The Kindness of Strangers

How generous hikers and search and rescue volunteers rescued me

Ralph Radford

Search and Rescue volunteers prepare for a search in Snohomish County. An intricate network of volunteers helps find and rescue hikers each season.

By Michele Coad

A handsome, wiry man bent over my leg, carefully preparing to splint my ankle. "On a scale of one to ten, how much does it hurt?" he said. It didn't hurt so much that I couldn't ponder my predicament. I was on my back a minute down from the top of Tiger Mountain, surrounded by more than 15 rescuers and their equipment. It was a sunny April day, but I had been immobile for almost three hours before help arrived. I'd been put in a bivy sack and two large parkas had been draped over me, and even then I was chilled. My ankle ached, but as to how I felt?

Well, I felt ridiculous.

I had climbed this mountain at least a thousand times over the years and was chagrined that I'd gotten injured. I'd taken a quick hike with my dog up the old Tiger 3 Trail. It was sunny, and the trail was good. Then, whoops! On the descent, my right foot shot forward and my left ankle twisted when I went down. Looking back at my left foot, I thought, "The angle of that foot doesn't look good." It wasn't, and when I tried to stand, it hurt considerably.

After resting a few moments, I got determined. I may have slipped and hurt myself, but, by god, I was going to make it down on my own. Two splendid women, strangers to me, Kathie and Liz, had made it to the summit and were descending when they found me trying to muster myself down the mountain with my hiking stick. They were going to call 911, but I protested. In hindsight, it was foolish to keep descending, because even when I was loaned another hiking stick, my progress remained painful and pathetic.

After watching me inch my way along, Liz declared she was calling 911. "By the time you make it down this mountain," she insisted, "you'll be hypothermic and your ankle will be ground to smithereens!" I immediately regretted weighing ten pounds too much and fantasized about being carried down the mountain by a couple of strong guys.

Two men who'd been climbing up, Paul and Dave, along with Liz and Kathie, decided to stay with me until the rescue was accomplished. When we e-mailed each other after the rescue, I put them in an e-mail group I labeled "Hiker Angels," because that is what they were. I could just have easily named the group "Hiker Marines." *Semper Fidelis!*

Most of us—the men, the women, and I—had taken wilderness first aid, so once 911 was called, we searched our bags for emergency stuff. And we were embarrassed by our lack of preparedness—except for Paul. I had a dry shirt and a vest and a compact, thin space blanket. Kathie had an Ace bandage on her ankle, which she kindly took off and gave to me. None of us even had even an aspirin that we could see. But Paul, a diligent Mountaineer, was carrying a bivy sack and a first aid kit with a splint and a packet of mystery pills. So we now had a splint and a wrap. But identifying the pills remained a problem. Were they for pain, anti-diarrhea, or were they salt tablets? Initially Paul could read a pill name which none of us knew, and I wasn't hurting enough to take something unidentified. None of our middle-aged eyes could read the tiny print without reading glasses, but eventually after much squinting, the best eyes deciphered "Ibuprofen." I swallowed them.

For added comedic distraction, my sole hiking buddy for the day, a Belgian Shepherd named Nalli, was becoming

anxious about my prone position. From his sheep-herding perspective, the rest of the flock, while upright, was not moving either, which only increased his vigilance. Nalli's mantra is when in doubt, get things moving. Accordingly, he tried to nip my hiker angels and anyone else who came close. Fearing a bite in addition to my break, I crawled over to him, unleashed him from his tree, and hugged him for the duration of the wait.

And wait we did. I started to get quite chilled, even though I had the dry shirt and vest, so the Hiker Angels put me in Paul's bivy sack and piled on their parkas. Liz, like a British explorer in an old Mount Everest documentary, smoked cigarettes as we got to know one another. The men—Paul and Dave—had been buddies since grade school. Kathie and Liz were friends and long-time hiking companions.

We were uncertain that the rescue team knew the proper trail, so Paul took a two-and-a-half mile run down the mountain to guide them. He found them organizing in the parking lot and ran back up the mountain to tell us they would be up shortly. He'd come for a workout on the mountain, but hadn't expected it would be so rigorous!

Kathie and Liz took the nippy Nalli a safe distance away when the rescuers arrived, and the team quickly went to work organizing the equipment and me. It had been three hours since we had called 911, so I had had plenty of time to think about how my ankle felt.

"About a half point now."

"You mean five?"

"No, point five, but if you hit it, it'll be a good nine or ten.

"Hmm, half a point, I've never had anyone say that before."

King County has the largest volunteer rescue organization west of the Mississippi. It's made up of nine different groups, each a separate entity, but all under the umbrella of King County Search and Rescue Association. The nine units, though separate, function as one large and coordinated rescue enterprise that provides rescue services in King and other counties across Washington. KCSARA is the coordinating body for the search and rescue units. It is also the financial arm which solicits donations and distributes those funds to the rescue groups, which also do their own fundraising. In other words, rescue is completely staffed and funded by volunteers.

The rescue community exceeds 600 members, all on pagers, and all volunteers. That sizeable force, trained in wilderness first aid and rescue techniques, had its start in 1936. A famous mountaineer of the time, Delmar Fadden, made a winter solo ascent of the Emmons glacier on Mount Rainier, only to die on the descent. Ome Daiber, a well-known local climber, was called to assist in the search, and Ome gathered together climbers he knew. Ome spotted the deceased climber from inside a fixed wing airplane. The body was eventually recovered and after that well-known success Ome was the go-to guy whenever there was need for an alpine search and rescue.

Ome's list of climbers he could count on for a rescue was expanded after World War II. That list became the core of Mountain Rescue Council (MRC), formed in 1948, and now known as Seattle Mountain Rescue (SMR).

In 1954, there were more rescues than MRC could handle. Some of these same MRC mountaineers with scouting backgrounds helped to form Explorer Search and Rescue (ESAR). Originally open only to male scouts, the split between men and women now serving in ESAR is about 60/40 and scouts are in the minority. ESAR members' ages range from 14 to 80—and the older ones are sometimes the fastest. In a cooperative venture, a couple of 70-year old SAR members raced up Mount Si and successfully found several teenagers reported missing after they went to see a lunar eclipse.

There are seven other outdoor rescue groups in King County, each created to fill a special need. There are rescue groups with horse, dog, tracker, swift water rescue, transportation, ski and special operation expertise. When a

Seattle Mountain Rescue

SAR rescuers prepare to take a victim downhill on McClelland Butte. Even evacuating a hiker with a broken ankle on Tiger Mountain can involve 24 volunteers or more.

911 call is dispatched, the King County Sheriff contacts appropriate operational units. Sheriff's deputies direct all rescues. The operational leaders send out pages to the volunteers with specific location information. The 4x4 unit is always along to provide transportation and base camp control. There had been no 911 rescue calls in King County after January and before my April accident, which conveniently happened during an ESAR training weekend. There were many pent-up and eager volunteers who happily skipped out on their crime scene certification training to come save me! Tracie Griego, who is the Training Director for KCSARA, told me they were excited when they got the page. Oh great. Their first rescue of the season was me, a designation I could have done without.

For most hikers, it's ESAR to the rescue, though there are often members from SMR and other rescue groups involved. ESAR today has an extensive training program, and all members must be certified in first aid, helicopter safety and crime scene awareness. ESAR has about 30 to 40 missions each year, mostly in King County, but they also travel to other counties when needed. There are many calls to the Denny Creek and Melakwa Lake area, which is the most difficult non-technical search area for rescuers because of weather, terrain and the difficulty of radio communication.

The wiry guy who was quizzing me about my pain and calling the shots was also a firefighter from Tacoma. He supervised putting together the litter, which had been carried up in two pieces. Once it was locked together, he saddled a big wheel under the litter's middle, a weird device to make the ride smoother for the injured person. The rescuers put a ground pad and two sleeping bags in the litter, and I sat gingerly upon it. Another sleeping bag was put atop me, and then I was burritoed in a tarp so no moisture could get to me. I was finally beginning to feel warm.

After all that, the fireman strapped me onto the litter. The thing about a litter is that the subject can slip off the litter going down a steep slope, so he strapped both my body and my good foot, bracing it so I would not slide.

But, whoa, wait a minute. The thing about being strapped into a litter is that although I couldn't slide off, I would be stuck in it if my speed outran the rescuers and set off like an uncontrolled toboggan. They'd thought of that. The brakes were provided by two people holding long tag lines tied to the back of the litter.

So, for a middle-aged, 5'6" woman, I had six hearty souls, men and women, taking me down. There were four ESAR people carrying the litter: one on each side, one on the end to balance me, and one at the head to direct. Then, bringing up the rear were two tag-line people to control the speed, and they were followed by other rescuers. It still wasn't easy. The ground was uneven, the trees numerous, and it was exhausting work. Recuers who became tired would rotate off the litter every ten minutes or so. I can't say it was a smooth ride, but the rescuers were incredibly careful to minimize the lurches during the trip.

You can never pack enough warm things, even if it's a sunny day. I was on a ground mat, had on dry clothes, but was still very chilled on a 58-degree day.

It was odd (but lovely, too) descending the mountain only looking up at the sky and branches, with an occasional tilt downwards or sideways. At one point I clutched the top of the litter when I saw the guy supporting me on the left move away and the litter tilted. "You won't get dumped," he said, "We're just setting you against a tree while I move around it." And, indeed, there I was on a narrow trail, my port side held up momentarily by a young maple tree.

Once we hit the cable line trail, which is clear of trees and descends very steeply, we zoomed down. We made it to the parking lot in an hour. I expressed amazement at how many people and trucks were there as part of the rescue and wondered if I was going to be billed. "No, this is strictly voluntary, no cost to you," Griego told me. I later found out that there had been a total of 24 people on the mission.

I asked if it was okay to drive, and after a few moments and a review of my vital signs, the fireman said yes, if I thought I was up to it. Of course I was up to it! My left foot was splinted and stable, my right foot was fine, so once they put me in my car, we waved good-bye. I am not sure I would do that again quite so quickly. Once I got on I-90, I was, well, umm, sort of spacey and anxious, but I drove very slowly home and eventually drove with a friend to the hospital. Yup, the ankle was broken, and I had that cast on for almost eight weeks.

Accidents happen fast and unexpectedly, whether in the mountains or on a city street. So what deep lesson did I learn from this experience? I guess it would be this: we are all dependent on the kindness of strangers. In my case, I was able to share e-mails and drinks with my Hiker Angels, so they are strangers no more, and I plan to get ESAR training so I can join the volunteer community that helped me so competently.

The practical lessons are easy ones. Wear the right foot gear. My fall happened on a clear trail; there were no slippery rocks or mud. But I was wearing low hiking shoes instead of stiffer hiking boots, a mistake I will never repeat.

Bring extra warm clothing. It's one of the ten essentials you should always have in your pack on any hike—even Tiger Mountain. You can never pack enough warm things, even if it's a sunny day. I was on a ground mat, had on dry clothes, but was still very chilled on a 58-degree day. I had a hat and mittens, but a neck warmer would have been good, and a heavier wrap.

Last, but not least, in that pack full of extra clothing, like Hiker Angel Paul in this story, carry a good first aid kit, including some painkillers. And, if you're over 45, CARRY SOME READING GLASSES! That's in capitals so us older folks can read it.

Michele Coad is a WTA board member from Seattle. ♦

Search and Rescue: How it Works

Over 700 volunteers in King County work on rescues in backcountry

By Timmy Williams

Being out in the backcountry, away from our all-too-familiar lives in the city always makes for an enjoyable time. Whatever time of year, whatever we're doing—hiking, skiing, or climbing—we're having a good time. But what happens if something goes wrong? What do you do when you find yourself in trouble, when you need help? What now?

In Washington state, the county sheriff has jurisdiction over all searches and rescues in the unincorporated parts of the county and the contract cities they deal with. And for all practical purposes being in the backcountry means that you're in an unincorporated part of the county. So what do you do when you need help? You contact the Sheriff of the county that you're in.

Okay—so you're in trouble. You contact the local sheriff. Now what happens? Well, chances are that you dialed 911 and explained the situation to the person on the other end of the phone. That person is the local dispatcher. The dispatcher doesn't make the decision whether or not to help you. That decision comes from the search and rescue deputy that's on duty at the time. So the dispatcher relays your information to the deputy. Now things start to happen.

The deputy wants to speak directly with you. He wants to make sure that this is for real (not a hoax), that you are where you say you are (are you sure you're on Tiger Mountain and not Mount Si?), and that he understands the situation. He's making an assessment of the situation so that he can determine what resources he needs to call out.

Resources? Just what resources does the sheriff have? In King County there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 750 sheriff's deputies. But the vast majority of them are performing law enforcement duties, and they aren't equipped for trips into the backcountry. Well, now what?

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A helicopter participates in a rescue. Volunteers, local sheriff's offices, and military, Coast Guard or National Guard helicopters can all be called upon for a variety of search and rescue operations. SAR organizations are volunteer-based and King County alone has over 700 volunteers participating.

In King County we have an organization that provides all of the backcountry skills and manpower that the sheriff needs. This is the King County Search And Rescue Association (KCSARA: www.kcsara.org). KCSARA consists of nine volunteer units: Seattle Mountain Rescue (SMR), Explorer Search And Rescue (ESAR), Ski PAtrol Rescue Team (SPART), 4X4, Operations, Rescue 1, Trackers, Search Dogs, Horse Unit. Across all of the units there are common backcountry skills, but each unit has a particular skill that it brings to search and rescue. In total there are approximately 700 volunteers spread among the nine Units. Quite a resource.

Now then, once the deputy decides that a mission is warranted (we're going to come after you) he has to decide what resources he needs and which units are applicable to the task at hand. Once he has settled on what he needs, he sends out a page to those units he needs (all the volunteers carry a pager). If he needs help from all of the units then approximately 700 pagers go off, and all of this can happen at any time of the day or night, 24/7, holidays—whenever.

When the page goes out, each volun-

Ralph Radford

Rescuers assemble at the trailhead. Each volunteer has a pager, and a system of operation leaders coordinates with sheriff's deputies to begin a search or rescue.

teer has to make a decision: can they respond to the mission? Remember, it's an all-volunteer operation. Nobody's required to respond. We all have many things that take up our time. You've got that important meeting today, it's aunt Sally's birthday, you've got an appointment to keep, and so on. Sometimes you just can't break away and head into the backcountry.

While you're deciding whether or not you can respond, one of the folks in your unit, the designated In-Town Operations Leader (ITOL) is calling the deputy to get the details of the mission. That means there can be up to nine ITOLs calling the deputy, one from each unit. You can imagine it will take a bit of time for the deputy to brief all of them. But it's certainly better than having 700 people calling the deputy. It works quite well and things move fairly quickly.

Once your ITOL gets the details he'll send out a unit-specific page passing on the additional information to the rescuers. By now you as a rescuer have decided whether you can respond. If you can, then you call your ITOL, let them know you're responding, throw your gear into your car, and head for the location where the mission will be based. And, hopefully, there are a lot of other folks doing exactly the same thing.

Once volunteers begin arriving at the base location, they check-in, teams are formed (a minimum of three people per team), additional information and last minute details are sorted out (Do we have GPS coordinates for the subjects?), gear decisions are made (Do we need ropes? Are we going to be out all night?), radio communication is checked (All teams have a radio), and then teams head out into the field.

If we have to search for you (we don't know your exact location) then we beat the brush until we find you. If we know your location (two miles up the Snow Lake trail, just above the Source Lake junction) then we come right to you. Either way, we come to you. You need to stay put. It's much easier and quicker to find a stationary subject than a moving one.

Once we find you, then it's a matter of deciding what to do with you. Are you just lost, with no injuries? We'll walk you out. Are you injured? What's the extent of the injuries? Can we perform basic first aid, strap you into a rescue litter, and wheel you down the trail? Or are your injuries serious enough to warrant calling in a helicopter to fly you directly to a hospital? Whatever it takes, we'll get you out.

If we've walked or wheeled you back to base then we see that you have transportation to wherever you need to go. That could be your own car if you're not injured, or you've got someone to drive you if you are injured. If necessary, we can call in an ambulance to transport you to medical help. There are a variety of options, and we work it all out.

After you're on your way, the deputy holds a debriefing with all of the folks who responded. It's a quick recap of the mission from start to finish. Then anyone who lost or damaged any gear or has any injuries can get the details into the report. After that, it's a matter of checking out, heading home and waiting for the next page.

All things considered, search and rescue is not often complicated, but it does require a fair amount of coordination. Probably most important of all is that you want to know who you have, where they are, and that everyone's back and accounted for. You don't want to leave anyone behind.

In the end, search and rescue is somewhat ironic, if not the supreme irony. Someone's out in the backcountry having a bad day, or even a terrible day. There we are, out in the backcountry, going after them, and we're having a wonderful day. We're doing what we like to do. And I suppose that that's a good thing.

Be safe out there!

Timmy Williams is the Chairman of Seattle Mountain Rescue. ♦

To the Rescue

You might think about padding your karma by adding King County Search and Rescue Association to your end-of-year donation list. It is a volunteer operation with no overhead.

KCSARA (King County Search and Rescue Association) KCSARA is the umbrella body for nine volunteer rescue operational units. www.kcsara.org (206)227-8161.

Seattle Mountain Rescue

ESAR (Explorer Search and Rescue) Wilderness first aid and crime scene work. www.kcesar.org, (206) 748-1300.

SMR (Seattle Mountain Rescue) Alpine, technical and wilderness rescues. www.seattlemountainrescue.org

KC4X4SAR (King County 4x4 Search and Rescue) Privately owned off-road trucks and jeeps provide base camp logistics. www.kc4x4sar.org/

SPART (Ski Patrol Alpine Rescue Team) Snow searches and avalanche recovery.

KCSD (King County Search Dogs) provides canine search services. www.kcsearchdogs.org/

Seattle Mountain Rescue

NW Horse SAR (Northwest Horseback Search and Rescue) Private horse owners assist in searches. www.nwhsar.org/ **Pacific NW Trackers** Tracking experts provide assistance in searches. http://pacificnwtrackers.com/

KCSAROPS (King County Search and Rescue Operations) Provides organization for rescues. www.kcsarops.org/

Rescue 1 Volunteer fire department members in Enumclaw provide swift water rescue http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/cpratt1010/Rescue1.htm

Other SAR organizations include:

Spokane County SAR Is a countywide coordinating umbrella for volunteer organizations including Spokane Water Rescue, Explorer Search and Rescue, Amateur Radio Emergency Services, Inland Empire Bloodhounds, Winter Knights Snowmobile Club, Spokane Mountaineers Search & Rescue and Intermountain Search Dogs. www.spokanecounty.org/emergencymgmt

Clark and Lewis County SAR, Silver Star SAR, Wind River SAR and Volcano Rescue Team are volunteer organizations in southwest Washington. www.silverstarsar.org, w3.gorge.net/graphics/sar/WRSAR1.html, www.northcountryems.org/vrt.

How to Volunteer

Most search and rescue organizations are run by volunteers and a few support staff members. Most major counties, such as King, Pierce, Thurston and Watcom all have a search and rescue web page.

Some search and rescue units, such as Snohomish County and King County, have an explorer search and rescue branch for youths between the ages of 14 to 21. This division teaches the kids basic hiking skills, CPR and first aid, map and compass and wilderness survival.

For adult members thinking of volunteering, there are many layers of training required before going on a mission. Search and rescue organizations require training in areas of first aid, map and compass, basic and intermediate helicopter safety and survival techniques. King County has a two day academy that is mandatory for all volunteers. A background check is also required.

The best method to find out more information for your area and how to get involved is to do an online search. Snohomish County Search and Rescue can be found at www.scvsar.org and King County volunteers can contact Kathleen.decker@metrokc.gov or go to the association page at www.kcsara.org.

—Ralph Radford