

Last Great Solo Hikes In The Wind River Range

by John Gookin, FCS&R Operations Chief

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1998 was an interesting year for Fremont County (WY) Search & Rescue. We had a few solo hikers disappear. The good news is that one of them is fine.

Tom Jones of Casper, WY disappeared on Horse Ridge on the hike out from Gannett Peak. His PLS (point last seen) was 4 miles from the roadhead and he was on a major trail headed to the Cold Springs Road. His partners described him as the most experienced hiker in the group, but not as fit as them, and said that he had done this route before. They said they saw him headed up the hill to Scenic Pass, when they all took off from their break at the top. When he didn't show up they looked for him for a couple of hours, then called 911. After they briefed us on the situation in the morning, they left to head back to Casper. They also broke a window in his car so they could get their stuff out of it. That was a new one to have the reporting party in such a rush to get out of town, and it made us suspect foul play immediately.

A year earlier Amy Wroe Bechtel disappeared, leaving no trace despite 1,000's of person-days in searching. This had us on guard for suspicious disappearances. We still did our normal search strategy, but we made sure we also searched based on some law enforcement scenarios.

We searched for days, and finally found Tom on a desert ridge above Dinwoody Lake. He was in one of the few trees around, allegedly to wave to the planes and helicopters that had been passing him. When I heard this, I thought "He must have been out of his mind to basically hide inside the branches of the only tree around on a desert ridge." Tom's story of becoming separated differed significantly in tone from the story of his partners. He said they hadn't gotten along very well, and that he had run out of food and the others weren't sharing their food with him. He said that he had planned and financed the whole trip, including the expensive ride across the reservation. On the hike out the 3 younger guys had taken off each day, and left him behind on the trail. On the last day, he had gotten up early to get a head start up the pass, but the others had passed him early. They were totally out of food. He said that they really hadn't gotten along and that he was feeling alienated from them. He said that on the final day they had just totally left him behind and that he was so furious, that when he crossed the meadow a mile from the roadhead, he missed the trail, double-backed to look for it, and just kept going.

There are a few valuable lessons in this incident:

- EB (expedition behavior) has a lot to do with safety of the individual.
- Food stress never helps a situation.
- The theory of risk homeostasis says that more experienced people can be even more error prone because they aren't as careful as novices.
- Sometimes lost people really are out of their minds because of food stress, dehydration, exhaustion, exposure and confusion.

- Lost people often get REALLY lost when they make a small navigational error, get excited about it, and radically overcorrect. It is like many of the one-car accidents in Wyoming: they stray to one side of the road, get emotional as they respond to the urgent problem, and roll their vehicle because they overcorrect.

I became involved with the next search of the Summer the day after I did a solo hike out from Matterhorn Peak in Yosemite. I used a "shortcut" through a fourth class col to save 5 miles. My background in managing searches had me constantly thinking about how soon someone would come looking for me if I slipped. It would be days. As I boot-skied down untracked snowfields and then thrashed through heavy alders and willows, I knew that I was entirely on my own and needed to be more conservative than usual. As I tired towards the end of my marathon day, I knew that I was more error prone and didn't cut any more corners: like I would walk right through the creeks rather than trying my usual balancing acts on rocks and logs. I knew that this hike was well beyond my usual comfort zone, especially sneaking alone through a fourth class col, and it was haunting me, even before I flew home and returned the call to the SO (Sheriff's Office) to get the bad news about Mike Turner.

Mike was a preacher from Idaho. He was finishing a year-long sabbatical with a trip along the divide in the Winds. He chose rugged terrain for his two week hike, weaving in and out of the Wind River Indian Reservation. Again, he was described as an experienced hiker who had been in this area before. He actually left a detailed itinerary, which we searched thoroughly by air and on foot. The family interviewed hundreds of hikers coming out of the Winds and posted hundreds of signs. The family involvement was in dire contrast to the previous search: this guy's family and friends basically moved to Lander and Pinedale for a month. I made a master map and clue board and consulted survivability tables and lost person data. I emailed peers in AK and VA. When I explained to the family why we weren't going to actively look for Mike anymore, they made it clear that they wanted to look for him for THEIR benefit, even though they believed me that statistically he couldn't be alive anymore. For 3 weeks, there was no sign of him, his dog, or his tent. There had been two reliable sightings of this 6'6" bald guy right when he left Elkhart Park, but then nothing. Until about day 21.

On day 21 his dog showed up at Island Lake, looking lean and weary. After a trip to the vet and a weekend's rest, family members hired guides to take them and the dog in from Pinedale and see if the dog would steer them to where Mike was. Before they got out, a hiker found Mike's body near the Brown Cliffs, but one drainage off of his itinerary. When we recovered his body the next day, we found his left leg pinned by a boulder just below the knee. He was 30 feet from a lake, and a long piece of parachute cord was tied to a pop bottle, that he had

obviously used to fish for water. The bottle was stuck in the rocks. Mike had camp set up around him and had spent 9 days dealing with his situation before he died of exposure. He died about the time the family reported him missing. A NOLS course had been through that drainage the week before, and any single hiker in that group could have helped Mike pull the rock off of his leg.

The lessons here were pretty obvious

- Experienced hikers are more comfortable taking greater risks and more risks.
- Solo hiking can be fatal.
- Itineraries help searchers. B that doesn't mean the searchers can find you fast enough to help you.

The last "experienced hiker" to disappear in The Winds this year was Jim Wright. Jim was from Illinois but had been out here before with his brother. The RP's (reporting parties) said he recently took a glacier rescue class at the EMS climbing school. This year he came alone but hooked up with three guys from Lander on the trail into Gannett's North Face. They all spent a day scouting the route across the Gannet Glacier, but Jim was tired so he stayed behind and hung out on the glacier. Jim's pack had clothing, food, four water bottles, a cell phone, a multi-tool and even flares in it. (This is unusually safety-conscious.) As the other three were probing routes up the last shoulder of the glacier, they noticed that Jim disappeared within a 30 minute period. They looked for him for a few hours then went back to their camp in Floyd Wilson Meadows to see if he had headed back. But his pack was still on the rock they ate lunch on (on the glacier), so they were concerned that he had fallen into a crevasse. The glacier was in a high melting stage, with water pouring into crevasses and moulins. At the Sheriff's request many NOLS mountaineering instructors searched for Jim over the next few days, to no avail. They worked in pairs and even used mirrors to redirect sunlight to illuminate deep into crevasses, but there were hundreds of major holes in the search area. On day 4 a blizzard literally sealed the search shut, for the season and for ever.

The lessons here were:

- Education and preparedness might actually make someone more dangerous because it can give them false confidence. I am not saying this is specifically why Jim was traveling alone on a glacier, but the theory of risk homeostasis says that people have a certain tolerance for risk. If you add some new safety device like a titanium

ice ax, or a cell phone, or some training in crevasse rescue, people just take more risks.

- Walking on glaciers without being on a rope team can be fatal.

Risk Homeostasis

A scientific example of Risk Homeostasis is the addition of anti lock brakes in cars. Initially, they caused an INCREASE in their users' fatality rate because people just drove faster because of their increased confidence. Once the general population caught on to the new accident data, they backed off and the final rate became exactly what the fatality rate was before anti-lock brakes. Another example is a scientific comparison of "safer" roads and "less safe" roads: like interstates and shoulderless country lanes. They have the same fatality rates. The theory of risk homeostasis says that people have predetermined tolerances for risk. If we think that certain factors make us safer, we just adjust our speed or how close we tailgate to make up for the safety advantage.

A book called "Target Risk" by Gerald Wilde Ph.D. (Target Risk: Dealing with the danger of death, disease and damage in everyday decisions. Toronto. PDE Publications. 1994. Eng. or Sp.) explains this theory in great detail. Dr. Wilde makes it clear that we CAN make activities safer, not by just adding safer equipment or teaching safer techniques, but by actively decreasing people's tolerance for risk. We increase safety when we teach about common accidents to help raise awareness. We decrease safety when we give people cool equipment, and teach them how to use it, without driving home safety concerns. I think this generally parallels the NOLS attitude about safety. I first heard the derogatory label "tech-weenie" at NOLS: I think it conveys our disdain for folks who act like high tech gear will make them perform better. Wilde also says that incentive programs for safety, like the NOLS Rocky Mountain Branch Transpo crew's awards for having 2,000,000 accident-free miles, are statistically effective. His point is that people don't become safer by technology, they become safer by decreasing their tolerance for risk. Having a cell phone in your pack may make you feel more comfortable while taking risks, but it not only won't make you safer, it might even make you less safe. In this last case, the victim's cell phone was readily available for the survivors to report the fatality.