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Letters

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Letters



David Sanderson as he looked in 1959, when he tried to save the stranded climbers on Cannon Cliff. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

Hypothermia Deaths on Cannon, 1959

As a member of the team that attempted to rescue Alfred Whipple Jr. and Sidney Crouch from the cliff on Cannon Mountain in August 1959 (see *Appalachia* December 1959, 2 no. 4, pages 441–461), I read with great interest the Accidents report of a rescue from the same cliff in November 2016 (Winter/Spring 2018, pages 110–113). This report includes a description of the facilities available for such a rescue, both in personnel and equipment, as contrasted with the situation in 1959.

Among the numerous differences I think the most significant is organization. A rescue team ready to go on short notice could conceivably have reached the boys on Sunday evening when the weather was warm, the cliff dry, and the boys still in good health. In 1959, however, there was no such team, as this was apparently the first instance of a rescue involving technical climbing in the White Mountains. It was necessary to form a pickup team of rock climbers from the Appalachian Mountain Club, but this meant choosing, locating, and contacting them so they could drive, in most cases several hours, to the rescue site. Monday morning it was raining and cold. Climbing proved slow and tedious. The first rope left the road at 6:30 A.M. and turned back, after an exhausting climb in the rain, about 3 P.M. The second rope, which consisted of Spencer Wright and myself, reached the ledge where the boys were trapped at about 3 P.M.

I had a few moments of elation when I realized I could reach the boys and thought I might rescue them. However, all I could do was keep them company during their last few minutes as they succumbed to exposure. I have often thought of the boys and tried to imagine a better outcome.

—David Sanderson, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

A Close Encounter with Hypothermia

The 2018 Winter/Spring edition contains an excellent, though sad, account of a fictitious person who succumbs to hypothermia (“How I Died Hiking,” by Mike Cherim), with details of the typical phases of this unique crisis, as well as how the person behaves through the process.

Here is my own close encounter with hypothermia, its effects on me—my mind and body—with the hope that *this story may actually save someone's life!*

The time was early August 1990, and the place was the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire from Gentian Pond Shelter to Full Goose Shelter, near Mahoosuc Notch (in Maine). And the weather that day was steady rain, cooling as the day progressed, with the temperature at 53 degrees at 5 P.M. when I got to the shelter (and was alone all night).

I arrived at the shelter, soaking wet in my shorts and Gore-Tex jacket, but comfortably warm from hiking. I had realized the need to immediately get into dry clothes, so I had been planning for miles to make that a top priority before doing anything else.

Opening the pack, I first pulled out *my stove*, so I decided to light the stove and heat some water for hot soup while I was changing clothes.

Then, after getting the stove going and the water heating, I stood and told myself to change clothes. *Nothing happened—oops.*

Again, I told myself to change my clothes—with the same result. Repeated and repeated. Still, I just stood there.

These events still are vividly etched in my memory; I was totally cognitive during the entire event. My brain was aware of the desperate need to get into those dry clothes, so I yelled at myself, “Change your clothes!” Nothing happened. I *screamed* at myself, “Unzip your jacket!” This time, my hand went to the zipper, and the crisis was over.

It was as if my brain and my body were not communicating; I think you could call this a disconnect, and I wonder if that is correct. With many people being exposed to this surprisingly treacherous scenario, nearly every hiker is at risk.

The physiology of this crisis is beyond my ken, so I welcome any information of similar experiences. And a synopsis of the professional medical description of such an event would be a boon to all hikers.

One more facet of my story deserves attention. I did not sit down; I stood during the battle of mind over body. Another story (true) tells of a man who sat down when he arrived at the top of Mount Madison in freezing rain,

refused a warm jacket, and died shortly afterward. Is there a critical difference between sitting and standing in such crises? I hope to see a response.

—*Al Sanborn, South Grafton, Massachusetts*

Al “Footloose” Sanborn thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail from March 24 to August 24, 1990.

Challenge or Danger?

“Care for the Caregiver” (by Stephen Kurczy, Summer/Fall 2018) could so easily have ended up in the Accidents section for multiple reasons:

- The author’s 60-year-old mother had never climbed a single 4,000er, but he decided to take her on a three-day backpack in the Presidentials. She was wearing unfamiliar boots.
- Thunderstorms were forecast. The IME clerk warned them not to go.
- “Locals have the luxury to choose what day they want to hike, but we’ve come a long way.”
- Wind pushed his mother and other hikers to the ground.
- Experienced and better-equipped hikers chose to take the shuttle off Washington.
- “I had not factored in the slipperiness, my mother’s physical exhaustion.”

He is so proud of himself, when he was so damn lucky that this was not a tragedy requiring rescue by others.

Twenty-five years ago, our family took my mother on a hike into Arethusa Falls. She was 80, in very good physical condition. (She was still mowing her hilly lawn and working in the garden all day at 90.) It was a beautiful day with no rain forecast. There were three strong adults accompanying her. Other hikers cheered her. And at the end I was enormously relieved that she made it through the hike without incident.

I hope that this article does not tempt anyone else into putting a family member in danger.

—*Bev Esson, Wells, Maine*