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Looking for Kate: Searchers' Stories

Sandy Stott

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At 8:30 p.m. on February 15, 2015, Matt Bowman and his wife, Jenna, both climbers, were sitting by the fire at home in Gorham, New Hampshire. "It was a school night; the kids were in bed," he recalled. Outside, the racketing wind and subzero temperatures made this a memorable night, the year's coldest. His phone buzzed. Bowman glanced at the screen and saw the incoming call was from Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, where he is a member of the Winter-Above-Treeline team. As he does with all AVSAR summonses, Bowman let the call go to voicemail "so I have the details on record."

He retrieved the message and switched to speakerphone so he and Jenna could listen together: "This is an AVSAR call," said the recording. "This is Bill Arnold calling from AVSAR, at about 8:30 on Sunday, February 15. We have an overdue hiker, who apparently has set off her personal beacon somewhere on the north slope of either Mount Madison or Mount Adams. . . . [New Hampshire] Fish and Game is having a hard time figuring that out. They have sent up a group from Fish and Game and one from MRS [Mountain Rescue Service] to try to locate this woman, but they're putting together groups to go out tomorrow morning, Monday, to search for her. The plan is to meet at Appalachia at 8 a.m. If you're available, please give me a call."

Bowman's recollection of the next moment follows: "Not that we could see it at 8:30 at night in February, but our house is situated with a view of Madison and Adams. We see it every day, and I'm always pointing out the peaks, changes in weather, and seasons to my kids. Anyway, I remember listening to the wind outside. I recall listening to the message a couple times, and Jenna and I looking at each other. She usually asks if I want to go, or I'll ask if she thinks (with business and kids) I can go. From what I recall, Jenna just knew I was going. I called Bill to let him know I'd be there at 8 a.m."

Earlier that day, Bowman, his 9-year-old son, and Bowman's friend Dave Salisbury had gone backcountry skiing. Bowman, a soft-spoken co-owner of a café in Gorham, and all-around mountain sort, keeps close tabs on the weather, and he knew extreme cold was on its way. So, he and his son dressed carefully and planned to stay down low. As the wind built during the day, the roar above them grew more deep-throated, and beneath a few

Search-and-rescue volunteers want the public to know that it takes a long time, sometimes many hours, to mobilize a search after a call for help. At left, members of Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue struggle along Star Lake Trail toward Mount Adams, searching for solo hiker Kate Matrosova on February 16, 2015. MATT BOWMAN

gusts, Bowman's son looked to his dad for reassurance that the wind wouldn't suddenly swoop down and carry them away, that they were OK. And, along the sheltered drainage of Avalanche Brook near Pinkham Notch, they were OK. Even in that weather, it was a day to be out—for a while.

But up on the ridges, the wind and cold were writing another story. The rumbling sound when a cold front blows in has often been likened to a freight train, and rightly so. But there's another sound, one more elemental, that such heavy wind calls up—that of a big wave. Anyone who has spent time at ocean's edge when the storm-spawned, large rollers arrive has heard their long, turbulent growl, punctuated by explosive breaking roars, and, involuntarily, stepped back. Then, just as the sound thins a bit, makes you think you might step forward for a closer look, another wave arrives; the din is constant and serial, the very air choked with spray. Just so the pour of arctic air during a front like that of the 15th—when it arrived, it brought huge breaking waves of wind.

At 5 A.M. that day, the wind had been light and the cold usual as New York City resident and aspiring mountaineer Kate Matrosova climbed away from the Appalachia parking lot on Route 2. She was headed first for the summit of Mount Madison and then on over Mounts Adams, Jefferson, Clay, and Washington. Nearby Mount Washington, routinely the windiest of White Mountain places, had a 35-MPH wind and –4 degree Fahrenheit temperature at 4:49 A.M. She knew that the big wind was on its way—she'd read the forecasts of the extremes in the offing—but that would happen later, and Matrosova was confident that she could get up and down before the wind-waves broke.

Later that morning, Bowman and his son wrapped up their skiing and went home to warm and enjoy some indoor time. Up high, the wind and cold had begun to intensify, and Kate Matrosova found herself behind schedule, down off Madison, with Adams above to the south and the rest of her planned route probably unreachable. Well-dressed for mountain winter, but not carrying any overnight equipment, she had some decisions to make. Her story, with its reportage of her decisions and speculation about those impossible to report, has been amply written: see "Too Cold," an essay about Matrosova's tragedy in the last *Appalachia* (Winter/Spring 2016, 67 no. 1, pages 10–22) and a January 16, 2016, New Hampshire Public Radio piece. Less chronicled is the narrative of the search for her that finally became a recovery.

Some 24 hours after skiing with his son, Bowman was bracing himself against hurricane-force winds and –30 F temperatures near Star Lake in the col between Mounts Madison and Adams. There, before him, was a strange

sight, a shed pack. His vision limited by goggles, Bowman endured a moment of confusion: had one of his nine fellow rescuers dropped the pack? Then, he looked over; 20 feet away lay Kate Matrosova's body. Bowman felt the air go out of him.

We Will Find You

The phones first began playing their ringtones around 4 P.M. that February 15. Some 30 minutes earlier, a locator beacon had sent its signal skyward from New Hampshire's Northern Presidential Range, and these chirps, jingles, and snatches of song were its spawn. "Not now," must have been each phone owner's silent prayer. Outside, the light was fading in a day that had tumbled into some thermal abyss; the valley temperatures huddled beneath zero, and the heavy wind probed every shelter. Up high, a howling gale shoved the –20 temperature down to a –80 windchill; both were in free fall. And, according to the beacon's signal, someone named Kate Matrosova was up there above treeline and in trouble.

In New Hampshire, when such a call comes in from the backcountry, it goes to the state's Fish and Game agency, and within that agency, it's the province of the law enforcement division. NHFG conservation officers are responsible for conducting and coordinating searches and rescues (SAR), and, although such work isn't the primary focus of a conservation officer's job, it is certainly a high-profile responsibility. And, with the advent of easy summons from various devices, a more prevalent one.

On the 15th, the state police call, in response to a 911 call reporting the locator beacon's being turned on, went to Sergeant Mark Ober. Ober's standard ringtone played, just as he was in the town of Twin Mountain wrapping up an investigation of a snowmobile accident, and he switched quickly to the calls demanded by this new seeming emergency. His first call went to Matrosova's husband, Charlie Farhoodi, who had placed the 911 call after hearing from the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (AFRCC) at Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, Florida, that his wife's beacon had been activated. Farhoodi gave Ober a summary of his wife's intended route, her phone number, her preparedness, and her character. As Ober wrote in his incident summary, "He [Farhoodi] said that she was a determined individual and would not activate her beacon unless something was really wrong."

During a January 2016 conversation at Gorham's White Mountain Cafe, Ober recalled his first thoughts as he gathered information about Matrosova:

"I hoped it was a mistake, an incidental activation by chance, because I knew where it [the signal] was would be near impossible to get to today, tonight. I've had pretty good cell coverage there, so perhaps I could call and get in touch and find out."

But as it became apparent that this was no mistaken activation, Ober began a practiced routine. He now had a sketch of a climber crossing exposed terrain made fearsome by the day's gale and cold, and he had more calls to make, many more calls. When a NHFG officer determines that a rescue may be needed, he can activate a whole network of professionals and volunteers: the professionals are NHFG conservation officers, local fire and police departments, and, at times, National Guardsmen and members of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), and the volunteers come from a fullness of acronyms—AVSAR, MRS (Mountain Rescue Service), PEMISAR (Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue), AMC (Appalachian Mountain Club), Solo (Stonehearth Outdoor Learning Opportunities), to name some. There is, in short, a lot of talent willing to come to your aid if you encounter trouble in the White Mountains. But here's the catch: that talent is not in some display case at each trailhead, with a note saying, Break Glass in Case of Emergency; rescuers are instead dispersed throughout the region's various towns and hamlets. Or, if they are conservation officers, they may be attending to some other problem, as Ober was when called.

When asked about the most challenging part of search and rescue, Ober, who has both conducted and coordinated his share, said, "It's the calling. Getting a rescue together takes a lot of calling. And that calling takes a lot of time." Here we bump up against a common frustration for all SAR folks: When a beacon goes off or a call for help comes in, the person in need on the other end has been in touch instantly; his or her expectation of help soars at what seems its near possibility. And then, as he or she settles in to wait and time passes, it may flag; life may be leaking away. Asked what he would most want the public to know about SAR, AVSAR veteran Mike Cherim, who was part of the team that found Kate Matrosova on February 16, 2015, said via email, "It takes a LONG time for help to come. Be prepared to help yourself. Expecting or anticipating a timely rescue when the need arises is foolhardy." Instant connection does not mean immediate rescue.

Of course, everyone associated with SAR knows that time is often critical, and surely as a coldest night neared on the 15th, Ober and those receiving his calls knew this was exponentially true. They hurried to respond. Ober paged fellow conservation officers Matt Holmes, Glen Lucas, and Bob Mancini,

all of whom were initially at work in places where they couldn't call out. He checked with the State Police Troop F dispatcher, who had been trying unsuccessfully to connect with Matrosova's cell and satellite phones, and asked for a call back immediately if the dispatcher could give him a "ping" from either phone. Ober's next call went to the top of NHFG command's chain, Colonel Martin Garabedian, who would make the final decision about search efforts that night. Advised of all Ober knew, including the last known beacon ping, Garabedian, himself a veteran of many searches, said, "We have to try. Let's see if we can go get her." Ober went back to the phone.

The next call went to Rick Wilcox, president of MRS. Wilcox, veteran of Mount Everest and other Himalayan climbs, is also a longtime leader of White Mountain climbing culture, and in 1976, he became the first (and, to date, only) president of MRS. When the slant of terrain or exposure to above-treeline and other extremes complicates a search or rescue, MRS gets the call. As Ober said to me, "We defer to MRS in situations like this, more than some people think. We ask for their advice and opinions on the safest way to conduct a rescue that is a life-or-death situation. They are the technical experts and are above treeline in the winter way more than we are." Wilcox began his own set of calls, and as he did, Ober set up his command post at the Appalachia trailhead Matrosova had left twelve hours earlier. There, he noted, "the wind was gusting, and I showed a temperature of –10 degrees." On top of nearby Mount Washington, it was now –37, with wind gusts topping 100 MPH.

Then began Ober's wait for results from all those calls. During that time, he "made and received a steady flow of calls." Someone hovering over the northern Whites might have detected a convergence of lights from all directions, homing in on Ober's lone light in the Appalachia parking lot. Perhaps, hoped Ober, another lone light was struggling toward that lot from high above in the col near Star Lake, site of the first beacon signal. He had reason for hope: a 5 P.M. update from AFRCC gave a new beacon location that Ober plotted as 0.6 miles northeast of the first signal, between the Watson Path and Valley Way. Off-trail and in thick snow, yes, but perhaps Matrosova was slowly making her way toward them.

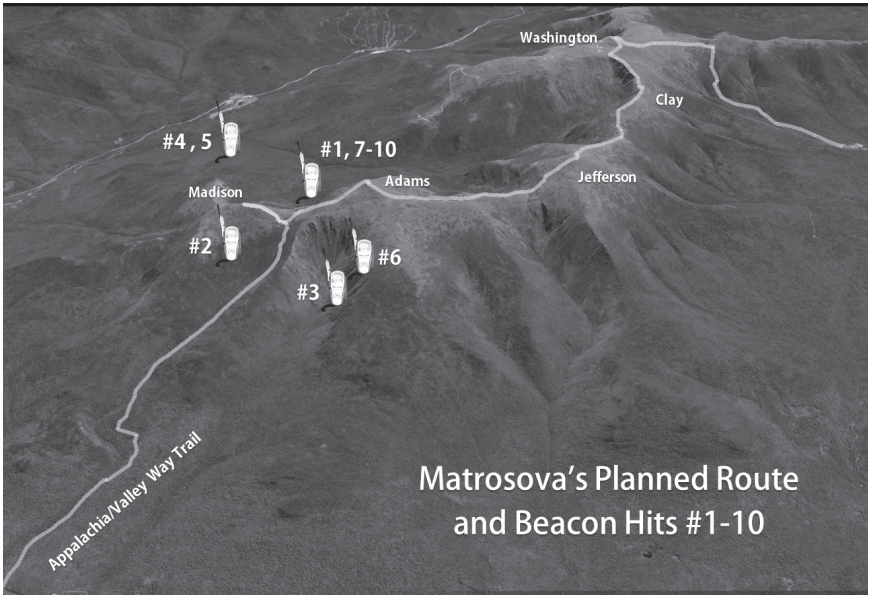
Up Into the Maelstrom

At 6:30 P.M., three conservation officers, Matt Holmes, Glen Lucas, and Bob Mancini, climbed away up Valley Way. Mancini's GPS held the coordinates

of the 5 P.M. beacon signal, and the three COs had instructions to go up to the point on the trail closest to those coordinates and then wait for the MRS team that would soon follow. The three COs also had "explicit directions to take no unnecessary risks, and if they felt their lives were in danger, to turn around." From those first steps toward Matrosova, the COs were in charge of their own safety, and indeed, in mid-climb, Lucas began to feel ill, and he turned back. Such a decision is both difficult and essential—rescuer safety must come first—and incident commanders worry constantly about rescuers who are up or out there.

That worry also explains the decision that the COs would await the MRS team before anyone tried to thread the off-trail woods to the beacon signal coordinates. Searching off-trail in rough, steep, snow-masked terrain holds many risks, and those risks were multiplied by darkness and the extreme weather. There would be no buffer of safety in two; there would be some in six.

At a little after 7:30 P.M., the four-person MRS team (Geoff Wilson, Scott Lee, Steve Larson, and team leader Steve Dupuis) was ready to go. But at



The personal locator beacon Kate Matrosova carried did not send consistent signals without the antenna upright. Rescuers spent precious time searching areas far from where she had fallen. They eventually deduced that signal numbers 1 and 7 through 10 were correct, and all the others were errors. TY GAGNE/NEW HAMPSHIRE PUBLIC RISK MANAGEMENT EXCHANGE

this point an updated beacon signal complicated the rescue: its coordinates now placed the beacon in the middle of King Ravine, nearly a half-mile northwest of the second signal, and an even greater span when one looked at the precipitous slopes someone would have to navigate to get there from either of the first two beacon signals. Also, King Ravine held dangerous avalanche risks, and Ober and Dupuis agreed that no one was going in there that night. Ober's confidence that Matrosova was moving their way was shaken. Still, the second position seemed the closest, most logical bet, and the MRS team aimed up at its meeting with the COs. If hit number 2 didn't pan out, perhaps the team could go on to the first beacon hit.

The MRS rescuers climbed as quickly as they could while still managing their own temperatures. In extreme cold, sweat can be lethal, its cooling qualities taking hold when a climber stops, and so they tried to be both prudent and hurried. Around 11:30 P.M., MRS rescuers joined the two COs at the site on Valley Way from which they would launch their search of the second beacon signal location. COs Mancini and Holmes, already cold from their wait, would stay at the site on the trail and provide backup support for the MRS team. Dupuis recalled some of what they hoped for:

> The initial plan was to go to the [beacon #2] waypoint, which was just below the Pine Link, roughly at treeline. My thought was to get there and search the area in a grid out 60 [meters] from that spot, and hopefully find her; if not, then reevaluate the weather, our team and see if we could go on to the next [beacon #1] location at Star Lake. Honestly, I had very little confidence that we would be able to venture much above treeline that night with the forecast. The wind was steady in the 90-plus-MPH range and temps were off my thermometer, well below –25 F when we were at the first waypoint; and I could hear the "freight train" just above us, actually the loudest roar I have ever heard. It was after midnight.

While this first search was unfolding near treeline, Ober was still working his phone in the parking lot. He called Wilcox again, asking for a second MRS team to carry a litter up in support of the rescuers; he stayed in constant touch with the teams on the mountain; he called the Civil Air Patrol to see if they had aircraft that could fly over and try to pinpoint the locator beacon. And then he turned to the possibilities of the morning, calling Bill Arnold at AVSAR, asking for a team on standby. If the teams up high didn't

find Matrosova, Ober knew they'd need new teams ready to try again at first light. Meanwhile, the temperature at the Mount Washington Observatory continued its free fall.

All the while, tech complexity morphed into perplexity: at 8:39 P.M. AFRCC reported the beacon in the Great Gulf Wilderness near the Osgood Trail (over a mile southeast from the King Ravine hit); at 9:26 P.M. AFRCC showed this same location; then, at 10:19 P.M. AFRCC reported the beacon back in King Ravine. Later, after the searchers had retreated from the mountain, Ober got a 6 A.M. update saying that a series of beacon hits at 2:17, 3:42, 4:35, and 5:27 A.M. had given a consistent reading of coordinates. Frustratingly for Ober and everyone else, these coordinates matched the first set that had placed Matrosova near Star Lake the prior afternoon.

Here is a moment of cautionary pause. Many of us now devise a net of knowing and safety with our devices; precise marking of location seems, at times, a miracle brought to us by an unseen but all-seeing satellite eye above. But before we assign our devices a divine infallibility, it's good to consider how and when they may err. As use of locator technology has grown more prevalent in the Whites, so too have stories of its sometimes wild variability. Not long ago, I recall writing up a rescue on Mount Madison (*Appalachia*, Summer/Fall 2014, 66 no 2, pages 118–119), not far from where Matrosova's story unfolded: an October cold front blew in with hurricane-force winds and dropping temperatures, trapping a Vermont couple, who sheltered in sleeping bags and wrapped themselves in a tent behind rocks above treeline. They called for help, and when rescuers checked the coordinates of the ping from their phone, it placed them over in King Ravine. Fortunately for everyone, the couple knew the names of the trails they'd walked and knew that they were on Pine Link Trail near Madison Spring and not in the ravine; rescuers climbed right to them instead of chasing a ping into absence.

Specifically, the ACR ResQLink locator beacon Matrosova carried is characterized as "small and mighty, the ResQLink+™, a buoyant, GPS-enabled rescue beacon designed for anglers, pilots and backcountry adventurers." That's what the advertisement says; surely both adjectives apply. Readers of a certain vintage may even recall this refrain, "Here I come to save the day . . ." and fill in the savior's name: "Mighty Mouse is on the way." And ARTEX, the outfit that makes this beacon, has, of course, a "Survivor Club," which you can tap into on its website; there you can find stories from those rescued at their broadcast coordinates. And you can see photos of all the survivors. It's a very effective collage of people still alive.

And, for the most part, my research suggests that much of this is true, that much of the time, this is a "small and mighty" device. But then there is the variability that Ober experienced as he received coordinates and directed searchers. And there is the extreme weather during which Matrosova perished.

In the aftermath of the search, NHFG and the Civil Air Patrol conducted some tests to better understand this variability. NHFG Lieutenant Wayne Saunders explained that when CAP flew a plane over the same model beacon Matrosova carried, it got an accurate location as long as the beacon and antenna were upright. When, however, they placed the beacon on its side, as it was when Matrosova was found, the locations transmitted varied. And, of course, violent weather could easily affect how one deploys a beacon. Saunders also said that this review by both agencies had helped AFRCC gain a better sense for being able to offer a best probability when receiving beacon hits that show a number of possible locations.

All of this is no reason to eschew responsible use of such beacons. It simply reminds us that the eyes that look down on us cannot always locate or reliably pluck us from trouble. For now, I return to my caution about tech overreliance.

On the mountain, MRS 1 reached the two COs at 11:30 p.m., and after a consult, the four MRS rescuers forged through the scrub and snow toward the second set of coordinates, where they didn't find Matrosova or any sign of her. Now what? Dupuis looked back at the moment:

> My biggest concern about going any higher was not being able to return to treeline, as the wind would then be in our faces. Also the cold was really sapping our energy at that point. We were in snow at times waist deep and other times fighting through thick scrub which grabbed us at every step. As a team [after not finding Matrosova near the coordinates], we had a quick huddle and decided it was time to go down.

MRS 2 (Bayard Russell, Max Lurie, Nick Aiello, and Janet Wilkerson) had started up with the litter at 10:53 p.m., and by 1 a.m., they were 2.5 miles up the trail, where they stashed the litter for possible later use. MRS 1 was then working its way back to the trail. Ober and his three teams agreed that it was time for everyone to come out: MRS 2 got back at 2 a.m.; COs Holmes and Mancini got there at 2:18 a.m.; MRS 1 reached Appalachia at 3 a.m. "You could see they were all exhausted. Their neck warmers and faces were crusted with ice. They looked like zombies," recalled Ober. After debriefing with

Ober, they all left to get some rest. Ober then drove to a series of trailheads where Matrosova just might appear if she had made it down off the ridge into the Great Gulf, a slim hope, but one worth checking; then, finding no sign of recent activity at those points, he "returned to Appalachia and maintained the command post."

A Brief Compendium on Cold

It's hard to describe the kind of cold rescuers found and endured during this search; to do so, you would have to go, literally, to the ends of the earth. And, even as most of us have felt really cold at times, it is also hard to describe deep cold's effects. Words simply don't measure up to the way cold skews then stills life. But by pausing here for brief meditation, we at least genuflect in the direction of winter's lethal element.

In an email, MRS 2 climber Janet Wilkerson recalled that night's cold:

> I remember the dark, cold, windy parking lot, getting our team packed up and the litter prepped (the role of our team was to follow the lead teams with a litter in case she was found that night). Her husband approached us, he was gentle and kind and appreciative of our being there. I was surprised he didn't seem more panicked. I started the hike with my warmest gloves and outermost puffy jacket layer on, and 30 minutes up the trail I was still not warm enough to de-layer, despite having a 40-plus-lb. pack on and hiking uphill at a good clip with the team. That was surprising and showed just how cold it was. And when we took brief breaks to switch out the litter hauler, get a drink or check in with the radio, my fingers, even in large gloves, were cold within moments.

Dupuis added this:

> I thought about the cold and wind, and how to be sure I would not get frostbite. I double-checked my gear so as to not forget anything. I had been out guiding on the previous two days (Friday up the Valley Way to Madison Hut, and Saturday to the summit of Mount Washington) so my stuff was a bit scattered and drying out. I thought that there was absolutely NO room for any mistakes of any kind that night. I thought about all the possible exits off of Adams out of the wind and

how I would handle it if I were in her shoes. And, I said a prayer asking God for protection through that night, and the strength to get there and BACK.

Cold works on us from the outside in. First our extremities—fingers, toes, nose—feel its bite, then, as cold takes hold, not much at all. Our bodies, ever alert to threat, pool their warmth at our cores, where vital organs are. Our brains, working best when well bathed by blood, get their share too, at least at first. But trouble can begin easily at the ends of fingers and toes, where fine motor skills and motion can suffer: we drop things, can't grip them, and we slow down. Cold then conspires to make us stupid. The body, intent on its core, thins the brain's ration. We decide slowly, wrongly, not at all. What looks simple to the warm observer may be a chalkboard full of physics to the cold person. Then the wind blows in, the chalk dust flies, and even the board is a blank. Hypothermia literature is full of odd decisions, absence of decisions. It is, for example, not uncommon to find a hypothermia victim partially undressed in response to the delusion of being hot. Cold, finally, undoes reality.

When thinking of that cold, we recall Matt Bowman's son's instinctive worry about wind, cold's conveyor, and we recall Steve Dupuis's earlier comment that, as they tried to reach Matrosova's coordinates, "the cold was really sapping us." And perhaps we recall our own moments, when cold made impossible manipulating a zipper, tying a lace, or pressing even a button. As the blood withdraws from our limbs and heads to protect the body's core, there's soon not much left of the capability and expression we call life.

Day 2: Up and Then Down

As the early morning light found Ober in the Appalachia parking lot, the cold had only intensified. Light often heralds a lifting of spirit, but, looking up, Ober could find little to be optimistic about. The recent beacon signals had collected back near Star Lake, and, if Matrosova was there, Ober saw little hope that she could have weathered such a night or the day that was howling overhead now. Still possibility prodded: there was a rescue to continue.

Ober's relief would be Lieutenant Saunders, and when they met at Appalachia at 7 A.M., the two decided to move the command post to the Randolph Fire Station. The parking lot was simply too cold to muster the various teams. Ober gave Saunders and his partner Lieutenant James Goss all of the beacon

coordinates and a summary of the night's actions, and, with the beacon hits located on a map, they planned the day's searches. Four teams were assembling; three would go to the more likely coordinates, while the fourth would be held in reserve to support any one of the three search teams or to respond to any new hope.

The ten-person Team 1, composed of AVSAR and MRS volunteers and conservation officers, would go up to Madison Spring Hut, and from there, weather permitting, search the area near Star Lake, the site of the initial and other beacon hits. Team 2, all MRS volunteers, would search in the tricky terrain of King Ravine. Team 3, made up of AVSAR volunteers and conservation officers, would search the area of the beacon hits in the Great Gulf. The spread of these locations meant that each team would search a different route. The teams headed out from Randolph a little after 8:30 A.M.

Ober's night of calls had also activated the possibility of helicopter help, and a National Guard copter flew north from Concord at 9 A.M., arriving in the area 45 minutes later. But the high winds created an impenetrable whiteout up on the ridges, and, after fifteen minutes, the helicopter, running low on fuel from battling the winds, had to leave. The Civil Air Patrol flew a fixed-wing plane over in an attempt to zero in further on the beacon location, but the winds forced the crew to fly at 10,000 feet, and they were unable to narrow the search area.

By late morning, further work with AFRCC and CAP suggested that the Star Lake coordinates were the most likely ones, and Team 3 was called back from the Great Gulf. Then, at around 2 P.M., close to the agreed-upon turnaround time, Team 1 called down: Bowman had found Matrosova. The search was now a recovery.

Getting Close

Some of what rescuers have said to me in outlining the actions and emotions of searching for someone describes a sort of intimacy. The possibility of rescue, no matter how long the odds, sustains them; hope brings searchers close to the person they seek. It keeps them there.

This intimacy can start to take root as a searcher begins the gathering and steps toward the person lost or injured; it's always there, potentially. MRS veteran and spokesperson and former Tuckerman Ravine Snow Ranger Justin Preisendorfer gives example in the 2008 story of a fellow climber, Peter Roux:

> There are so many stories of folks rescued where a context sets up so that your heartstrings are being tugged even before you're out there—it could be a missing elderly person, a lost Boy Scout. One recent avalanche fatality affected me that way: Peter Roux was a climber who had cut his teeth in the Northeast, then moved away, and he had just come back to these roots for a visit and to climb with friends. On the day before they were to climb, Roux went out into Huntington Ravine on his own. Put yourself in his shoes—someone coming home to a familiar area; you want to make the most of your time. He went up into Huntington during elevated avalanche danger; he went up from excitement. On his descent, he was avalanched and died.
>
> We were in the Fan when the sun came up, hoping still to find him. When we located his body in the avalanche debris, we felt deflated; hope was lost.

That sense of closeness also can take on added urgency and specificity as a search lengthens, odds decline, and the sketch of the victim's story comes clear. Working against extremes—wind, cold, time lost, odds—sharpens urgency, which heightens expectation. And then, if the victim is not found, or if she is found dead, it feels like a sudden fall from the height of hope.

Such a fall happened twice during the Matrosova search: first on the night of the 15th, when MRS 1 reached the second beacon hit and found nothing.

Imagine the expectation as, after hours of uphill through tumult, they near the coordinates, struggling through deep snow, arctic cold, and wiry krummholz. We're here, they think . . . and then, headlamps spiking this way and that, they set to a grid search as best they can manage it in the screaming wind. She could, she should, be right here; we are that close. But, as they finish their wallowing trample, no . . . no one's here. Possibility flies off on the wind. Their spirits sink.

Then, there is the next day: in the broad light, but blanketed often by ground blizzard, Team 1's ten searchers are in the area of the initial beacon hit, the one that has been replicated four times early this morning; they may be near. Possibility wears still its 1 percent of hope; she could be alive. As he works through "waves of wind," having often to kneel and wait out the waves, Matt Bowman comes upon an anomaly—here's a pack, sitting on the surface; what's that doing here? Bowman's first thought is, Did one of us take off his pack? Then, 20 feet away, he sees Matrosova, unmoving, fully clothed, leg

extended. "She looked flash frozen," he recalled. Bowman, hunched against the wind, hurries over; her eyes are open—he will remember this—unseeing. O . . . it is an outrush of hope.

During a January 2016 conversation, Preisendorfer reflected a bit on how searchers focus on hope rather than grim likelihood when a search stretches on in unfavorable conditions:

> We all prepare differently. But there is a common thread—we try to look at possibility, not likelihood; the possibility of finding her [Matrosova] alive was still there, even if unlikely. That's also why the images of finding someone dead stay with us, because they occur at the point where we realize what we'd hoped for is no longer. It's difficult because we've searched for and found all sorts of people. You want to believe they'll live through it and they'll learn.

Coda: A Walk to Low's Bald Spot

Not long after my January 2016 conversations and exchanges with Sergeant Matt Ober, Matt Bowman, and others, an afternoon opened up. A little earlier, I'd stopped by the Appalachia parking area just to look at this story's beginning. A cold front had blown in, and its north wind harried a dusting of snow, chasing it in arcs across the tarmac like a dropped scarf. I sat for a few minutes in my warmed car, looking at the signage that marks the start of Valley Way; a gust rocked the car gently with a reminder.

A bit later, from Route 2, I looked up into the whitened col between Mounts Madison and Adams; the side of the Adams spur, Mount John Quincy Adams, glowed in the slanted sun. The col seemed almost an alpine cliché, a scenic place near and far, but not quite; really it was another world above.

Why not—I asked myself as I drove—sort this story through by taking a walk? The day was bright and average, temps a notch or so above zero, winds moderate for a mountain. I pushed off on the Old Jackson Road around 1 P.M. carrying a pack full of layers, snacks, and water (even down low, winter asks that we carry a lot); the new inch or so of snow, already foot-beaten by morning walkers, squeaked a little underfoot.

As I walked, I thought back to the SAR people I'd spoken with, and I felt warmed by their commitment, and warmed also by the absence of bluster and ego; the wind may roar announcement of self in the Whites, but its SAR

people do not. Two other common qualities occurred to me on my walk: to a person, search-and-rescuers say a primary motivation for doing this work is giving back to a community that values the outdoors, giving back also in support of the freedom to keep going out. And, to a person, they say it has been, could have been, could be me out there. Each has a story of being touched by the loss or trials of a friend. So I heard no pontificating, saw no finger-pointing or head-wagging. When I heard quiet criticism, it tended toward lament: if only people would turn back sooner when conditions deteriorate.

I'd aimed the few miles out and up to Low's Bald Spot, where I'd be able to peek into the beginning of the Great Gulf and look up again at Mounts Adams and Madison. An hour later, I watched two plumes of snow unfurl from these mountains; even on this low spot, there was enough wind to give the 8-degree temperature some teeth. I was, I realized, on the other side of the mountain, which is where this story ends.

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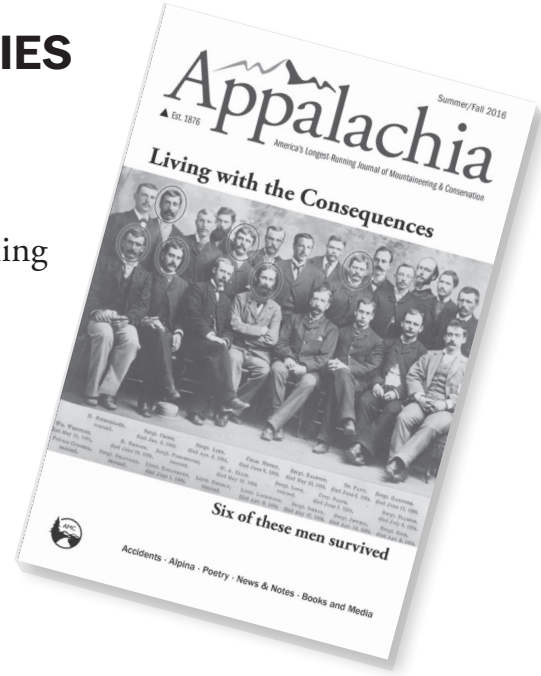

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