

Rescue
An abbreviated history of survival and rescues from remote places.
Some of the current and proposed search and rescue strategies.
Unintended consequences.

In the old days, when one ventured into the unknown or remote parts of the world, you were basically on your own.

Your survival was usually dependent on your skill and luck.

About the only help you could look for was from the gods.

Although this does present a problem since there are now almost 5,000 gods you could appeal to.

Best be you send your request for help to the correct god.

Survival depends on many things:

Your knowledge, skill, and planning.

Who you pick as companions and their skill and ability to work with others in the group.

And of course, luck.

Even with the best team, knowledge, and preparation, sometimes things go wrong.

Some blame the weather or say the land was against them.

But as climbers say: The mountains don't care.

There are many tales of survival against all odds.

And, of course, many tales that were told by others about those who did not survive.

The great stories of attempting to reach the South Pole come to mind.

The success of Amundsen and the tragedy of the Robert Scott venture.

Self-rescue is sometimes a possibility.

In the aftermath of Fletcher Christian's mutiny on the *Bounty*, Lt. William Bligh, along with 18 loyalists, traveled over 4,000 miles in an open launch to reach safety.

There is an interesting book called *In the Land of the White Death*, by Valerian Ivanovich Albanov, which details the voyage in the Siberian Arctic when the *Saint Anna* was trapped in the polar ice cap for nearly a year and a half.

Twenty members of the crew stayed aboard and 13 set off on foot pulling lifeboats behind them on sledges over 100s of miles of ice.

In the end, everyone who stayed on the ship died and only 2 of the 13 on foot survived.

Another great book is *Island of the Lost* by Joan Druett.

In 1864 two ships were wrecked on Auckland Island in the Southern Ocean.

One group of 5 was able to work together to build a cabin and even build a forge to make tools and hardware.

They built a small boat which allowed two of them to escape and eventually bring help for the other three.

At the other end of the island the crew of 19 fell apart.

They fought, starved, and some resorted to cannibalism.

Only 3 survived.

There is a book and documentary called *Touching the Void* by Joe Simpson.

Two climbers in the Peruvian Andes run into trouble.

One climber suffers a fall and breaks his leg.

They continue with self-rescue until the injured climber goes over a cliff.

The other climber thinks he has no option other than cutting the rope and, after searching for the injured climber, assumes he is dead and makes his way back to base camp.

Unknown to him, the climber with the broken leg has survived and spends 3 days hopping and crawling back to camp.

Another great book is *Edge of the Map* by Johanna Garton who grew up in Appleton.

The book is about Christine Boskoff who also grew up in Appleton, was a high-altitude mountaineer and guide, and disappeared in the remote peaks of Western China.

Note that this book will be presented on Chapter A Day on Wisconsin Public Radio starting on Memorial Day.

So, what can you do to increase your odds of survival?

For rock climbers, there are several self-rescue techniques you can use if you or your climbing partner are injured.

I took a self-rescue course at Vertical Stronghold several years ago.

Knowing the basics can go a long way toward getting yourself out of trouble.

Of course, basic, or better yet advanced, first aid courses are highly recommended.

Having a backup group to come after you if you don't return by a certain time has sometimes worked.

When Malory and Irving were lost on Mt. Everest, there was a support group below them.

Unfortunately, that group did not have the strength to help.

I mentioned the people shipwrecked on Auckland Island in the southern seas.

After that and similar incidents, shipping companies and governments prepositioned equipment and supplies on a number of islands.

Ships passing these islands watched for distress signals so that they or others could assist any survivors.

This prepositioning of supplies also happens at nearby places like Devil's Lake.

Rescue gear and medical supplies are cached in a number of places along the top of the cliffs so that rescue personnel don't have to haul it up when it is needed.

There are also numbered markers at Devil's Lake so that a person calling for help can say they are at marker 5, for example.

So, what happens when the best laid plans go awry and you need help?

Communication is key.

Let a **responsible** person know where you are going and when you expect to return.

I say responsible person since there have been many cases where a contact person did not notify authorities or waited too long to raise the alarm.

It is a good idea to designate a single, key person, even if you tell a number of people about your plans. That way, you avoid people thinking someone else will notify Search and Rescue (SAR)

Leaving a note on your car at the trailhead with the same information is always a good idea.

Ways of communicating with the outside world have improved greatly.

When I climbed Mt. McKinley (now Denali) in 1968, Don Sheldon, the pilot who flew us in, gave us a big radio, many feet of antenna wire, and a car battery for the base camp.

As long as someone in our group could make it back to the base camp, we could call for help.

The invention of relatively lightweight sat phones (satellite phones) allowed for contact during the trip.

As phones got smaller and coverage better, things definitely improved.

I've noticed that some climbers refuse to carry a phone or other device, so they don't spoil their authentic adventure.

In my mind, carrying a phone and stacking the odds in your favor is a reasonable choice.

I would hate to see a partner die because of my ego.

Just as a side note. If you are having trouble contacting authorities by voice, try text messaging.

This takes less battery power and has a much better chance of getting through.

Texting 911 (if available) and your **reliable** contact person has a better chance of working.

In skying areas, avalanche beacons can help your group locate the buried person.

At the outset of the trip, these devices are set to transmit.

If someone is caught in an avalanche, the others in the group can set their devices to receive so that they can locate the person who is buried.

Of course, this only works if everyone in the group has a compatible device.

Nowadays, there are personal beacons that are relatively lightweight.

Pushing a button sends a message to rescue personnel and/or your contact person.

Some units only send an SOS, but other units can include information such as the exact GPS coordinates and type of assistance needed. Some even provide video and two-way communication.

Search & Rescue equipment and techniques have had many improvements over the years.

In 1945 the first civilian helicopter was used in a rescue.

A basket was lowered by a hoist to retrieve the injured person.

Over the years, helicopters have been involved in many high-altitude and remote rescues.

Sometimes the copter can even touch the slope with its skids while the injured person is loaded.

The highest altitude helicopter rescue I could verify was at over 23,000' in Nepal.

When I was in Alaska waiting for a plane to take us into the mountains, there was a report of a missing plane. It was amazing how the community responded to the event. Available planes went out to do coordinated searching and planes that were on a scheduled route kept an eye out for the missing plane and reported on the area that they had covered.

Dogs have long been used in searching for victims.

Their sense of smell is phenomenal.

It's interesting that dogs can be discouraged if all their searching only results in finding dead bodies.

Handlers will occasionally have someone hide in the rubble so that the dog can have a victory.

Personally, I still like the idea of St. Bernard carrying a cask of refreshments.

Robots have been enlisted in search operations for many years.

After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, robots were used to search for victims.

However, early robots used wheels and treads which were of limited use in uneven terrain.

Newer robots are being developed which act more like lizards or snakes.

Some of these robots can even burrow into the rubble.

Robots are often guided by a human controller, but newer versions can work autonomously.

Some of us will remember cartoons where a person used a jet pack to fly around.

These have become more available, and I found one SAR group in the Lakes District of the UK that is thinking of using jet suits to locate, assess, and stabilize the victim as quickly as possible.

The person with a jet pack can get to the victim in minutes while a team on foot might take many hours to reach the area.

I've seen a video of jet packs being tested but did not find reports of use during an actual rescue.

So, there have been great improvements in SAR equipment and techniques.

This seems wonderful, but are there any unintended consequences?

Many years ago, I noticed reports from the Alps about people getting into trouble, but not caring too much since they could easily call for help.

These are sometimes experienced people, but more often, ill prepared people who figure they don't have to worry since help is readily available.

Who responds to calls for help depends on where you are.

In the United States, some National Parks have rescue capabilities.

There are also many volunteer organizations that usually work with the local sheriff or other authorities in rescue situations.

Some rescues are free, but others do charge for their services.

Increasingly, there is sometimes a charge for the gross negligence on the part of the person requesting help.

When I went climbing in Ecuador, we contracted through the American Alpine Club for rescue and medical assistance if we got into trouble.

I noticed that they have recently changed their pricing to reflect the increases in cost and logistics.

The pandemic has brought on even more problems.

People, in their attempt to avoid crowds, are opting for trips to parks and remote areas.

Many of these people are inexperienced, ill prepared, and do not understand what they are getting into.

There are cases of people being found wearing shorts in a blizzard.

There was also a person who just got tired and did not feel like completing the hike.

Last year, there was a case in the Wind Rivers of Wyoming where a totally inexperienced Florida man was intent on climbing Gannet Peak, the highest point in Wyoming.

I climbed Gannet in 1968 and it is at least one day's hike from the trailhead and includes glacier travel.

This man could not be dissuaded from his adventure, but luckily, he was found the next morning

shivering in his car at the trailhead since he was not able to start his camp stove.

He was finally persuaded to give up his quest.

Personal Locator Beacons can also give a false sense of security.

Pushing the button does not necessarily get you help quickly as is often depicted in a television show or movie.

Accidental butt dials are also a serious problem and take up considerable resources.

There are also ethical considerations.

When someone calls for help, they can be placing SAR personnel in considerable danger.

Is your lack of knowledge, poor planning, or stupidity worth putting another person in danger?

Also, while resources are deployed in getting you out of trouble, are you taking valuable resources away from more serious situations?

A question you might be asking is: Have I ever dialed 911?

In 2013 I was climbing with 7 others on Mount Elbert, the highest peak in Colorado. The route we took was relatively easy and our group got strung out along the trail. Some of the younger climbers were even returning as I approached the summit.

There were three of us coming down and one of the climber, 9 years older than me, was having trouble walking.

His legs would give out on him after walking 40 or 50 paces and he would have to sit down on a rock or even collapse on the ground.

His condition continued to deteriorate to the point where he could only walk 10 or 15 paces until his legs gave out.

Although we had clothing to survive the night, I did not like the fact that nightfall was approaching and he seemed to be getting worse.

I called 911 and they quickly switched me to the local SAR group.

We were well below tree line, so a helicopter rescue was not practical.

They suggested we continue down as best we could while a rescue team was dispatched.

It took some time for them to mobilize, and we actually reached the trailhead as the SAR group was starting up the trail.

The rescue team did a thorough job of checking all of us out before releasing us.

In summary, be prepared, know your limits, and have a backup plan.