track above me or below me? If it was below me, I would eventually intersect it. For half an hour I plodded steadily uphill in fresh snow, making good progress but with no sign of tracks either up or down. Was it just ahead of me? Finally I decided to kick-turn and head in the other direction, facing the setting sun. I was still low on the mountain with no up-track in sight.

Just as the sun set, my skins fell off. I took a deep breath and told myself that this was a test. A silly thought came into my head. I had forgotten to renew my life insurance, which had now just expired. My wife would be really mad. I removed my skis and wiped the bases clean. Then I scraped all the ice off each skin with my palms and fingers until they were dry. I gently re-applied them to the skis, rubbed them firmly and gave them a big kiss. They worked. Five minutes later I found the up-track.

No snow cave needed. I could follow this track all the way home by starlight. I remembered that I had left my headlamp under my pillow. I still had a thousand feet of uphill but it felt like nothing once I slotted myself into this beautiful railroad track. I crested the hill in darkness and carefully skied down the backside, leaving my skins on so I wouldn't go too fast.

Half an hour from the hill I saw the lights of the cabin in the distance. What a feeling! And then suddenly I saw three figures approaching, kitted out with headlamps and huge packs. I think it was Tim Strange who hugged me and said, "Boy, are we glad to see you!"

Everyone had returned to the cabin in groups of threes and fours. Some had rested in bed, some were cooking, others enjoyed the sauna or read in the common area. When they all sat down for supper someone said, "Where's Geoff?" Everyone stopped and thought. "The last time we saw him he was on the far left going down the mountain." Pandemonium ensued. Judith got on the radio to Blue River. Three men prepared for a night search. Within a short while I was safely back in the cabin.

We talked a lot that night and everyone learned something. I learned not to depend on the group – to carry my own map, bivy sack, headlamp and other gear as if I were out on my own. What surprised all of us was how easy it is to go missing when you're in a large leaderless group on a sunny day. Contrary to popular wisdom, there is less safety in numbers. For the rest of the week, we adhered to the buddy system in the trees. It's not easy. Some people grumbled that it restricted their freedom to swoosh down the mountain for minutes on end. You decide. And don't curse those clear-cuts and logging roads.



Photo by Andrew Lunny 2002 – Geoff Bennett above the Monashee Chalet

Do the Math
Geoff Bennett
April 2012

News item from the UK: Sales of Ordnance Survey maps (OS) are down 25% but mountain rescues are up 50%. This is attributed to over-dependence on hand-held GPS devices.

Back in the middle ages, before there was an internet, mountaineers used maps and compasses to navigate safely to the summit and back. That was soooo 1980's, say the young people who roll their eyes and laugh at such pathetic dinosaurs. These days, of course, we use GPS and cell phones. This technology works amazingly well when the satellites are up, the waypoints are entered correctly, the batteries are charged and the proposed route from A to B doesn't drop off a cliff. And if the worst should happen, you just phone up a helicopter that whisks you back home in time for tea.

In May of 1983, a group of us set out to climb Mount Columbia, the highest peak in Alberta. We pitched our tent on the flank of Snow Dome in the middle of the vast Columbia Icefield. The next morning we enjoyed a clear view of the narrow snowy ramp leading to the summit. Nevertheless we planted green bamboo wands every so often so that we could find our way back to the tent in case the weather turned. As usual, we ran out of wands sooner than expected. After planting the last one, we turned sharply to the left, crossed a steep canyon and headed straight up the snowy ramp.

In the morning sunshine we looked down both sides of the ramp, down into a breath-taking jumble of crevasses and cliffs. We reached the summit tower without incident, removed our skis and kick-stepped up the steep slope to the top. The summit photos didn't show much, because the clouds rolled in suddenly and the wind picked up. We gingerly retraced our steps back to the skis, roped up and stared into the void.

Total absolute whiteout... We couldn't tell which way was down until our skis started moving. I pulled out the map and held it against someone's back so it wouldn't flap in the wind. Then I laid the edge of the compass along a line from our current position to a point uphill of the tent where I presumed we would intersect the line of wands. I was relieved to see that the route followed the centre of the ramp. Then I announced the bearing to the others.

Unfortunately, my compass didn't have the new-fangled screw which allows you to adjust for magnetic declination in the comfort of your tent before you head out into the wilderness. At that time the declination in this area was almost 20° East. I thought for a moment and said that we should subtract this from the map bearing. But then my brother Rick and some of the other guys argued with me, saying "No, we should add!"

If we got the math backwards, we would head off in the wrong direction by 40° and either get totally lost or fall off the cliff. I could see that I might lose the argument so I asked for three ski poles, which I laid on the ground. One pointed to True North, a second to Magnetic North about 20° East and a third in the direction of travel. After a bit of muttering, the mutineers reluctantly agreed that we should subtract. I rotated the compass dial in the fateful direction and handed it over to my brother.

Rick had decided to punish me for being right by putting me at the pointy end of the rope while he called, "Left... right... more right!" from above. The others followed closely behind him while I slid and wobbled down the uneven slope. Crevasses loomed out of the murk, much too close for comfort. We

travelled at least a mile in this unpleasant fashion, threading the needle of the narrow ramp, crossing the canyon, and finally arriving on the main icefield. The wands must be somewhere on the right but there were none to be seen. After a few scary minutes of plodding and self-doubt, one tiny green wand appeared.

Supper that night never tasted so good – except for the previous evening, but that’s another story. The lesson is clear that, even in this GPS era, a map and compass are indispensable, even if just as a backup. A mountaineer, especially in Canada, still needs to understand the abstract concept of Magnetic North. When the technology fails, we have only our wits to save us. Or you can call a helicopter.



Mount Columbia (12,293') from the summit of Snow Dome

Carrot Creek
Geoff Bennett
May 2012

Last month my brother and his wife were diving off the island of Cozumel, Mexico, when they were caught in a massive underwater current. The “avalanche” dragged them down into deep water and separated them. Rick managed to reach the surface but there was no sign of Lorraine. The violence of the moving water had ripped off her face mask and forced sea water into her lungs. She unlatched her weight belt and passed out. Luckily for her she floated back to the surface where a passing dive boat chanced to pick her up and brought her back to life. Another diver in the same group wasn’t so lucky. Rick and Lorraine are back home now and grateful to be alive. They credit her rescuers, pre-trip conditioning, scuba training – and the foresight to undo her belt – as the keys to her survival.

Have you ever hiked up a mountain stream bed in the middle of summer and marvelled at the jumble of boulders and logs? Sometimes you see a little trickle of water in the middle and you wonder how it could possibly have wreaked such havoc.

In early June 1974, Wendy and I were new to Calgary and keen to explore the magnificent Rocky Mountains at our doorstep. The higher peaks were still covered in snow but the lower reaches were now accessible. We pored over the maps and planned a 3-day 23-mile route from the dam at the west end of Lake Minnewanka, following a good trail for 12 miles along the winding north shore to the inlet at the east end. Then we would cross the river and head partway back along the wilder southern shore. After three miles we would bushwhack up from the lake and head south to a broad pass at the base of Mount Peechee. From here we would drop down Carrot Creek to the Trans-Canada Highway. The map showed an eight-mile horse trail over the pass from the lake to the highway.

At home we loaded up our new MEC pack frames with enough food, gear and survival necessities for four days. On Friday, June 14th we duly registered our route with the Banff Park wardens at the gate and drove to Lake Minnewanka. For two days we hiked in a leisurely fashion along the north shore, enjoying the warm spring sunshine and the late evening light.

Early on Sunday morning we forded the inlet at the head of the lake and for the first time started to feel uneasy. The water was high and fast and difficult to cross, although we managed with the aid of a couple of stout poles. The next three miles on the remote southern shore were difficult but the route up to the pass was brutal. We struggled through the dark trees up the steep hillside. There was no sign of a horse trail anywhere but eventually we reached the pass. The trees thinned out and the sun gleamed from the snowy summits around us. Now it was all downhill and in a few hours we would be back at the highway. We followed some rivulets downward until they coalesced into the headwaters of Carrot Creek. We stripped down to T-shirts in the mid-day heat and marvelled at the volume of water in the widening stream.

The mountain walls penned us in from both sides as we picked our way down the swollen stream bed. I realized that the horse trail, if it existed at all, must have been under several feet of water. We could hear rocks thundering downstream. There was just enough room to walk along one edge but the walls were growing steeper. Finally we reached a point where the cliff forced us to cross to easier terrain on the other side. I fashioned a wobbly bridge out of a few branches and twine and then we leaped across safely. Much to our chagrin, after another hundred yards the bank disappeared. The cliff face loomed above us on our left and the river roared beside us on the right. We discussed backtracking the twenty

miles but we weren't too keen on the idea, especially the thought of crossing the wobbly bridge. The cliff above us was impassable. However, if we hugged the canyon wall we could make it to easier ground just a few yards ahead. I suggested that we undo our hip belts in case we went for a swim and had to ditch the packs.

I stepped into the raging torrent and crept along the rock face with Wendy right behind me. The water roiled above my knees as I struggled to keep my footing. We couldn't turn back against the force of the water. Angry brown waves thundered around the next corner. Suddenly Wendy slipped against me. I shouted, "I'm going!" and catapulted into the stream.

My first instinct was to ditch the pack but I was tumbling head over heels. I finally tore it loose and pushed it away as I grabbed a rock on my left. Wendy watched me go around the corner, thinking that would be her last sight of me. Then she too plunged into the stream. She quickly got rid of her pack and washed up on the left bank. Much relieved, she found me hauled out on the same side. A few yards further downstream, a huge sweeper spanned the creek – a large log with branches sticking out in all directions. I had missed impaling myself by seconds. In shock I tried to cross it but Wendy wisely called me back. Stunned, we sat on the bank and tried to decide what to do.

Our small bank was hemmed in by an overhanging wall on one side and the creek on the other. We were well and truly stuck. Our only gear was the clothes on our backs – shorts and T-shirts – and whatever remained in our pockets. I fished out a soggy packet of paper matches and laid it out on a rock to dry. The rest of our survival gear had disappeared.

As the sun went down we huddled together and scraped some dry moss around us. The June night was cold but fortunately not too long and it didn't rain. We shivered as we listened to the boulders rumbling down the stream bed a few feet away. The next morning the matches felt dry. We collected some tinder and then I struck a match in the carefully laid fire pit. Eureka! Within minutes we had a roaring blaze. After we'd warmed up we laid some green boughs on top and watched the smoke drift above the canyon.

Wendy idly wondered if I could catch a squirrel or a few birds for breakfast. Even though we had registered our route, we knew that the wardens wouldn't come looking for at least a day. In the early evening we heard the unmistakable beating of a helicopter, then no other sound but the ceaseless roar of the creek. Another hour passed and the sun went down over the mountain. Suddenly we heard a call. We looked up to see a ranger on the other side of the creek. "How did you get over there?" he yelled. "I'll be back with the chopper."

Within minutes we saw the helicopter high above us, carefully descending into the narrow windy chasm. The ranger was attached to a long tether underneath. As he came down he shouted to Wendy to get ready. He slipped her into a harness and radioed the pilot. Wendy squeezed her eyes shut and then zoom! – off they went into the evening sky. I doused the fire and waited. A short while later he returned for me. What a ride!

The peanut butter sandwiches at Banff headquarters tasted pretty good. The debriefing was short because there really wasn't much to say. They had thought about rescuing us with horses but then decided against it when they saw the level of the creek. It was too high for horses, let alone people. In hindsight we should have turned around, of course, and spent two days hiking out. Waterproof matches and a space blanket in a pants pocket would have been a good idea. But they were relieved to have

found us alive. Normally, they said, these flood situations are body recoveries – found with pack belts cinched tightly around the hips.

One week later, we got a phone call from some Alpine Clubbers who had been hiking up Carrot Creek from the highway. They had found our packs and were obviously worried – but glad to hear of the happy ending.

Wendy remembers the accident as if it were yesterday. The date was Father's Day, 1974, before either of us had become parents. Her best memory – when she finally opened her eyes – was being hitched to the waist of her handsome rescuer, flying high over the Rockies at sunset.



Locals and tourists at Lake Minnewanka – May 2009

Bum Raps
Geoff Bennett
June 2012

Here are some rappelling stories – a mainstay of mountain literature and a topic which may elicit responses. Rappelling takes us to the “edge,” which is where we like to be, right? If you’re not living on the edge you’re taking up too much room.

Everyone knows that rappelling is the second most dangerous part of rock climbing. Driving to the mountains is the scariest part. There are good reasons for rappelling’s bad reputation: we usually rap at the end of the day when we’ve bagged our summit, we’re tired and we just want to get home. Or we’re caught in the weather and have to retreat from a bad place. Or the rope gets stuck, or you come off the end, or your long hair gets caught in your device and you can’t reach your knife. Most commonly, our lives literally hang by a thread and depend upon various bits of pieces of hardware, all of which must be anchored and fastened correctly.

If you’re a climber of a certain age, you’ll remember learning to body rap using the infamous Dulfersitz method. Since it was also the age of pitons, we learned to reduce the friction on the cheeks by wrapping the rope around our rock hammer. Bum raps indeed. Thankfully we now rarely resort to the Dulfersitz, but are mechanical devices really much safer?

The Wedge in the Kananaskis is a pleasant climb on a sunny day but a blizzard changed everything the day we climbed it. We tagged the summit and raced back down. There was one steep bit that looked a bit slippery so we set up a rap anchor. The limestone was loose and wobbly but we all agreed that the piton would probably hold. Most of us prepared to go down in a Dulfersitz but Ken had a fancy new Figure 8 that he was determined to use for the first time. As he stepped over the edge, I got suspicious and called him back for a final check. He had neglected to loop the rope over the neck of the device, so he was essentially rappelling off a carabiner. He was somewhat embarrassed to be checked and corrected but at least he got down safely.

I once led a honeymooning couple on a climb of the Bugaboo Kain route. We reached the summit without incident but the weather suddenly turned nasty. Grey clouds rolled in fast and thunder rumbled in the west. We quickly organized a rap station beside the famous gendarme, which sticks up high in the sky like a lightning rod. I had three ropes with me, allowing me to set up a belayed double-rope rappel. I belayed Julie first, then Bernie, all the while listening to the horrifying crescendo of zapping and popping from the gendarme beside me. When it was my turn I went down on a prussik, so that I wouldn’t plummet to the ground if hit by lightning. Then we gathered up the ropes and ran like hell. I often wonder if I could have managed this situation in a faster, safer manner but the alternatives seem to carry similar levels of risk.

Years later, when I lived in Indonesia, I used to take the Boy Scouts on “survival” weekends in the jungle, including swinging from vines and rappelling off waterfalls. I made sure the anchors were bombproof and I belayed each boy on a separate rope system, but I’m still amazed that the other parents let me do this. One particular weekend, we did some training raps off a military-style tower. The platform had an overhang and was about 15 metres off the ground. As each boy went over the edge, I instructed him to sit down low and get his rap device over the lip before slipping into the void. They loved it. But there was one very heavy pear-shaped boy who could barely fit into the harness. I was a bit nervous because I couldn’t double-back the belt into the buckle. I checked everything carefully, including my belay, and let

him go. He got over the edge all right, but then he flipped upside-down! In one horrible moment I thought that he might slip out of his harness. I should have used a full-body harness. Luckily for him – and for me – he managed to right himself and landed safely on the ground.

None of these incidents led to disaster, thank goodness, but others have not been so lucky. Guide Peter Amann told me about an incident at an Alpine Club General Mountaineering Camp a few years ago. An experienced climber fell to his death while descending on his ATC device. With an ATC it is necessary to clip both rope loops into a locking carabiner. He had accidentally clipped only one loop, a mistake which is surprisingly easy to make, especially if nobody is checking.

A friend of mine and fellow Scoutmaster, Jim, suffered a real heartbreaker at a summer camp in Colorado. One of his assistants, an experienced climber, volunteered to set up a rap station on a nearby cliff. He used two ropes and knotted them together for a double-rope rappel. Jim told me that he was sitting at a table in the camp headquarters when a Scout came running in, shouting, “One of the guys fell off the cliff!” Jim ran to the base of the cliff where the boy lay, dead, with two untied ropes in his hand. The investigation was inconclusive. The distraught assistant swore that he had tied a single fisherman but the evidence suggested that he had actually tied a reef knot. Jim will never get over the guilt. He told me that the worst part is bumping into the boy’s mother in a store and seeing the look in her eye.

So please think of that mother when you set up your next rappel. Check, think for a moment, and then check everything again. I remember a Swiss guide who thanked me at the end of a long rap on the Engelhorn. After he lowered me to an exposed ledge in the ignominious way that guides do, I had tied a pigtail into the end of his doubled rope. He said that none of his clients in thirty years had ever done that for him.



My most memorable rappel – four double-rope lengths down the vertical face of Mount Louis near Banff.

**Odaray Glacier
Geoff Bennett
September 2012**

The 2012 McKelvie Basin camp continues the popular tradition of ACC summer camps. We love the scenery, the climbing and the camaraderie of a large group. And we feel more secure in a large group, right?

In July 2004 the Vancouver Island Section organized a week-long summer camp at Lake O'Hara, one of the most beautiful alpine valleys in the Rocky Mountains. Two dozen mountaineers eagerly crowded into the rustic Elizabeth Parker Hut for a week of climbing. We ate heartily every night and sang until bedtime. Every morning small parties headed high into the hills.

On one such sunny morning, I joined Sylvia Moser and three others on a climb of Mount Odaray. Four of the five were experienced climbers. We knew what to expect and what gear to bring for glacier travel and belayed rock climbing. Or so we thought. Rope, helmets, crampons and axes were plainly visible on our packs. We gathered outside the hut and chatted amiably as we waited for the last person to show up, and then off we went. None of us felt like asking if everyone had harnesses or gloves or ice screws, for example. I had an ice screw and I assumed everyone else did too.

After an hour or so of hiking we reached the base of Odaray Glacier and roped up. One of the group volunteered to lead and I agreed to tie into the other end, with Sylvia immediately in front of me. To reach the notch in the summit ridge, parties can either stay low on the glacier and traverse around or go high along the base of the cliffs. None of us had climbed the peak before. We looked at the low route and saw bare ice and some big crevasses. The high route looked straightforward and so up we went.

The high route got steeper, of course, as always happens at the top of a glacier. However, the snow was soft and the footing was easy. Eventually the leader called a halt to put on crampons, which was a good idea because we could start to feel the ice just below the snow. We traversed upwards and to the right, across a series of gullies. I lost sight of the first two climbers and I started to feel uneasy. The snow had thinned to a few inches of slippery crud through which the crampons had difficulty biting. The rope slowed down as everyone walked more carefully. I yelled at the leader to put in an ice screw but the wind whipped my words away.

Suddenly I saw the leader's red jacket flying backwards through the air. I shouted at Sylvia to dig in. I jammed my pick in the ice and watched Sylvia hurtle into space. Time to be a hero, I thought. I braced myself and wondered if I could hold the weight of four climbers. The rope plucked me off my feet like a fly.

I felt strangely calm as I rolled onto my belly and lifted my crampons off the ice. I adjusted my grip on the axe and bore down as hard as I could. Sylvia told me later that she was doing the same. I watched in fascination as the pick dug a vertical groove in the ice. To my dismay I saw that the rope had somehow looped around my upper hand. If and when we ever stopped the rope would break my wrist. We careened down the glacier at high speed, heading for the cliff and the rocks below.

The slope eased slightly just as we entered the boulder field. I pushed hard on the axe, the rope went tight and suddenly we stopped. The pain in my wrist was excruciating but fortunately nothing seemed to be broken. I looked down the hill and waved at everybody.

The only injury was a small cut that later required stitches. However, the leader's axe was still at the top of the pitch. I suggested that two of us climb up to get it and I asked for an ice screw from everyone so that we could belay ourselves properly. To my surprise I had the only one. We safely retrieved the axe and abandoned our attempt at Odaray. Sylvia and I contented ourselves with a scramble up Walter Feuz Peak while the others went back to camp.

A few ice screws would have made all the difference. The leader could have placed them at intervals; I could have collected them at the rear and then passed them up to the front again. Most of us have done this many times, usually on the steep icy snouts of glaciers. So why did we forget? And why did we all neglect to do a quick verbal check of equipment before we headed out? When we climb with professional guides we sometimes get lazy and rely on them to keep us safe. Similarly, when surrounded by experienced friends we may be reluctant to speak up. However it only takes one person to start the process and the others will chime in. Inevitably, someone will have forgotten something crucial – such as the rope! It only takes a minute to ensure that all the gear is on hand.



Walter Feuz Peak, Odaray Glacier and the main summit of Mount Odaray from All Souls Prospect

First Climbs in the Alps
Albert Hestler
October 2012

You had to be tough, back in the day... riding your single-speed bike to the mountains with your hemp rope and wooden ice axe... sleeping on the snow with no Thermarest.

The year was 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay climbed Mount Everest and my personal hero Hermann Buhl succeeded in an epic solo climb to reach the summit of Nanga Parbat. I was twenty years old and about to climb my first 4000m mountain in the Alps.

Some years earlier, the conductor of our youth choir had returned from a summer holiday in Zermatt. He mesmerized us youngsters with a tale of climbing the Matterhorn with a local guide and a one-armed war veteran from New Zealand. He invited my friend Eckhardt and me to join him in on a return expedition to Zermatt.

The lure of the Matterhorn was the nudge which introduced us to climbing. We spent many a weekend on the crags of the Swabian Jura. In hindsight, our knowledge and practical experience was pretty minimal and our equipment was downright primitive. We still used heavy hemp ropes which, in the absence of seat harnesses, were wrapped around the chest. A free fall while climbing would knock the air out of one's lungs, sometimes breaking a couple of ribs to boot. We had old-fashioned ice axes with wooden shafts (which I still use today) and clumsy cast-steel crampons. I wore flannel shirts, woollen sweaters, corduroy knickerbockers, wool knee-socks and unlined leather boots. My most treasured item was a US Army surplus jacket with multiple pockets for carrying chocolate bars and rye bread. Of course, what we lacked in experience and equipment, we made up in enthusiasm and the youthful conviction of immortality.

We also lacked the necessary funds to travel by public means or to stay in commercial lodgings. Eckhardt and I rode from our hometown of Giengen/Brenz in Germany to Zermatt on single-speed bicycles, fully loaded with all our gear. We covered 450km in five days, pushing our bikes over several mountain passes. In Zermatt we stayed in a hay barn at the edge of the village. These wooden structures were built on stilts, with high entrances to keep the hay dry and the rats out. Eckhardt and I arrived one week before our conductor, so we explored the area and got acclimatised. After a few days we were ready for our first climb to the magical height of 4000m. Our goal was the Alphubel, 4207m.

From Zermatt we planned to ascend the Weingarten Glacier to the col at Mischabeljoch, 3850m. From there we would climb both Alphubel and Taeschhorn, 4491m. We were unsure how long it would take, so we carried our floor-less pup tent and sleeping bags. We didn't have any foam pads or air mattresses.

The day of our ascent was clear and sunny. There had been little snowfall during the winter; hence most of the crevasses were wide open. We had to navigate from one side of the glacier to the other. Snow bridges were sparse and unstable. Once, while I was leading, I broke through and instinctively threw myself forward. I clung to the other side of the crevasse but my rucksack landed on my head and pushed my face into the snow. Eckhardt hauled me out but I wondered afterwards how I would have climbed out of the crevasse if I had fallen all the way in. We hadn't practiced that – in fact we had never even walked on a glacier before. We reached the col at Mischabeljoch late in the afternoon with just enough time to climb the snowy north ridge of Alphubel – our first 4000m peak. Hallelujah!

When we returned to the col we pitched our little tent, cooked our dinner on an Optimus stove and enjoyed a glorious sunset. Once it got dark, we put all our spare clothing on the ground and crawled into our sleeping bags.

Our night was downright miserable! An hour after sunset, the temperature dropped well below freezing. Lying on ice without proper insulation from below, we couldn't stay warm. So we got up, put on all our clothes, wrapped ourselves in our sleeping bags and stomped around the tent, flapping our arms like chickens. Fortunately the sun came up at 4 AM. We quickly decided to skip the Taeschhorn and made our way down the glacier. Once we reached the meadows we collapsed in the grass and slept for a few hours before trekking back to our "hay hotel" in Zermatt.

One could easily conclude that everything was hunky-dory and that there were no serious mishaps. However, when I tried to hoist my rucksack after the bivouac on the col, I couldn't lift my right arm beyond shoulder height. While lying on my side in the tent I must have frozen my right shoulder. At the hay barn, I could hardly climb up to the entrance and I needed help to lift my pack. However, with the confidence of youth I figured that, if a veteran with one arm can climb the Matterhorn, so could I. After we connected with our conductor and his family, we enjoyed a grand alpine tour which lasted five days and included the Breithorn, 4171m and the Monte Rosa, 4638m. On the day before our Matterhorn attempt we hiked up to the Schwarzsee Hut. Unfortunately the weather turned bad overnight and our guide said, "I can take you to the summit, but I can't guarantee a safe return." Given our earlier experience on Alphubel we reluctantly called it quits.

Once back home a doctor administered heat treatment and gave me subcutaneous injections for two years. I finally gave up when I emigrated to Canada in 1955, but ever since I have had difficulties with any overhead movements of my right arm.

A few months after our climb of Alphubel I read in an alpine magazine that a party of three French climbers had tried to do the same trip. During the night of their bivouac on Mischabeljoch it started to snow. They decided to wait it out but the snowfall didn't let up and soon developed into a full storm. After a few days a rescue party was dispatched but they too were delayed by the storm. When the rescuers finally managed to get through, they found the climbers in their tent, covered by snow and frozen to death.

I realized how lucky we had been. If it hadn't been for the fine weather, Eckhardt and I might well have met the same fate. It definitely cured me of the notion that one "conquers" a mountain. At best, the mountains allow us the privilege of standing on their summits. It also germinated a notion which I heard many years later, namely that "a successful mountain climber is one who dies in bed." Amen to that!



Taeschhorn (L) and Alphubel (R) with Mischabeljoch in between.
Route up the Weingarten Glacier shown in red.



A view of Mischabeljoch (with the 1996 hut) from the north ridge of Alphubel looking towards Taeschhorn. In 1953 the ridge was snow-covered from col to summit.



Eckhardt (L) and Albert (R) on the summit of Alphubel.
Photo taken by self-timer on top of Albert's ice axe.
Albert no longer recommends this rope technique!



Albert (L) and Eckhardt (R) with Monte Rosa in the background.



Albert in Zermatt (L) and descending from Monte Rosa (R)

Triple Peak Rappel
Chris Ruttan
November 2012

Rappelling seems like such an easy way to get off the mountain. But it can all go wrong very quickly and dramatically, in a hundred different ways. Experienced climbers routinely check for loose rocks under their feet, but what about loose rocks off to the side?

On August 15, 2009, Karen Van Dieren and I climbed the wonderful rock trail through the waterfalls up to the lake below Triple Peak. I had previously spent a weekend by myself at the lake and climbed the regular route to the summit. I enjoyed the trip so much that I offered to take Karen up.

After a short break at the lake we continued to the upper snowfields below the main summit. The weather was border-line, with low clouds and fog on the peaks, but the outlook improved as we moved up the mountain. We passed a ptarmigan that was really tame but it wouldn't fit in my pocket. We made it to the summit with no problems and stopped for lunch.

After lunch we down climbed the upper section to the first steep bit, where we hung a rope and rappelled low enough to avoid the rock chimney. Then we down climbed some more and looked for another rappel point that would take us to the snow. I found a good block, hung the rope again and started down. An easy corner led to a ledge about half a rope length down. However, I could see that it would be difficult to reach the snow by following the same line. There was a nasty-looking moat below me, with no secure footing. That route was off the fall line anyway, so I unclipped from the rope and called up to Karen that we needed to redirect the line. I asked her to rappel down to me, and then the two of us would traverse along the ledge to the fall line. She would then continue down while I kept the rope in position.

She rappelled to the ledge and kept on going below me. I pulled the rope as far into the fall line as I could and watched her go down. Everything looked fine. When Karen was far enough down, I called to let her know that I would be letting the rope go and that she would feel a bump as it went straight. She acknowledged and I let go.

I heard a scrape above me and looked up to see a large rock on the move. The rope had slipped under an edge and lifted it off the face. As it crashed past me I spun around and yelled "Karen!" at the top of my voice. A freezing rush of fear charged through my body.

As if in a dream, I watched the rock bounce down the steep face. Karen looked upslope and crouched into a seam. The rock struck a couple of feet above her, cartwheeled over her head and missed her by inches. It finally came to rest on the snow about one hundred and fifty yards down slope.

Karen's instinctive reaction saved her but she was also very lucky. Her helmet might have protected her from a glancing blow but not from a direct hit. I stood on the ledge, shaking with adrenalin and thankful that the rock had missed her. She completed the rappel and I followed. We pulled the rope down without incident and then walked to where the rock lay on the snow. I was amazed that such a big rock could have been sitting so precariously on a steep face.

I was really annoyed that I had made such a mistake but the decision to move the rope seemed logical at the time. In hindsight I should have predicted how the rope would move under tension and then

checked the route for loose rocks. Every choice we make has implications and we need to assess those choices carefully. I'm so glad that my friend wasn't hurt on what was otherwise such a great trip.



Karen on rappel. The arrow points to the rock that was later dislodged.
Inset shows the rock with ice axe for scale.

THE CLIMBING COFFLES
Musings on Group Size
Sandy Briggs
December 2012

Definition of “coffle”: A group of animals, prisoners or slaves chained together in a line. A coffle is good for pulling people out of crevasses, otherwise...

Bob Spring, the famous North Cascades photographer who died this past July at age 93, has a photo on page 91 of Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills (3rd edition). It shows a line of nearly seventy un-roped people crossing the Winthrop glacier on Mt Rainier during the times when ice-axes were just starting to replace alpenstocks. Such a photograph may cause us to cringe a little nowadays, on aesthetic or other grounds, but we must resist becoming smug in our 21st century sensibilities. This is because Greg Hill's account of the September 2012 fatal avalanche on Manaslu shows a photo of more than sixty people (the caption refers to more than 100) ascending the glacier of that very pretty 8000er. The July 9th 2012 issue of Maclean's magazine has a picture on page 68 which shows about 150 people in a line on the Lhotse face of Everest.

It is possible, I suppose, that with the accumulation of more evidence the 1990s will prove to have been the decade of Vancouver Island Section mega-trips (or maybe just Sandy's mega-trips.) Perhaps it will prove to have been a decade during which our ability to attract new members outstripped our ability to mount trips for them. I have not tried to assemble the needed data. But on January 1st 1992 a dozen of us climbed our Island El Capitan.

“That's nothing,” you say. Well, on Sunday February 6th 1994 I led a party of 21 people over the NW ridge of Mt Whymper to the summit and down the *voie normale*. It went fine. In those days I kept better notes than I do now, and I hardly wrote a line about it. Nothing happened, which perhaps fed my complacency.

On Sunday March 19th of that same winter I led a group of 22 up Mt Landale. We stopped for breakfast at the Dog House restaurant in Duncan, as was the habit of the time, and we stopped for dinner at a pizza place that evening. We even carried off the trip without needing our headlamps. Later that same year, on October 15th, my group of 14 set off to climb Mt Maitland. A dozen of us, scrambling un-roped, reached the summit. My frayed nerves insisted that most get belayed for the descent from the summit block. Speaking somewhat scientifically, my observation has always been that the ‘viscosity’ of a mountaineering party — its ability to flow over the terrain — is a non-linear and increasing function of its size. Therefore it was not unexpected that night soon fell on our merry band, that we had to rappel in the forest in the dark, and that I arrived home at 3:30am. I think almost everyone had a good time, though our visitor from Whitehorse may have found things a bit bushy.

My almost casual success on Mt Whymper that February must have given me an inflated sense of the possible, for a year later on January 28th 1995 I set off for the same route with a party of 31. (And that was down from a monster list of 40 people!) What was I thinking? I didn't own a car in those days, so Valerio Faraoni picked me up early and we met most of the group at Helmcken Rd at 6:00am. Sorting out the car-pooling for that group took a while, but soon we were having a fine, highly social, high-carb breakfast at the Dog House restaurant. (The staff were beginning to know us.) We began hiking at 10:30am in light rain and reached the Nanaimo-Chemainus watershed after 1.5 hours of road-walking. (In those days there was a washout quite far back from the base of Mt Whymper.) Two people turned

back at that point, so we were down to a mere 29. In wet and windy conditions we set off up through the recovering clearcut and then into the forest, topping out on the first real bump at around 2:00pm. Everyone was wet, and the cold wind was gusting really strongly — classic hypothermia conditions. After a quick chat with some experienced friends I decided to split the group. Don Berryman generously offered to lead a group of 17 back down to the road, whereupon they summarily disappeared into the mists.

By that time it was pretty clear that the traverse of the NW ridge to the summit had become infeasible (which is to say, out of the friggin' question.) I offered to lead the remaining "dirty dozen" up to the consolation prize of the first summit on the NW ridge proper, from which, I proposed, we would return to the road via our ascent route. This group included some experienced folk as well as four young guys from the UVic Outdoors Club who were very keen but who had very poor (cotton) outdoor clothing, poor footwear and no mountain skills. The first obstacle on this part of the ascent is a short slab overhung by a cedar tree, the branches of which make a great handhold. Though this wee slab was covered in verglas, Judith Holm, Greg Gordon and I, being used to such things, were up it in a flash. But it brought the four youth to a dead halt. One of them went down to the nearby col saying he would wait for us, but it was very apparent that waiting around in those conditions was not an option. This small technical bottleneck, with a bit of exposure and real consequences for slipping, triggered the sensible decision that we would all descend immediately. To have continued would have meant "serious trauma by hypothermia," as I later recorded in my trip notes. I also knew that further and greater technical difficulties loomed above.

Our descent was slow and there were, I think, a couple of minor injuries in the bush. Nevertheless our rather strung-out (in more ways than one) group of 29 all got back to the vehicles before twilight. The four UVic guys were soaked and cold, but all said they'd had a good day. One even gave me a wee nip of Irish whiskey as a thank-you.

Certainly Sandy's second rule of mountaineering* applies: "Conditions are everything." The best summary of lessons learned is probably the one I wrote in my trip notes right afterward: "A successful and enjoyable day withal. It bears mentioning that once again the weather (*i.e.* the bad weather) may have saved me from a greater trauma. Had the weather been good and had we pressed on, I fear that the technical difficulties and the advance of night and the length of the hike would have caused much bigger problems. Also I am lucky to have such great people along as Don & Judith, Claire & Russ & Darlene [Anderson] *etc.* to be my extra eyes and hands. I must say, probably even in good conditions it would be stupid to do that trip with 29 people, especially with so many novices. But the day ended well."

Postscript: On January 1st 1999 we set off as a group of 25 people and two dogs to climb El Capitan. First, deep snow. Then, hard icy snow. A tricky traverse. A too-independent "loose cannon." Eight of us summited. All 25 (and the dogs) survived, but it wasn't pretty.

*Sandy's rules

Rule 1: Talk is cheap.

Rule 2: Conditions are everything.

Rule 3: Never underestimate the pioneers.



Line-up on the Lhotse face of Everest
(Maclean's magazine, July 9th 2012)



On our way up on Sept 22nd, we could see a line up of climbers on the fixed ropes, a traffic jam moving slowly through the seracs. Easily over a hundred people on their way up to Camp 2. We were coming late so we could avoid this and get up to our Camp 2.

Traffic Jam on Manaslu
(Greg Hill 2012)



NW Ridge of Mt Whympers in winter
(Sandy Briggs)

Protection
Geoff Bennett
January 2013

I used to climb with a friend who insisted on protecting the pitch every ten feet. "We'll never get to the top," I complained. "But what if I fall?" he replied. "You won't fall. This part is easy." And on it went. We never did climb anything big. On the other hand, I have sometimes been accused of not using enough protection. Where is the happy medium? Here are two short stories of climbing in the Rockies.

A long time ago, when my buddies and I were new to rock climbing, we drove out to the Rockies from Calgary every weekend. We were reasonably well-trained and equipped, with new Whillans harnesses, pitons and rock hammers. In the spring we enjoyed climbing the easier routes on Yamnuska and the adjacent Goat Butte, all visible and easily accessible from the highway. One of our favourites was Keelhaul Wall, a solid 5.5 route about 400 feet high with 6 pitches, one of which had a neat little overhang. After doing that a few times we looked up some other routes in Greg Spohr's new guide to Canmore Climbs and found a promising line further along the face, called Twilight. It looked a lot like Keelhaul but two grades more difficult.

One fine June day in the late seventies, Dave, Mike and I drove to the mountains and hiked to the base of Twilight. The rock and the route looked superb – multiple pitches of very hard and grippy Cambrian limestone, quite unlike the typical Rockies fare. None of us had ever led a 5.7 climb before but I felt confident and volunteered to lead off. The only information in the guide book was a blurry photo with dots, so we were essentially on our own. When I look at more recent photos, I'm not even sure if we were on the right route. Most of the modern climbs on this face are 5.8 and above.

The initial pitches were difficult, but exhilarating and well-protected. I was "in the zone," as we say today. The overhanging slab, where I expected to find the crux, was another pitch above me. There seemed to be a vaguely-defined ledge underneath it, where I hoped to find a good belay stance. I left my two partners securely fastened to a tree and started climbing up to the ledge.

The climbing was straightforward but, to my dismay, on this smooth part of the face there were no cracks, trees, horns, fixed pins or bolts to offer secure protection. No problem, I thought, there'll be something at the ledge. But when I got there, I couldn't find anything but a thin shallow crack into which I banged a short piton. I looked left, right, up and down but there was nothing else. In retrospect, I should have climbed down but the thought of the steep unprotected pitch below me was definitely unappealing. I didn't have enough rope to use the manky pin as a top belay. So I clipped in and belayed my two partners up to the ledge.

They were disappointed, to say the least, when they saw the belay stance. None of us wanted to rappel off one small pin so the only choice was to continue. However, I felt confident that I would find a place further along the ledge to bang in a good piton. As I traversed off to the right, I gave my two anxious partners a cheerful wave.

There was nothing on the ledge and it eventually disappeared. I looked at the overhang above me and took a deep breath. I started climbing, stepping up very gently in rock shoes and holding onto nubbins of sharp limestone. I felt above the overhang but there were no handholds, nothing. Smearing my hands against the rock I slowly inched my feet higher. Then I moved my hands a little bit, then my feet again. What seemed remarkable to me later was a feeling of total calm. The thought of falling and the certain

death of three climbers never entered my mind. Within a few minutes I found myself above the crux and on easier ground. I wrapped a sling around a huge tree – my first piece of protection on the pitch. Then I clipped in happily and sat down to enjoy a secure belay and a new lease on life.

The story might end there, but as I belayed Dave and Mike together the rope stopped for a long time. Dave called up, “How the hell did you do it?” I gave him some hints and a bit of tension. Then he fell! The rope pulled me to the edge of the cliff. I had forgotten to take the slack out of the sling but I managed to hold him. He tried again and made it the second time. I’ll never forget the sight of his scraped-up face and his bloodied hands coming over the top. “I thought for a moment you didn’t have me,” he said. I blamed myself for the slack belay, of course, but I’ve always wondered what might have happened if I hadn’t led the pitch... or if I hadn’t felt confident.

That experience taught me to turn back from climbs and summits whenever I felt uncomfortable – which happened more and more often as I grew older. I remind myself never to climb anything that I can’t down-climb with confidence...including retreat from a dangerous situation. If I had down-climbed Twilight on a secure belay, I would have risked a nasty leader fall but my partners would have been fine. By continuing upward I placed all of us at risk of death.

Being “in the zone” is important. If you believe you can do something, you probably can. If you feel nervous, you had better be well protected. Nowadays many popular routes, including Twilight, are secured by bolts and fixed pins.

A similar problem caused my brother grief on the Gonda.

The Gonda is a popular single pitch traverse on Tunnel Mountain near Banff – even though it has nothing to commend it other than a tricky move in the middle and a fine view of the Bow River. When Gary, my brother Rick and I climbed it years ago, the footholds were already well-polished and the original 5.5 grade was questionable. Gary led off and inched his way along a finger crack at the base of a huge overhang. At the crux move he was surprised to find that a crucial piton had been removed. He had no suitable gear in his rack so he gingerly climbed on and safely reached the end of the traverse. I followed Gary’s rope and was also belayed from behind by Rick. If I had had some gear I could have put in protection after the crux move. However, I reached the end safely and then Gary belayed Rick across.

Rick slipped on the crux about 40 feet from us. I watched in fascinated horror as he pendulumed across the face and came to a stop just a few feet above the deck. Gary lowered him to the ground and then we ran down to check on him. He had no injuries but his jacket was torn to shreds. Something had happened inside, though, for he never climbed anything steep again.

My climbing buddies and I learned some hard truths on those two climbs and on other youthful adventures: to protect difficult moves beforehand – and afterwards in the case of a traverse; to make belays bomb-proof, especially on difficult or unfamiliar routes; to carry sufficient gear, because without the right equipment we shouldn’t even be there. We were lucky that nobody got hurt. The pleasure of climbing comes from pushing our personal limits and taking reasonable risks, but only to a point. Before you take that desperate leap, spare a thought for your climbing partners and for your family.



The Gonda Traverse on Tunnel Mountain near Banff

SPOT to the Rescue
David Campbell and John Young
February 2013

The ACC-VI executive has recently been debating the merits of various electronic rescue devices, such as SPOT, EPIRB (personal locator beacon), VHF radios and satellite phones. The Section has an EPIRB for trip leaders but is considering selling it owing to lack of use.

David: On a fine BC Day long weekend in August, 2012, John Young, Cassandra Elphinstone and I headed up the Elk River to start a 6-day trip along the Wolf-Cervus Divide from El Piveto to Mount Laing. On Day 1 we slogged our way up to a flat camp spot below Rambler Peak. John had been up Slocomb Peak before, so after dinner Cassandra and I had a lovely jaunt in the rain up to the peak.

John had also climbed Rambler before and had made a previous attempt on El Piveto. He knew a route across the shoulder of Rambler and down into the Rambler-Cervus col. Day 2 was cool and clear, so Cassandra and I went for a crack at Rambler. John passed on a summit attempt but we made a plan to meet up at the Rambler-Cervus col. (I had assumed that the terrain was fairly benign to get there.)



The Spiral Staircase (photo: John Young)

Cassandra and I climbed Rambler and as we descended the south gully we saw John reach the shoulder of Rambler Peak. He was waiting for us to come down and join him before heading on. We met John around 2 pm and started making our way down into the Rambler-Cervus col. John was out in the lead since he knew the route. The terrain is fairly typical of the Island – convoluted and bluffy – and we weaved our way on snow (~35 degrees) through the bluffs. At one point Cassandra slipped but was able to self-arrest. It was apparent that in the heat of the day the snow had softened quite a bit and it was difficult to get purchase with the ice axe.

John: *On the morning of Day 2, David and Cassandra headed off to Rambler while I slept in, thinking it wiser to save my energy rather than re-climbing Rambler. I set off about 10:30 am and before long I had climbed the shoulder of Rambler into the sunshine. As I neared the Spiral Staircase I could see the other two descending. They soon retrieved their gear and joined me.*

David and I debated which route to take to El Piveto. He wanted to descend to Cervus Lake but I wanted to traverse higher, so that we wouldn't lose as much elevation.

"Not the route I'd choose," opined David.

"Well, it's the route we took before," I reasoned and off I went. By then the snow had softened in the early afternoon sun. Initially I didn't use my ice axe but after a while I noticed it was getting steeper. I stopped to take out my axe but I was still plunging nicely into the snow as we made a downward

traverse towards the Rambler-Cervus col. I wasn't worried about falling. Even if I do slip, I told myself, I'll be able to stop myself easily in this soft snow.

David: When we made it down about halfway to the col, I fell behind and took a different variation around a bluff. John and Cassandra were about 150-200 feet below me. I heard a call and looked down slope to see John sliding and accelerating. Snow was flying everywhere. I thought to myself "Oh sh**...self-arrest!...self-arrest!!...self-arrest!!!" Unfortunately he couldn't. I watched as John hit a rock section and he started to "rag-doll." A final bounce threw his body into a head-first position. Then he plunged over a cliff and out of view.

Oh my god... My first thought was that he might not have survived the fall. I was screaming at the top of my lungs but heard no response. I carefully worked my way down the slope, calling the whole time, but still there was no response. I was worried about Cassandra's exposure on the terrain, so I got her to move to a safe area on the slope and wait while I headed down to check on John. I was trying to move quickly but carefully down the slope...still calling, still no response, still thinking that I might be finding a body at the base of the slope.

John: *I tried to self-arrest when I slipped but my axe wouldn't hold. I remember looking up at Cassandra and saying something like, "That didn't work." Then I rolled onto my back, thinking that my pack would protect me when I hit the rocks below.*

From that point on, I have no memory of sliding and somersaulting over the rocks and tumbling 14 metres down the slope. I must have banged off the nearly vertical cliff. I had minor cuts and scrapes all over my body and my shirt was ripped to shreds.

When I came to, I was sitting in a hollow in the snow at the bottom of the cliff. I don't know if I had lost consciousness or if my mind had just blacked it all out. I vaguely remember looking around, not really knowing where I was or what I was doing there. David arrived a few minutes later, took one look at me and activated his SPOT.

He patched me up as best he could, put a sleeping bag over top and a pad underneath. He kept asking me if I knew where I was, what day it was, and so on. At first I couldn't remember, but after a couple of minutes I recollected exactly where we were and what day it was. David's calm manner certainly reassured me. I shudder to think how I would have reacted if he had panicked.

David then went up around the cliff to fetch Cassandra and found my poles and axe. I mentioned to him that I'd lost my sunglasses and hearing aids, so he went back and found them all. At that time, sitting the way I was, legs slightly raised and bent, I figured that maybe I just had a couple of cracked ribs.

David: It seemed to take forever to make up the few hundred feet down to John. I came around the cliff he had fallen over (about forty feet high) and saw John lying crumpled, head-first in a moat at the base of the cliff. The snow was soaked with blood. He was groaning, which brought me momentary relief that he was in fact alive. I got to him and he was able to respond. There was blood all over his face and he had an obvious gash in his head. He was complaining about his ribs. He didn't know who I was or what he was doing here. I was able to remove his backpack and then I moved him gently into a lip of the moat. I didn't want either of us to slide any further.



Waiting for the chopper (photo: David Campbell)

I clicked into first aid mode, checked his vital signs, and did a rapid body survey to see if there were any surprises. He seemed mostly intact. His ribs were painful to touch but he was able to breathe all right. Nothing was poking out of his chest or anywhere else on his body. His heart rate was fine. Most of the blood was coming from his head wound and a gash on his knee but they were no longer bleeding seriously. I tried to talk as much as I could and to be reassuring. I kept testing him to see if he could remember who he was, what we were doing, where he lived. He was confident that he had broken some ribs. In fact he told me that it felt worse than the

last time he had broken his ribs! Moving him did not seem to be an option, so I made the decision to deploy my SPOT.

I bandaged up his head and knee, got him into some warm clothes, placed him on a Thermarest and covered him in a sleeping bag. Every few minutes I checked his vital signs and tested his memory.

John seemed comfortable and stable so it was time to get Cassandra down. I needed her help and I wanted to get the group together. I climbed back up, belayed her across a rock section and then set up a rappel to bring us over the cliff and down to John.



The Cormorant arriving from Comox with Golden Hinde in the background (photo: David Campbell)

John: *After half an hour an RCMP helicopter arrived, hovered above us and then flew up the slope. When we heard them land we reasoned that they had called the bigger Cormorant chopper from the Comox Armed Forces Base.*

A while later the Cormorant flew into view and hovered over us. The pilot opened the window and yelled down, "Who's hurt?" (Dave yelled back.)



Paramedic coming to the rescue
(photo: "The Province")



Getting strapped onto the litter (photo: "The Province")



Being raised into the chopper (photo: "The Province")

"Where are you hurt?" (Ribs!)

"Your wrist?" (No, RIBS!)

"Oh, your ribs?"

Then they lowered a litter and two paramedics on a cable. They laid me out on the litter and strapped me down. Oh, the pain when they straightened me out!

And then more pain and fear as they raised me into the helicopter, swaying to and fro.

David: An RCMP helicopter arrived about 30-40 minutes after deploying the SPOT. They communicated by loudspeaker and I with hand signals ("Is it broken bones?" I nodded my head wildly and pointed to my ribs.) They saw our situation at the base of a cliff and realized they couldn't land. So they flew to a suitable landing spot and waited to act as spotters. (I think they enjoyed the view!) About one and a half hours later a Cormorant helicopter arrived from CFB Comox. Two rescue crew were lined down. They assessed the situation and discussed options. I offered to hike out with Cassandra but one of the rescuers said, in a serious tone, "You're coming with us." OK.

The helicopter dropped a basket down to the rescue crew. We bundled up our packs and moved John onto the stretcher board. The crew showed us how the rescue harness worked ("Don't lift your arms!") They had come directly from another rescue and apparently there was not a lot of fuel to spare in the helicopter. Once we were ready they winched John up, then Cassandra with our gear and finally myself. It was a quick flight across Strathcona Park back to Comox. The crew went into full first-aid mode and seemed to enjoy the challenge of this rescue.

John: *After they hauled David and Cassandra into the helicopter, the longest journey of my life began. The pain! We finally landed at CFB Comox where I was transferred to an ambulance. Shortly afterwards we arrived at the hospital.*

Wow, was I ever lucky! After a 14 metre fall I had two cuts requiring two stitches each, six broken ribs (two fractures each!) and a punctured lung. But I had no skull or spinal injuries and no other fractures. Over the next four days a tube drained nearly a litre of blood from my lung. The shattered ribs resulted in a flail chest which has a fatality rate as high as 35%. But here I am, just a few months later, feeling as fit as ever.

David: An ambulance was waiting for John at CFB Comox and took him to St. Joseph's Hospital. The rescue crew didn't know what to do with Cassandra and me. ("Normally you are on your own now.") In the end they were super-helpful. A Military Police convoy drove us from the base out to the hospital.

Details were pretty thin once we arrived at the hospital but it sounded like John was in serious shape. He would have to stay in the hospital for a while. We got in touch with his wife who drove up to be with him. Cassandra's parent also came up and helped us get back to Strathcona Park to pick up the two vehicles.

In my twenty years of mountaineering, this has been the most serious and traumatic incident I have been involved in. I am so grateful that John came out safely from the other end. There were certainly moments when I fretted that there might be a different conclusion. I am also deeply appreciative of the work of CFB Comox Squadron 442. Although the rescue was difficult and the terrain was challenging, they handled the job safely.

John: *So what have I learned? Electronic safety devices sure have their place in the backcountry. SPOT might have saved my life. In addition, first aid knowledge is essential. David obviously couldn't do much for my shattered ribs and punctured lung but he stopped my external bleeding. Most importantly, he kept me warm and reassured me with his calm manner, maybe preventing shock. As for me, I don't have a list anymore. If I do climb again, it'll be because I want to, not just because a mountain is on a list. I'll focus on the journey and not rush myself into rash decisions.*

David: I am conflicted with failing to be self-reliant but sometimes sh** happens. In this case self-rescue did not seem like a viable option whatsoever. A few lessons learned:

Our original plan was to meet John at the Rambler-Cervus col after our climb of Rambler. This was beyond where the accident occurred. Had John stuck with our original plan and not waited for us, the accident could have occurred while we were separated. The original plan of having independent travel over semi-technical terrain was really not appropriate

As soon as ice axes are needed, it is worth putting helmets on.

Snow conditions were evidently unfavourable for self-arresting. Although the terrain appeared fairly benign, the group should have discussed the consequences of an uncontrolled slip.

I picked up a SPOT about a month ago. This seemed like an appropriate deployment compared to, say, having to hike eight hours to a phone and then organize a rescue. It allowed John to quickly get the medical care he needed – a little over three hours from accident to hospital. The two-way communication of a satellite phone would have been useful to relay information about the situation.

An Accident on the South Sister

Rick Hudson

March 2013

Following last month's gripping saga on Rambler Peak, ribs are on the menu again! Helicopters too. A longer version of this story first appeared in the 2006 Island Bushwhacker. One of the photos has never been published before, not even in the National Geographic. Just when you thought it was safe to go out and play in the snow...

A long weekend in May 2005 provided a chance to visit the Twin Sisters in Washington State, during that intermediate time when winter is turning to summer in the alpine and most peaks are out of condition.

Camped in the bowl between the North and South Sisters, Christine, Sandy, Charles and I chose the West Ridge of the South Sister as our first route. A classic scramble on good rock, it dried early in the season and offered close to 300m of low class 5.



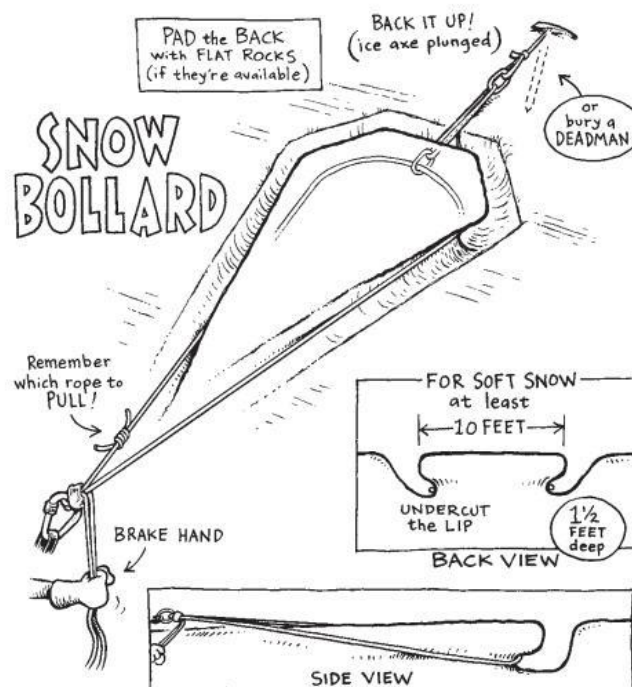
The South Twin Sister with the West Ridge on the right. The large snow slope and bergschrund are below left of the summit. The slot had partly filled in when this photograph was taken 3 weeks later. The rescue col is lower left. Photo: Martin Smith.

Leaving early, we were on the summit some hours later, the day calm, the cloud layer below us, with summits poking through like islands in the sea, and the huge bulk of Mt Baker coming into view as we topped out. We idled away an early lunch and discussed the next day's activity – the equally elegant West Ridge of the North Sister, visible across an intervening col.

Then came the decision. We could either descend by the way we had come – down the West Ridge – or descend a snow slope to the col. Holding to the maxim that something new is always more interesting than something known, and the weather being fine and the day long, we chose the snow slope.

There was one problem, however. Between our summit and the glacier there was hidden ground. Would it go? Sandy led off as we plunged down steep but stable snow, craning to see over the curve of the slope below. Some distance down, the lay of the land became clear – there was a *bergschrund* blocking our descent, although how wide, we couldn't guess.

On reaching it, we looked left and right but the line appeared continuous across the slope. There was no option but to rappel. While two cut a large snow bollard, the other two prepared the gear. Sandy rappelled first. As a precaution, I pushed my axe in above the bollard, and clipped it into the rope. As he went over the edge Sandy called up, "It's not far," and then he disappeared.



Snow Bollard from "Glacier Travel" by Andy Tyson and Mike Clelland, Morris Book Publishing, USA 2009.

In due course, both Charles and Christine rappelled over the edge, leaving me alone. When it came to my turn, I removed the ice axe which had been serving as a backup to the bollard. The snow looked pretty solid and the rope hadn't cut into it at all. Still, never trust a snow bollard.

I eased myself down the ropes, the slope increasing towards the top of the moat, trying hard not to load the line any more than necessary. But in the back of my mind, the earlier comment, "it's not far," gave me confidence. What was the worst that could happen?

As I came over the upper lip, two things happened. First, I could at last see the others and they were a long way down – possibly 10m rather than the 5m I'd been expecting. The second thing was, the rope came away above me.



Rick at the moment of falling. Strangely, he cracked his left arm and ribs, not right. This is a remarkable picture because in 2005 cameras still had a significant delay between pushing the button and the shutter opening. Charles Turner on the left. Photo: Christine Fordham.

Impact on hard snow, then a bounce into the *schrund*, hitting the rocky back wall but not going far. Icy water poured down as I struggled to stand, realizing at once there was a huge amount of pain. Finally out of the slot, soaked, shaking with cold and shock. The realization that things had just gone from a mellow afternoon to rescue mode.

After a while to recover, I locked my left arm in place and with two back ropes slowly descended to the col, where Christine got reception on her cell phone and called for help. It turned out that the US 911 rescue centre couldn't call her back because she had a Canadian number. There was a long delay during which we were uncertain what was happening. We could self-rescue – lowering me down a series of rock slabs, where a heli-rescue would be complicated, or we could wait at the col in the hope that a rescue would come.

The sun came out, for which I was grateful. Soaked from the waterfall, I couldn't change my shirt without moving my left arm. Several hours later we heard incoming rotors but the pilots, seeing other climbers in the bowl below, headed for them. More delays. Finally it was overhead, a massive US Navy machine that blotted out the sky and filled the air with sound. A SAR tech descended on a line with a

stretcher, and I was laid into it. Being strapped down was the worst part. With arms, body and legs pinned, I was helpless. A sudden lurch as we became airborne and then the increasing roar as we were winched up into the metal bird.



*The US Navy to the rescue. Rick and SAR tech being winched into the helicopter some hours later.
Photo: Christine Fordham*

The noise was deafening, the attending doctor cheerful. In Bellingham I was transferred to an ambulance and taken to St Joseph's Hospital. By then it was a quiet Sunday evening in Emergency, with the only other patient a 7-year-old with a bike handlebar stuck in his chest. Perhaps it wasn't so quiet. I was scanned, X-rayed, stitched and discharged three hours later full of morphine, with two cracked ribs, head cuts and a fracture of the left arm. My son drove from Vancouver to fetch me. My three climbing buddies had, in the interim, descended to our camp. They carried all my gear out the next day.

Lessons learned:

1. Since I was uncertain about the snow bollard, I should have either traversed the snow slope to the rock and scrambled down past it – a process that would have taken an hour and involved some risk – or I should have padded the bollard with a jacket, to reduce the chance of the rope cutting through, since my axe was no longer acting as a second safety check. I did consider padding but was in a hurry. It's not difficult to arrange the rope so the padding comes down when you pull the rope down but it takes time. I rushed the rappel even though it was 2:00 in the afternoon, light for another seven hours and we were just a few hours from camp. Never again.
2. When I realized I was seriously hurt, I should have let the others strap the arm but I didn't want to be a bother. As a result, the pain was excruciating for several hours. I should have been honest and let them help me more.

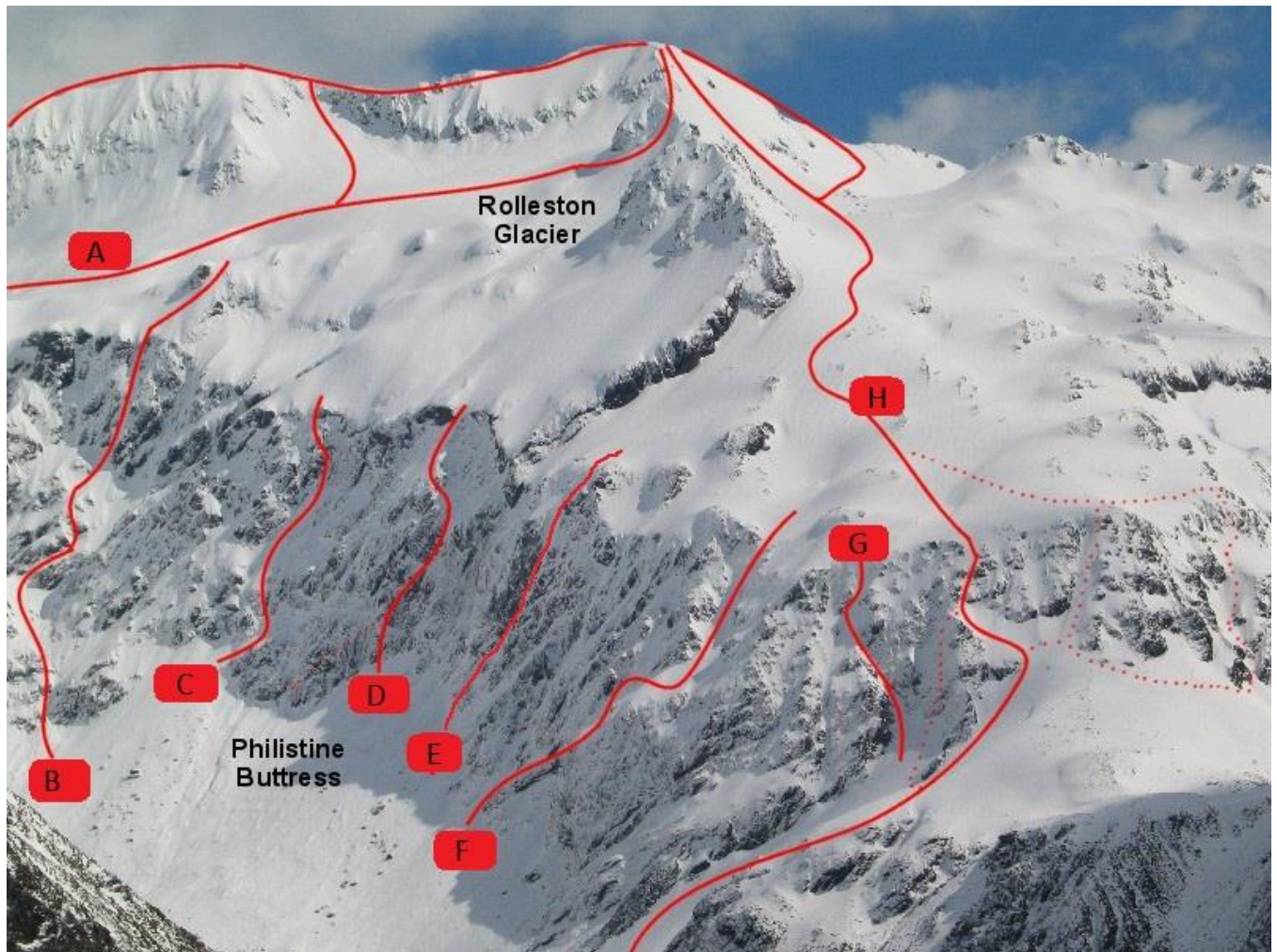
3. This happened before the age of SPOT, which has better coverage than a cell phone, plus it provides the rescuers with a precise location. SPOT2 now allows messaging via your smart phone. A few years after this accident, when SPOT became available, Phee and I bought one for each of our kids (both active climbers) and one for ourselves. They are cheap insurance.
4. Talking of insurance, Phee had renewed our out-of-province insurance just a week before. It covered "climbing with ropes." The hospital charged over \$15,000 for their services. The insurance company eventually settled for \$8,600. If you do get hit with a US medical bill when uninsured, negotiate.
5. As an interesting postscript, Martin Smith's photo of the peak, taken three weeks later, showed the *bergschrund* partly filled in, so we could have walked all the way down.

The Hillman and the Philistine
Lindsay Elms
April 2013

Driving to the mountains is supposed to be more dangerous than climbing. That's certainly true if you're seventeen. Even then, it's a toss-up...

At seventeen, the feeling that anything is possible is strong: pulling an all-nighter was no problem; I was the best driver on the road and I could do anything, even if I had never done it before. Oh, to be young again! At four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in 1976, I finished work at the rental shop in Christchurch, New Zealand (my weekend job.) I grabbed one of the large flagons of beer that regular customers often dropped off in appreciation of the service and drove over to Sumner at the base of the Cashmere Hills. I was to pick up four other mates from our high school mountaineering club and then drive to Arthurs Pass where we intended to climb the Philistine Buttress. As with any plans they need to be flexible, because when I got to the house in Sumner I was informed that we were going to a party first. No problem! I had the beer and it was only a three hour drive to Arthurs Pass.

Around 11 p.m. I left the party with Rick Burns, Nick Craddock, Al Hay and Roland Logan in my old 1958 Hillman Minx. Does anyone remember these British beauties? Our packs were in the boot and the cassette player rode on the dash, pumping out tunes which we were all singing, yes, in perfect harmony. We left Christchurch on a clear March night. There were hardly any other cars on the road so we unwound the rubber band on the Hillman and exceeded the 50 mph legal speed limit. Passing through Yaldhurst, Darfield and Springfield, we never slowed down as we roared across the flat Canterbury Plains. The long haul up Porters Pass required a few gear changes, which saw the Hillman drop below the speed limit, but then once at the top it was all downhill. Rock on through to the other side! Around 2:30 a.m. we pulled into the carpark beside the Kennedy Hut (the Canterbury Mountaineering Club hut in Arthurs Pass) where we meet two other acquaintances who were just getting up. They were about to start the two hour walk up the highway towards the Otira Valley where they planned to climb the Otira Face on Mount Rolleston. I said there was room in the Hillman for them as the Otira Valley was our destination as well, but we needed a couple of hours rest first.



*A winter view of Mount Philistine and its Buttress in the Upper Otira Valley, New Zealand.
The climbers ascended Route E and descended Route H.*

By 5 a.m. my Hillman arrived at the pull-out beside the highway and seven climbers stumbled out. Dawn was breaking on a cool, crisp morning so there was no need for headlamps as we made our way up the trail. After half an hour we said goodbye to the other two and then the five of us crossed the Otira River and headed over to the base of the buttress. We harnessed up and started up the easy lower slopes. Eventually we decided it was time to rope up: three on one and two on the other. Nick led out on the first rope while Rick led on the second with Roland and me. After two pitches we arrived at the crux. Rick and Nick were both in good form and both wanted to climb the pitch. Nick led off with two ropes. When he got to the top he anchored the rope and then threw it down to the rest of us. To save time Roland, Al and I would use jumars and clogs (not the wooden shoes) to scale the rope while Nick would belay Rick up. It was all working out nicely. Rick arrived at the top along with Roland and Al. I was the last to ascend. I'll be up in five minutes, I figured. However, I had borrowed a pair of clogs from a friend and this was the first time I had ever used them. In fact this was the first time that I had ascended a rope like this. But I had read how to use them so they couldn't be that difficult, right? I clipped the first clog onto the rope and attached it to my waist with a prussik cord. The second clog I attached above the first but with a longer prussik in which I stood with my left foot. Then I untied the rope from the anchor to which I was attached. The top anchor wasn't directly above me, so I pendulumed across the rockface. I

was ready for that but, because of the stretch in the rope, I found myself lower than where I had been standing. Below me was about 200 feet of air.



*A pair of clogs from the sixties
(from the Scottish Mountain Heritage Collection)*

When the rope stopped bouncing I started moving up. Sitting back on the waist prussik, I leaned forward and slid the upper clog as high as I could. Then I stood up in the foot loop. Suddenly the waist prussik went slack and the clog popped off. Oh, shit! I looked down and saw that the clog was still attached to the prussik and hanging at my feet. Phew, it wasn't careening down to the bottom of the buttress. Then I realised that I wasn't firmly attached to the rope. I was just standing with my left foot in a wobbly prussik attached to the rope by another treacherous clog. All of a sudden the hold I had on the rope became a death grip. I pulled the rope in to my chest and hugged it like a long lost friend. Had I tied a knot in the end so that I wouldn't slide off? Could the others pull me up?

Once I felt like I was safe and not going to fall off (yet) I reached down carefully and pulled the clog back up. I hooked it onto the rope – and maybe let out a little sigh – but I still had to make sure that it wasn't going to pop off again. I unhooked a couple of carabiners off my harness and clipped them through any

holes in the clog that they would fit through. I did the same with the other clog. That looked like it should do the trick. MacGyver eat your heart out!

Anyway, I am here to say that it worked fine for the rest of the ascent. We topped out on Philistine Buttress and then made our way back down to my Hillman. We began our journey back to Christchurch – a journey indeed because about thirty miles down the road my Hillman died and it wouldn't start again. There was a hole in the fuel pump filter and I didn't have any duct tape (sorry MacGyver.) A few minutes later an old Series One Land Rover pulled over and asked if we needed a hand. When I described our predicament he pulled a tow rope out of the back and hooked it to the front of my Hillman. For the next seventy miles he towed me with a 15-foot length of rope. My eyes were glued to his brake lights as we descended Porters Pass (just as well I didn't have a brake line leak.) Later that evening we pulled up in front of home, unhooked the rope and then the Land Rover drove away. I guess I had two close calls on that long ago outing. If either the climb or the drive had gone bad, I might not have made it to school the next day.



*Lindsay Elms, age 17, and his 1958 Hillman
April Fool*

What if an elk falls through the roof?

Geoff Bennett

May 2013

My wife, Wendy, sometimes asks me, "Did you pick that story out of Thin Air?" Well, yes, I really did this time.

One of the things that separate Canadians from most sensible people is a willingness to sleep in the snow (or to make love in a canoe, but that's a different story.) Not only Canadians, of course, but mountaineers in general think nothing of spending a long night in a snowbank. We've all done it. Doug Scott and Dougal Haston set the high altitude record in 1975 by sheltering in a snow cave at 8760m on Everest.

There are many different ways to survive a night in the snow. A foam pad and a very good sleeping bag will suffice in good weather. On one memorable January morning in the Rockies I watched three species of chickadees pick breakfast crumbs off my bag. A tent is safe and easy, but can be cold and noisy in a high wind. An igloo is superb when constructed by an experienced person, preferably an Inuit trapper. However, in the hands of amateurs, such as myself and two of my buddies on the Yoho Glacier, it can take all day and still be cold and drafty. A quinzee requires little skill but lots of labour, and can be cold without a sleeping platform. It can also be dangerous if it collapses. In my experience the king of shelters is the snow cave. Properly dug, a snow cave is warm, bright, cozy and provides a safe haven for several days.

Six of us once dug an elaborate snow cave in the Sunshine Meadows above Banff. We stripped down to waterproof pants, overmitts and jackets and took turns digging furiously into the snowbank. Two hours later we had created a central vestibule tall enough to stand in, with three separate grottoes radiating outward from the entrance. Using a ski pole, we poked ventilation shafts into the roof. Shelves held space for small items. Candles flickered from niches in the walls. While I prepared dinner, my five buddies sat upright in their sleeping bags, their backs comfortably resting against the walls. Outside the cave the wind howled and the mercury dropped to -33C but inside the temperature hovered near zero and we heard nothing but our own voices.

I set up three stoves on the platform at waist height while I stood in front of them in the vestibule. Two stoves melted snow while the third cooked dinner. The scene was heartwarming – people chatting and reading by candlelight while the stoves roared and the water boiled. We had cooked inside caves several times in the past but only with a single stove. Suddenly the lights went out, the stoves hissed to a stop and the burners glowed red in the dark. All six of us hollered and punched holes in the roof with our fists. When the hubbub settled down, we relit one candle and I ran the stoves in the frigid darkness outside.

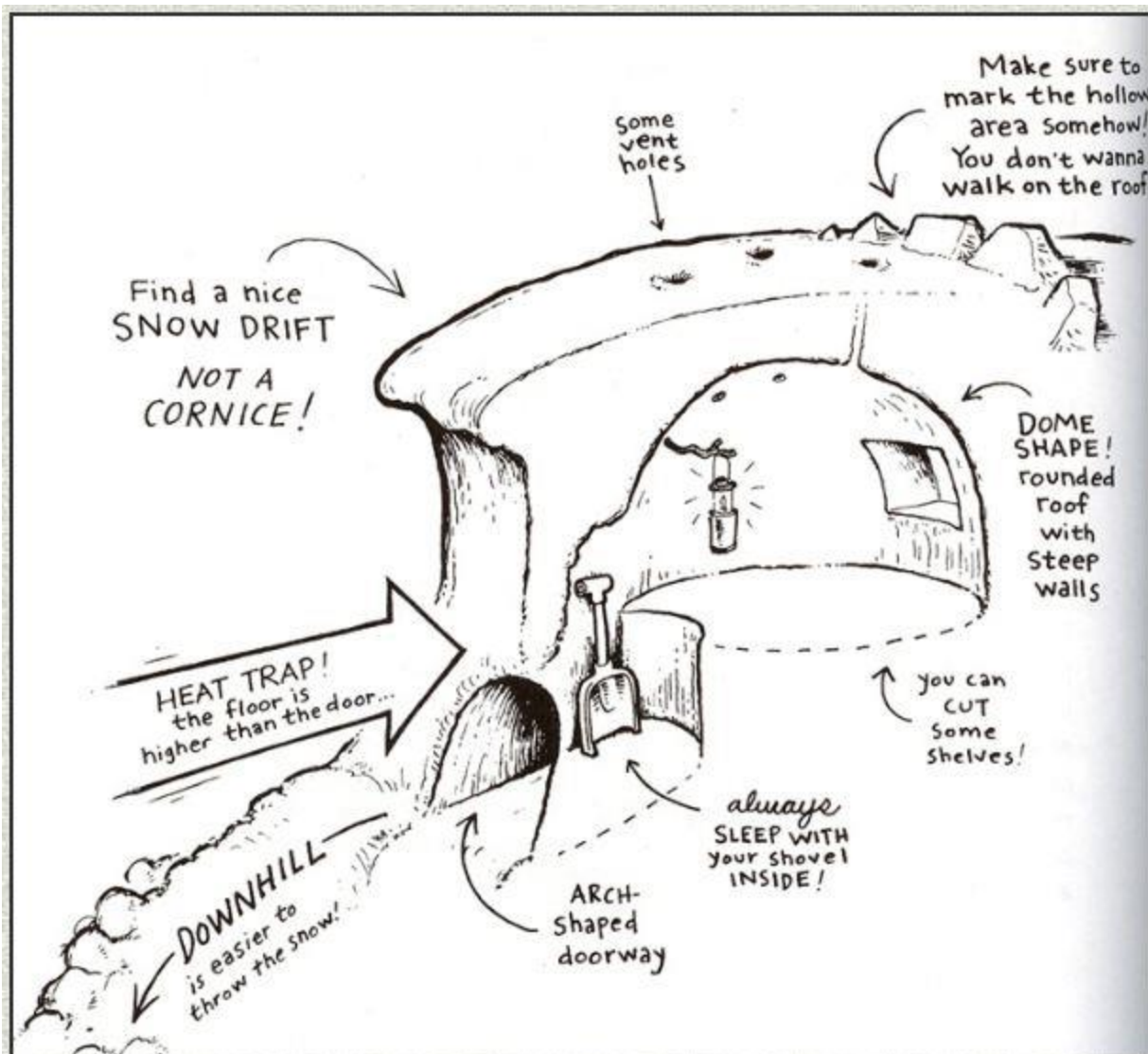
Though chastened, we survived the evening quite comfortably. Others have not been so lucky. Snow caves carry the ever present danger of asphyxiation, not only from the carbon monoxide (CO) produced by burning, but from our own exhaled carbon dioxide (CO₂). CO is a well-known and insidious killer, taking its victims in their sleep. On the other hand we tend to think of CO₂ as relatively harmless. Most of us would probably wake up if we had difficulty breathing but this is not necessarily the case. In the 1986 African Lake Nyos disaster, 1700 people suffocated when a large cloud of CO₂ rolled through their village at night. Many died in their beds. In 2000 four lost Australian snowboarders were found lying in their sleeping bags in a snow cave. Their deaths were attributed to asphyxiation, certainly from CO and

perhaps also from CO₂. Heavy snowfall had sealed off the entrance and ventilation shafts. They had used a stove inside the cave. This situation can also occur in a tent, if the base of the fly is covered by snow.

Six years ago, two experienced back country skiers (ACC hut custodians in fact) died in a snow cave in Yoho. Their cave apparently collapsed, perhaps owing to heavy snowfall. The weight of a few feet of packed snow is a serious matter, as anyone who has been caught in an avalanche can attest. An American Boy Scout wrote an article recently about a quinzee that he and his buddies built. In their enthusiasm they piled up a huge mountain of snow and then started digging before it had time to settle. The roof collapsed on two boys and instantly turned to "cement." They nearly suffocated in the few minutes it took to dig them out.

My two brothers and I once dug a spacious snow cave on the flank of the Saskatchewan Glacier. Spring had sprung and the snow was getting soft. The three of us lay side by side with my brother Robb in the middle. Rick and I watched, at first with some hilarity then with growing concern, as the roof sagged in the middle and started dripping on Robb. He gamely scraped away at the soggy ceiling all night long and vowed, somewhat profanely, never to go winter camping with us again.

And finally, you might ask, what do elk have to do with snow caves? A young couple and I were enjoying a weekend of back-country skiing near Banff. She had never slept in a snow cave before and was anticipating the claustrophobic experience with some trepidation. They had their own cozy little cubbyhole and I had mine. We enjoyed wine and a candlelit dinner (cooked quite safely on a single stove.) As I was cleaning up, I noticed that all was not well in the honeymoon suite. In fact there were tears. The young gentleman tried to console her and asked ever so nicely, "What's the matter?" Catatonic with a whole plague of nameless fears, she refused to utter a word. Finally the words tumbled out of her in a teary flood, "What if an elk falls through the roof?" Well, we clever fellows laughed and laughed until we caught the evil look in her eye. The tears had stopped and she was ready to kill. Like a coward, I jumped into my bag and left the two of them to sort it out. I fell asleep to the sweet sound of abject male apology.



From Allen and Mike's Really Cool Backcountry Ski Book, illustrated by Mike Clelland

Predators
Geoff Bennett
June 2013

As mentioned in an earlier article, Canadians distinguish themselves from most sensible people by a willingness to sleep in the snow and make love in a canoe, eh? In addition, any self-respecting Canadian can trot out one bear story after another. Think Andy Russell and his son Charlie. And not only Canadians, of course, but also our American neighbours along the border, especially authors like Stephen Herrero who now live in our Great White North. Our Alpine Club friends who hail from other faraway places (Britain, Europe, New Zealand, South Africa, Japan...) have probably seen more bears than most native-born Canadians.

Even my sweet little 96-year-old war bride mother-in-law from Dursley in the Cotswolds has a bear story. When she was young, the only “bears” she saw were the busbies on Guardsmen in front of Buckingham Palace. In the late seventies Joan was staying in a cabin on Tunnel Mountain in Banff with her daughter Wendy and our first newborn. The two ladies needed a much larger teapot than the one that came with the cabin, which is not a big surprise if you know them. So Joan walked out of the cabin in a lovely dress with the tiny teapot in hand and strode purposefully towards the manager’s office. Rounding a corner at full mother-in-law speed she ran smack into a black bear. “Pardon me,” she said and turned around smartly. The bear sized up his tiny fearless opponent and ran off in the other direction.

My favourite grizzly story comes from our 2007 ACC summer camp in Little Yoho Valley. We had hired local porters to bring in extra food and supplies. All went according to plan, sort of, but by sunset on the first day we were still missing a couple of packs. Late at night the door of the hut banged open and in walked Neil the porter, exhausted, with the two packs on his back. Earlier in the day he was resupplying a camp in the Kananaskis. To save time, the wiry young guy rode uphill on his mountain bike, loaded down with gear. On his way back, he fairly flew down the wide trail but ran into sharp rocks and blew out both tires. Undaunted, he picked up his bike and held it over his head, crosswise, with the wheels on either side. He ran down the trail as fast as he could, anxious to pick up our gear and pack it up the long trail to Yoho. You guessed it – on a blind corner he ran straight into a mother grizzly and two cubs. He screeched to a halt and stood there stock still, with the wheels slowly spinning on either side of his head. The bear looked as shocked as he did but charged him anyway. He stood his ground and winced, waiting for the blow. She stopped and roared at this strange apparition, then turned around and lumbered away with her cubs. Neil ran down the trail, drove to Yoho, picked up our gear and hiked several hours in the dark up to our hut. After listening in awe to his story, we fed him and gave him a bed for the night.

So never mind the bear spray; in bear country it obviously helps to carry either a bike or a teapot. Garry Clarke, a glaciology professor at UBC when I was a student, had none of these with him one day in the Yukon. He and a friend were hiking up a wide alpine valley when they spotted a grizzly about a mile away. The wind was blowing towards the bear, which stood up to have a better look at the source of the strange scent. Bears have poor eyesight, so he started walking closer to the two men, then began loping, then broke into a full gallop. Garry’s friend crouched behind a two-foot high willow bush but Garry figured there was nothing to do but stand there. The bear was huge; it was roaring, foam flying from its mouth, running as fast as a race horse straight towards him. At the last possible second it brushed past Garry and continued pell-mell down the valley. Phew!

Bears can be dangerous creatures and cougars even more so. When I was 12 years old I saw one prowling just outside my lean-to at night. Unforgettable. However, the shine is off this magnificent predator ever since one of Victoria's finest, Graham Maddocks, handcuffed a cougar in the Empress Hotel parking lot. I'll let him tell the story but you can see photos of the "perp" in the hotel lobby.

Moose are even worse, and not just when they're flying through your windshield in the fog. During one memorable canoe trip through Algonquin, we saw 23 moose and only 5 other people. Some of them were really cranky, the moose especially. Years ago when I was in the army, I learned the military trade from a young infantry lieutenant who was missing the left side of his face. He had been driving a pickup truck through the bush when a bull moose charged him from the driver's side. Both the moose and the lieutenant survived, just barely. He was a scary sight in my slit trench at night, with the light of the moon on his face. I'm glad he was on my side.

But the title of Canada's Most Ferocious Predator goes to the wolverine, right?



Tony Vaughn and I were lucky that day in 2002 on the top of Comox Glacier when we spotted fresh wolverine tracks, like those of a big dog but with five claws on all four feet and too small for a bear. A few minutes earlier and we might have been torn to shreds, eh? Actually, this track sighting is especially galling because Vancouver Island biologists, in their wisdom, never went looking and still don't believe us. It might have been the last one on the island.

Back in the seventies I met a wolverine at Skoki in a remote valley east of Lake Louise. My brother had been backpacking in the area a few weeks earlier and told me that his tent and food supply had been totally trashed. Intrigued, I went in for a few days with my brother-in-law Richard. We camped in a wide treeless valley and piled rocks over our food bag. That evening, as we cooked dinner over the stove, we saw the wolverine approaching our tent about fifty yards away. I called over to him and told him there was nothing inside, so please don't bother ripping the door apart. He circled the tent a few times and appeared to agree. Then he sauntered towards us. I checked quickly for any food lying around – only the soup bowls that we were holding in our hands. Canada's Most Ferocious Predator came right up to us, like a dog begging at the dining table. I swear he sat on his haunches and smiled. If not, it certainly felt that way. He sniffed our bowls. I said, "no beg," and told him there was nothing else. Then he shrugged and wandered off. Richard and I smiled and finished our soup.



Photos from the internet (in order: badassoftheweek.com, rabidwolverine7.tripod.com, blog.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com).

Near Death
Gil Parker
October 2013

We've all heard the old cliché, "My life flashed before my eyes," but most of us have never experienced such a mind-altering event. As Gil Parker writes in this reprise of a 2008 article, our usual response during an accident is calm resignation and a focused will to survive. The shock comes later.

I have had a few experiences of what might be called near-death, or what I am sure my brain thought was near-death. The most recent was only marginally so – an avalanche on Mount Klitsa. I was badly frightened but not out of control. We saw the avalanche coming very fast. Hoping to evade the main path I took a couple of steps to the right, away from the rest of the group, but quickly realized that I wasn't going to make it. I dropped down fast, dug in my ice axe and pushed my head down in the snow. I felt the main flow coming over me, along with Rudy who landed on my back and hung on. Then it was past. Three others had been plucked off by the avalanche, two of whom made the fastest trip down a mountain in their lives. They rode a wet snow plug down a twisting runnel – about three hundred metres in less than a minute.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, although a bit of minor patch up work was needed. The snow conditions prompted a hasty retreat from the mountain. The trip home was punctuated with nervous laughter as we all realized how lucky we had been. I couldn't help but remember previous encounters which had been more serious for me.

In Kootenay National Park, while skiing with two friends, I decided to cross a gully to avoid a huge detour from our route to a summit. Halfway across, I knew that it was a mistake. The whole gully began moving and there was no chance to ski out of it. I don't recall any existential feelings except to "swim, Gil, and keep your head up," which I was able to do. I don't even know if I thought that death was imminent. Fortunately, in a few seconds the whole mass stopped. I had lost a ski pole but both skis were still attached (thanks to climbing bindings) and my legs had been twisted in several unusual directions. As the gully was now quite safe, my friends dug me out. The avalanche had stopped about fifty metres from a cliff, above a drop of several hundred metres to the valley below.

We completed the summit objective of our climb, although I had to use a cut willow for a ski pole. I was somewhat chastened by our decision to cross the gully, having neglected the convex shape several hundred feet above. We later revelled in the wonderful powder ski back to the cabin but I relived that avalanche often in later weeks.

In the Stikine, east of Petersburg, Alaska, we were trying to climb Mount Noel, a first ascent of a remote peak in the general area of the Devil's Thumb. After several attempts, we were traversing a wide snow slope to avoid the loose snow that was coming off the south-facing, sun-warmed face. I was leading our roped party through a runnel when I was hit by a snow and ice avalanche that, despite my helmet, knocked me unconscious. I pulled the other three climbers down with me, one after the other until we were all flying down the forty-five degree slope.

I regained full consciousness in mid-fall and grabbed the ice axe that was still attached to my wrist. I made several successive arrests until finally I stopped and held the next climber. The third, Roger Neave, had fallen into a bergschrund, but this was lucky because he held the fourth, Rafe Hutchinson, who had shot over the gap. He stopped just a few metres before a serious cliff above a deep drop to the valley.

During our five hundred metre descent I recall neither a “zone of peace” nor racing thoughts, related or unrelated to my expected abrupt end. It was merely, “Keep your crampons clear of the ice and get the axe in this time.” After digging ourselves out, we climbed several hours to the ridge to avoid the snow runnels. Rafe was still focused on climbing the summit but I had had enough of that mountain and wanted to get off. That feeling grew stronger as we down-climbed extremely fractured rock and spent the night on a very cold ledge bivouac. When we skied on the sun-cupped glacier out to our helicopter pickup point I worried that I had been responsible for the accident. None of the others shared this view because the route choice had been a joint responsibility. Nevertheless, I was the least experienced of our foursome and was only leading to relieve others of trail-breaking in the loose snow. Whatever the cause, I redeemed myself in their eyes by arresting the fall.

After such emotional and fearful events, I believe that the mind tries to turn them into a logical story. In fact, I believe that there is a tendency to romanticize one’s imminent demise. Perhaps it is somewhat like remembering dreams. You wake up, recalling glimpses of an event, and the mind quickly fills in a few details. Sometimes they are not very logical but the excerpts are strung together into what might be called a story.

Some adventurers may indeed have had quasi-religious, quasi-spiritual experiences. But I wonder if their minds are trying to fill in the gaps, to explain how they survived situations that they never expected to survive, or to explain their actions to a sceptical audience.



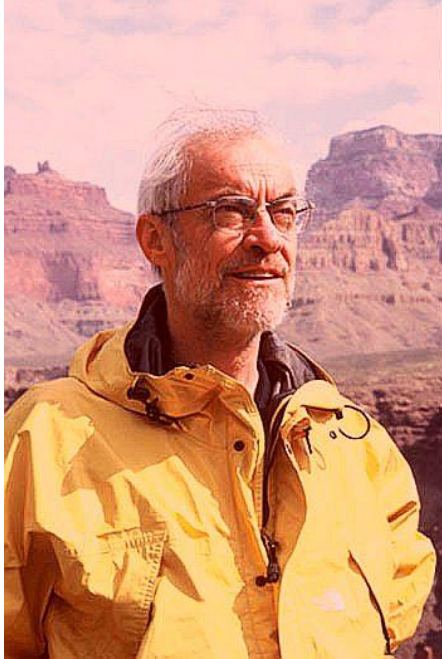
Gil Parker on Mount Arrowsmith 1972



John Simpson, Bill Feyrer, Gil Parker and Rick Eppler on Mount Baker 1975



Rafe Hutchinson and Roger Neave on the ridge of Mount Noel after the avalanche, eating a late lunch and deciding to turn around. They later bivouacked on a freezing ledge. Photo by Gil Parker.



Gil Parker in the Grand Canyon ca. 1998

A Harrowing Descent in the Dolomites Sassolungo, August 4, 1971

**Reinhard Illner
June 2019**

It was late afternoon when Werner and I descended the "via normale," the easy but long and complicated standard route to and from the top of Sassolungo, or the Langkofel in German. Both names mean the "long rock," an appropriate name for this enormous limestone formation which rises like a huge castle out of the meadows of the Seiser Alm in the Italian Dolomites. It reaches a height of 3,181 meters and dominates the Groedner Valley with its 1,100-meter-tall north pillar. We climbed this pillar via the classic north face route, which leads to the top of the pillar to a place called "Pichl's" wait. From there we followed a series of faces and chimneys to the summit. Much of it is easy, but there are steep, even vertical, pitches up to 5.6 which require careful belaying and route finding. The lower half of the route is exposed to rockfall, so speed and good orientation are important. We were young and fit, all went well and we reached the summit at about 1 pm after seven hours of climbing. The weather held well and we had a good summit rest.

The descent from this mountain is not trivial; parties often get caught in thunder and lightning near the top. For these reasons the Italian climbing community erected a bivouac shelter with an aluminum skin a bit below and east of the summit. It is very easy to find and, as we sat in front of it, we contemplated just staying the night. But youthful energy prevailed: we had at least six hours of daylight, the weather looked OK and we knew we could make it to the scree below the rock faces in less than four hours.

The Langkofel is the largest of a series of peaks lined up in the shape of a horseshoe opening to the west. The northern half of the horseshoe is mostly occupied by Langkofel itself, while the other half is taken by the Fuenffingerspitze (five summits like the fingers of a hand,) the Grohmannspitze, the Zahnkofel and the Plattkofel. The latter three are hiking targets, although their steep northwesterly sides offer lots of climbing challenges. The easy way up and down Langkofel starts near the central inside of the horseshoe, just below the col separating Fuenffingerspitze from Langkofel. There is a hut in this col and in the daytime one can ride a chairlift from the Sella Road to this place. On the inside of the horseshoe the Langkofel is a dazzling labyrinth of towers, gullies, faces, chimneys and pillars with rock of variable quality. The time from bottom to top along this "via normale" is listed as about 5 hours up and 3-4 hours down, assuming that one does not lose the way. And that's a big "if."

We found the way down with little effort. The rating is no more than class 4 and we decided to simul-climb. We were good climbers, at the top of our game. We felt that the most important thing was not to get caught in darkness while we were still on rock. But simul-climbing on a short rope means, "Don't fall." If there is a risk of falling one must belay from an anchor. It requires good judgement and constant re-evaluation of the risk. Werner and I were confident that we wouldn't fall, so we descended in tandem, the one below scouting the route and down-climbing alertly, the other following above at

about 10-15 meters of rope distance.

We made good progress. I remember that at one point Werner said, "I'll never again complain about polluters." Indeed, the candy wrappers, cigarette stubs and cigarette packs that we found at random intervals proved that we were following a well-traveled route. The rock was also lighter and a different shade along the route.

At about 5 pm we found ourselves no more than 200 vertical meters above the scree. We noticed that there had been no trash for a while and that the rock colour was a primordial grey. We were off route, but it did not seem to matter much. The terrain was steep but not vertical; there were hand- and footholds everywhere and all we had to do was descend straight down to reach the scree. No more than half an hour.

I was in the lead and down-climbed a short face when, for a moment, it steepened slightly. I took a big step onto a small platform below, placed a foot on it, held on, placed the other foot, put my weight on it -- and then the whole platform collapsed and crashed, taking me down with it. It happened so fast that I had no time to hang on or even to think, but a moment later I found myself hanging from the rope. Werner shouted from above, "I've got you!" He held that fall and saved our lives by happening to stand on solid ground at that very moment and reacting instantly, although without an anchored belay. What I had seen as a little platform was in fact the top of a rotten pinnacle, not discernible from the top, which collapsed as soon as I put my weight on it.

I couldn't feel my right arm and feared it was broken. However, after a couple of minutes the feeling returned. I must have hit my right elbow during the fall but the arm was intact and otherwise I had just a few bruises and scratches. I found a safe stance and, with infinite care, we descended to the scree.

We did not have the energy to climb up to the col at the eastern edge of Langkofel. It would have meant hiking uphill 200 meters. Instead, we walked out of the horseshoe through the western opening and circumnavigated the Langkofel to get back to our tent. We ran out of daylight and into a thunderstorm, but we were alive and in essence unbroken when we got to the tent, bruised and exhausted, in the middle of the night. The next day, having slept in, we broke camp and went to Lake Garda.

Days later, we interrupted our climbing adventures and recuperated a while on the shore of Lake Garda. Werner said, "You know there, on Langkofel? We had incredible luck!" And right he was -- it was incredible, undeserved, boundless luck! We felt that our innocent youthful spirits went down that rotten face with the collapsed pinnacle but, fortunately, we lived.

After a few days on the beach our mojo came back and we spent another ten days climbing in the Brenta group. That summer climbing vacation with my friend Werner was one of my most successful trips ever. In three weeks of climbing, we did nine major rock climbs, three on the scale of Langkofel. But without a lot of luck, we would not have come home.



Sassolungo on the left with its imposing north pillar

**Mountain Mishaps on Vancouver Island
And some Advice**

**Janelle Curtis with Lindsay Elms
November 2019**

Accidents can happen to anyone in the backcountry, even to those who have a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience. Fortunately, our mountaineering community here on Vancouver Island is closely connected. We celebrate each other's successes (e.g. The Charles Turner Vancouver Island 6000'ers Award), learn from each other's experiences (see the Close Calls Collection on ACCVI's website), and support others when a helping hand is needed.

This year, Lindsay Elms and I gave joint slide shows for the ACCVI and Island Mountain Ramblers to let fellow mountaineers know more about the circumstances of accidents that affected us in the mountains during the past few years. We also shared some advice based on our experiences. During our slide shows, we described the objectives, climbs, accidents, injuries, use of satellite communication devices, and the valiant efforts of the Search and Rescue teams that helped us during those fateful days.

The accidents that affected us differed in many ways. My partner, Rowan Laver, and I were on our way to Mount Mitchell on 2 July 2016. On the ridge between Augerpoint Mountain and Mount Mitchell, I fell fifteen or twenty metres off a cliff and then tumbled about eighty metres on steep scree. My fall resulted in several fractures, including a broken ankle, two broken knees, and a broken hand. I also sustained a severe head injury which caused me to be in a coma for a few weeks. By coincidence, Lindsay and his partner, Val Wootton, were on the summit of Mount Mitchell and watched the helicopters involved in my rescue. Almost a year later, on 29 June 2017, Lindsay, Val, and her daughter, Caitlin, were climbing The Triplets and The Pitchfork in the Haihte Range. Not far below the summit of The Pitchfork, Val broke her femur near her hip joint and fractured her L3 vertebra after a large chunk of snow randomly landed on her back and caused her to slip on the smooth rock and jam her leg between the rock and the overlying glacier.

Fortunately, everyone involved in those two mountain mishaps were well equipped for day trips on 4th and 5th class terrain including bringing the "Ten Essentials", using climbing gear, and having emergency satellite communication devices to initiate rescues.

After my accident around 9:30 a.m., Rowan deployed his inReach Satellite Communicator and my SPOT Gen3 GPS Messenger. Rowan was able to text with his emergency contact and the RCMP about the nature of our emergency and my rescue. A year later, Lindsay and Val deployed their SPOT beacon right after Val's accident, around 2:30 p.m.

Rowan and I were at the hospital in Comox within a few hours of my accident and then I was flown by BC Air Ambulance to the Victoria General Hospital around 3:30 p.m, six hours after accident. Unfortunately, Val's rescue took approximately eleven hours. Contact at the accident site was initially made by a RCMP helicopter at 7:45 p.m. Then a Campbell River Search and Rescue helicopter arrived an hour later. Finally, a nighttime lift by Comox's 442 Squadron brought Val safely out of the mountains.

Based on our collective experiences, here are a few nuggets of advice that Lindsay and I shared during our joint slide shows:

Leave a detailed trip plan, carry the "Ten Essentials", and expect the unexpected.

Use protective gear in 4th class terrain, even when there aren't overhead hazards. I wouldn't be here today if I wasn't wearing my helmet when I slipped on the way to Mount Mitchell.

Carry a satellite emergency beacon, ideally one that allows for two-way communication. Rowan was providing details to the RCMP and Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue team about my injuries within thirty minutes of my accident. By contrast, my SPOT device did not support two-way communication. So, my emergency contact was frantic with worry and didn't find out what happened until Rowan called her about seven hours later. Lindsay and Val's SPOT device eventually triggered a rescue for Val but because it did not allow two-way communication either, they were uncertain whether a rescue had been initiated and were unable to communicate with the outside world about the nature of their emergency.

If your satellite beacon does not support two-way communication (e.g. with SPOT or SPOT Gen3), dedicate a pre-set message to one or more contacts as an emergency message. Your preset message should inform them that there has been a serious emergency and ask them to call 911. Your device will send them the coordinates of where you are. Your contact(s) won't know the details of the emergency, but make sure that they have your trip plan and understand the importance of following up with 911 when they receive your pre-set message. The inReach also allows you to pre-set messages so that you can be a bit quicker to send one out.

With a satellite beacon that supports two-way communication, be prepared to give details about the "three Ps and a D": position, problem, people, and description.

Send short bursts of text (e.g. name, age, scenario, injuries).

Only use official names of features or mountains; avoid using local names.

Provide details when you register your device and to your emergency contact(s), including information about allergies, medical condition(s), age, and experience.

As Barry Hansen noted after one of our slide shows: “We are enriched as a community when we share our stories with each other.” It is our hope that sharing our stories can inspire others to be more prepared for the unexpected. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or comments about this. And enjoy your time out there in the mountains!



Wearing my helmet on the ridge leading to Augerpoint Mountain. Photo by Rowan Laver.



The tracking data from Rowan's inReach Satellite Communicator. This shows the tracks to where I slipped between Augerpoint Mountain and Mount Mitchell. Red shows the location of tracking data and messages after Rowan pressed the SOS button and where we camped the night before. After my rescue, the Comox Valley Ground Search and Rescue team kindly helped Rowan pack up our tent and other gear (hence the red dots where we camped). Also shown are tracks from some of our previous trips, including hikes to Marble Meadows, and to Syd Watts and Sid William Peaks.



Val and Caitlin on the summit of The Triplets in the Haihte Range. Photo by Lindsay Elms.



Lindsay (lower down in the photo between the rock wall and glacier) close to the site of Val's accident on the way back from summiting The Pitchfork. Photo by Caitlin O'Neill.

**A long traverse in Strathcona Park
Where many things go wrong**

**Jes Scott
August 2018**

We set out to travel 80km from Mt. Washington to Flower Ridge over eight days. Our goal was to climb eight of Strathcona Park's tallest and most remote mountains. This included Harmston, one of the Island Qualifiers.

I wanted a trip that was physically demanding but less scary than my usual mountaineering trips. COVID stress left me feeling so drained. I just didn't have the same appetite for adrenaline that I usually do.

But endurance events were still very appealing. I was looking forward to working through some stress by spending some long days carrying a heavy pack....

Read the rest of the article on Jes Scott's blog:

<https://webelongoutside.com/2020/08/a-long-traverse-in-strathcona-park-where-many-things-go-wrong/>