



RESCUE ME

Behind the Scenes of Search and Rescue

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Introduction

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

In the pages that follow, search and rescue (SAR) members share cases that are meaningful and memorable to them—how these cases unfolded and how they have affected their lives forever. There are survivor stories that will leave you shaken and in awe of people's will to survive, as well as open missing-person cases that still haunt SAR members and are shared here in hopes that someone will be able to provide information that might bring them home. Mothers of missing children tell heartbreaking stories of searching endlessly and waiting for them to walk through the door, whether it's a day, a week or until the end of their days.

You will read about K9 teams who are key in finding missing persons. Some of these dogs are certified in human remains identification, and others are trained as avalanche dogs. You will also read about horses who have the uncanny ability to find the lost through their sense of hearing and smell.

In any kind of terrain—from deserts to the woods, from mountains to the Arctic or to swamps—there's a SAR team near you. From plane crashes, vehicles dangling over cliffs, ATV rollovers, cars plunged underwater, skiers buried alive in snow, kayakers stranded in floods, canoeists trapped in rapids, or crevasses that can swallow you up in one gulp—there's nowhere that SAR teams won't go to rescue you and your loved ones.

By purchasing *Rescue Me*, you are assisting SAR operations, as some proceeds will go back to SAR units in the greatest need of donations, as a thank-you for their help in the creation of this book.

EARLY SAR OPERATIONS

The first-known civilian SAR operation was in 1656, and it took place at sea. The Dutch merchant ship the *Vergulde Draeck*, laden with chests of silver and other treasures, struck a reef close to the west coast of Australia. Out of a crew of 193, 75 survived and made it to shore. The under steersman and six other crew went back to get help from Batavia, a journey that took forty-one days. Despite several rescue attempts, no confirmed trace of the *Vergulde Draeck* was found, nor were any more survivors. If there were any, they were possibly eaten by cannibals, according to the Government of Western Australia.²

Beginning in the 1700s, St. Bernard dogs were used by monks to rescue travellers in the snowy avalanche-prone Alps. St. Bernards, with their keen sense of smell, were able to find people buried in the snow. The dogs covered freezing people with their body to keep them warm. “Over a span of nearly 200 years, about 2,000 people, from lost children to Napoleon’s soldiers, were rescued” by St. Bernards.³ What about the stereotypical image of a barrel of booze around the St. Bernard’s neck—is it truth or legend? It all stems from a painting, *Alpine Mastiffs Reanimating a Distressed Traveller*, by Sir Edwin Henry Landseer. In it, one of the St. Bernards has a wooden keg on its collar. While it’s controversial whether or not the dogs indeed sported kegs, they did carry packs with essential supplies for lost victims, according to the St. Bernard Club of New South Wales, Australia.

ABOUT THE CANADIAN NATIONAL SAR PROGRAM

The National Search and Rescue Program (NSP) oversees all of Canada’s SAR organizations and resources, in terms of both response and prevention. NSP is a part of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, through the National Search and Rescue Secretariat (NSS). NSS coordinates the National SAR Program, working with federal, provincial and territorial as well as air, ground and marine SAR organizations. Canadian SAR organizations and their responsibilities include:

- Canadian Armed Forces—aviation incidents.
- Canadian Coast Guard—marine incidents.
- Parks Canada—incidents within national parks.
- Provincial and territorial governments—searches for missing

persons, including those who are lost or overdue on land or inland waters.

- Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA)—assists the Royal Canadian Air Force for aeronautical SAR incidents.
- Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary (CCGA)—assists the Canadian Coast Guard in marine SAR incidents.
- Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR)—often delegated to the police service of jurisdiction.
- Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SAR-VAC)—assists police forces of jurisdictions for GSAR.

There are fifteen thousand specially trained air, ground and marine SAR volunteers who assist the requesting authorities and deliver prevention education with the intention of saving lives.⁴

ABOUT SAR IN CANADA

The roots of the civilian volunteer search and rescue (SAR) organizations across Canada began in the late 1950s and '60s, to safeguard Canadians in the event of a nuclear attack from Russia. As perceived threats from the Cold War diminished by the middle of the 1970s, civil groups began to respond to natural disasters.

The Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SAR-VAC), established in 1996, is a registered Canadian charity supporting Ground SAR (GSAR) volunteers in Canada, and also the general public.

SARVAC represents Canada's thirteen provincial and territorial volunteer GSAR associations, with a board of directors including volunteer representatives from each of the provinces and territories. SARVAC protects the interests of the country's nine thousand GSAR volunteers who provide SAR services on land and shorelines.

ABOUT BCSAR

British Columbia has the highest volume of rescues in Canada, due to its vast wilderness and the strength of its outdoor culture. According to the BCSARA website (bcsara.com), there are nineteen hundred search and rescue incidents in BC yearly, with twenty-one hundred people rescued by their three thousand volunteers.

North Shore Rescue (NSR),⁵ founded in September 1965, is the busiest SAR in Canada. According to Emergency Management BC's (EMBC) database, there were 1,775 incidents, including air, land and inland water from December 28, 2020, to January 2, 2022. In 2022, there was a sharp uptick in the number of incidents to 2,136 incidents logged from January 3, 2022 to March 31, 2022.

As of April 1, 2022, Emergency Management BC stopped posting weekly incident reports,⁶ but still produces annual reports for all types of emergency responses in the province, such as dangerous goods, motor vehicle accidents, environmental incidents, natural disasters, body recoveries, fires and SAR.

NSR (northshorerescue.com) taught urban rescue skills during the Cold War, due to the collective fear that the Russians might drop a nuclear bomb on the Vancouver area, but the organization also assisted in searches for lost hikers and skiers. They later completely focussed on search and rescue, specializing in mountain, canyon and helicopter rescues.

ABOUT US SAR

The National Search and Rescue Committee (NSARC) funds SAR in the US, including the US Coast Guard, FEMA Urban SAR, the US Air Force, FAA and the National Park Service. SAR groups go back to the late 1920s. American SAR groups are usually called out by the local sheriff, other law enforcement agencies (such as the FBI), the US Fish and Game Department or national parks rangers. Some SARs receive funding from municipalities and may come under the volunteer fire department category, but most rely upon donations.

PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC SARs

Ending a search is never an easy decision, but if conditions are too dangerous to searchers, there are no further signs of the subject, and the chance that the subject is alive is highly unlikely, then it's done after consultations with experienced SAR managers. A search of a day, four days or even a month may not seem long enough to a desperate family, but sometimes the initial search doesn't turn up any more information than can be found years later. However, sometimes subjects walk out on their own just as the searchers are preparing to leave.

Private SARs may approach families when they are at their most vulnerable during an active investigation, which can interfere

with the process, or after the official search is called off. Private SARs who contact families of missing persons claim they don't receive government funds, but many public SAR groups don't receive such funding either.

Private SARs may be registered charitable organizations and have volunteers amongst their membership, but they are run independently. In Canada, that means they don't fall under the NSAR and/or provincial SAR organizations, nor are they called out by authorizing agencies. The same is true in the US, in that private SAR organizations aren't called out by the sheriff, the US Fish and Game Department or other law enforcement agencies.

Public SARs have structured training and certification, and criminal record checks are conducted on the members annually by the local police. Public SAR groups are volunteers who don't solicit donations, don't ask families for compensation, won't put themselves or the public at risk during a search and won't interfere with evidence that could lead to finding a subject.

This book doesn't include private SAR groups. They have a niche when they're contracted to private companies, such as ski resorts or forestry companies, whereas public SARs never contract out to private companies. For example, logging companies are required by their jurisdiction's workers' compensation board, such as WorkSafe BC, to treat and evacuate injured workers, which is beyond the scope of public SARs or ambulances.

MYTHS ABOUT SAR

There are misperceptions that the public and users of public parks have about SAR members. Here are some of the more common myths, as well as an explanation of the reality in each situation.

Myth 1: Police go out on the lookout for rule-breakers, or SAR members go on patrol looking for people outdoors who need assistance.

Truth: SAR is called out to assist only by requesting agencies. In Canada, these agencies include the police, the RCMP and the provincial ambulance service. Park rangers patrol provincial parks, and that's why people may have the impression that SAR does the same thing. However, SAR isn't like the ski patrol or police on a beat. In the US, usually the sheriff's office is the requesting authority, although there

are exceptions, like the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other law enforcement agencies, like the FBI.

Myth 2: SAR members are paid employees.

Truth: SAR members are volunteers. Some provinces and states don't fund the groups adequately, so they pay out of their own pockets for training and equipment to perform rescues.

Myth 3: SAR work is glamorous.

Truth: SAR involves a lot of walking around at inconvenient times, looking for people who may already be home. A few SAR groups in mountainous regions do most of the dramatic extractions with long-lines from helicopters, because it's extremely expensive in terms of equipment and training. Only a few members within SAR do Human External Transport System (HETS) rescues, where they are hanging from a cable that's swinging from a helicopter.

Myth 4: SAR work is dangerous.

Truth: SAR has become extremely safe, and the safety of the crew is the top priority of every call.

Myth 5: SAR members maintain the trails.

Truth: Clubs, such as trail societies, mountain biking clubs, park rangers and other volunteers maintain trails.

MYTHS ABOUT MISSING PERSONS

When you call 911 to report a missing person, the police, RCMP, ambulance, Armed Forces, Coast Guard, coroner, fire department, Independent Investigations Office (IIO) or sheriff determine when and if they need SAR.

There are several misunderstandings about reporting a missing person, probably brought about from misleading scenes in movies or television. Here are some common myths:

Myth 1: You must wait twenty-four hours to report a missing person.

Truth: The sooner you report someone as missing, the better the odds of finding them, especially if the person left their trip plan with you. Every hour counts when they are overdue, and if you can't reach them, it's time to call 911. After twenty-four hours, the chances of finding someone alive drop dramatically.

Myth 2: You must be related to a missing person to report them missing.

Truth: A friend, neighbour, work colleague, or anyone connected or concerned can contact 911 about a missing person.

Myth 3: A missing-person case is closed if they're not found after a search.

Truth: A missing-person case remains open and active until they are found.



The majestic life-saving St. Bernard with the mythical barrel of rum around his neck is associated with saving the lives of skiers and hikers in the mountains and for the most part this myth is true, except for maybe the booze. Shutterstock 1713912484

3. Caves

Unlike the other BCSAR groups, BC Cave Rescue (BCCR) has no outside funding other than the Emergency Management BC (EMBC) operational allowances and reimbursements. Three applications for gaming grants have been turned down on technicalities, and BCCR is ineligible for regular funding through the BC Search and Rescue Association (BCSARA). It does not fit the template for community-based Ground SAR (GSAR) groups, as it is organized through the BC Speleological Federation (BCSF), which represents the interests of organized caving groups in the province. From the beginning, except for private donations, BCCR has raised their own funds, paid for their own equipment and shelled out for their own training.

The most the cave rescuers get in swag in exchange for their hard work and volunteerism is a T-shirt, making it challenging to attract new volunteers. The T-shirt motto makes all the hard work and expense worth it, however: “Interfering with natural selection since 1984.”

There are only about a thousand cavers in organizations throughout Canada. Fortunately, enthusiastic cavers see cave rescue training as a way both to improve their personal technical skills and safety, and to contribute to a service that anyone venturing into a cave, including their companions and even themselves, may someday need.

Their main source of fundraising is from the basic caving and cave rescue courses that they hold a couple of times a year for a modest fee of \$150. They also receive private donations. Phil Whitfield, whose story appears below, says it’s a point of pride amongst their membership that they are self-funded and that it says a lot about the caring nature of the caving community.

There haven’t been many cave-related rescues, and thankfully few fatalities, but when their expertise is needed, there’s a handful of committed, highly trained experts spread between BC and Alberta that can mobilize quickly to the mouth of any cave. Most caves are located in provincial parks and are remote, and it requires a massive effort to coordinate a rescue.



A cave Search and Rescue member properly harnessed to a rope system descends into a challenging environment for a search with no light and no communications equipment. Shutterstock 1867616776

The two mammoth underground BCSAR rescue operations covered in this chapter happened not because of human error, but because of the fragile properties of limestone on the interior of the caves that became worn away from friction of ropes and cams—cleats placed into cave walls that ropes are secured to—rather than because of any error of the experienced cavers themselves; in other words, they were freak accidents.

PHIL WHITFIELD—KAMLOOPS, BC

Born and raised in Victoria, Phil Whitfield got hooked on caving at the age of seventeen, and he started his caving career at Horne Lake Caves in 1964. Six years later, he helped revitalize Canada's first caving organization, the Vancouver Island Cave Exploration Group, and became active with the US National Speleological Society, presiding over its Northwest Caving Association for twelve years.

After moving to Nelson in 1975, he became involved in winter SAR through his career with BC Parks, which began in 1971. Between 1982 and 1984, he organized BC Cave Rescue, primarily for the safety of the provincial caving community.

Transferred to Kamloops in 1984, Phil joined Kamloops SAR (KSAR) and was invited to become involved with its rope rescue team. He attended a week-long Provincial Emergency Program (PEP) rope rescue instructors' seminar in Penticton in 1985–86, initiating a thirty-four-year run as a SAR rope rescue instructor. Serving as president of KSAR for several years, he also represented the Emergency Management BC Central Region groups, including Barriere SAR, Central Okanagan SAR, Kamloops SAR, Keremeos SAR, Logan Lake SAR, Nicola Valley SAR, Oliver–Osoyoos SAR, Penticton & District SAR, Princeton Ground SAR, Shuswap SAR, Vernon SAR, and Wells Gray SAR, on the Provincial SAR Advisory Committee in the early 1990s. Phil was the regional planning manager for the southern interior region of BC Parks from 1984 to 1995. He moved to a regional management position with the Land Use Coordination Office from 1996 until he retired in 2002. Phil also retired from KSAR in 2004, but he continued to be active in caving organizations, cave rescue instruction and rope rescue instruction.

In 2011 BCCR and the Alberta Cave Rescue Organization (ACRO), who have worked closely together since 2001, formed the

Alberta/BC Rescue Cave Service (ABCCRS) to share resources, training and to assist each other with search and rescue incidents.

After over thirty years, Phil stepped back as the BC provincial coordinator for ABCCRS in 2013, in part to put more time into improving the SAR rope rescue program. From 2015 to 2018, he was on the team that updated the rope program and produced the new *SAR Rope Rescue Manual*, published by Province of BC, EMBC with a grant from Canada Council's SAR New Initiative Fund (SAR NIF).¹⁸

Disillusioned with the transition process into the new rope rescue curriculum, he retired as an instructor in 2019. However, when his successor as BCCR coordinator moved to Atlantic Canada in 2020, Phil came out of his short-lived retirement from SAR.

Phil shared the following highlights of the cave rescues he has been involved in during his over five decades of caving experience, in his role of rescue coordinator.

CASE 5: CAVER INJURED ARCTOMYS CAVE, BC

From October 17 to 21, 1991, Phil managed the most extensive and expensive cave rescue and recovery in Canadian history at Arctomys Cave, Mount Robson Provincial Park. At the time, Arctomys, at 536 metres deep, was the deepest known cave in Canada; however, Bisaro Anima Cave, 683 metres, near Fernie, BC, has since surpassed that record. The deepest cave in the world is found in Russia—the Veryovkina Cave, at 2,212 metres.

According to Phil's report on the Arctomys accident, three men from Jasper, Alberta—Rick Blak, Ron Lacelle and Hugo Mulyk—and Chris Zimmerman of Valemount, BC, took a helicopter twenty kilometres from the Yellowhead Highway and up almost two thousand metres to the entrance of the Arctomys Cave. Rick and Ron each had ten years of caving experience, so they split into two teams; each of the experienced cavers paired up with a less experienced man.

Rick and Chris went into the cave first, at around two in the afternoon, then Ron and Hugo followed three hours later. At around eleven that night, they met up at an area called the Straw Gallery. Half an hour later, Rick used a handline—a free rope tied to an anchor, in this case rock outcropping—to avoid water on a 3-metre drop just below the Elbow at 405 metres deep.¹⁹ Suddenly, a four-hundred-kilogram

outcropping of rock that anchored the handline broke loose. The boulder slid, crushing Rick's pelvis and knocking him unconscious.

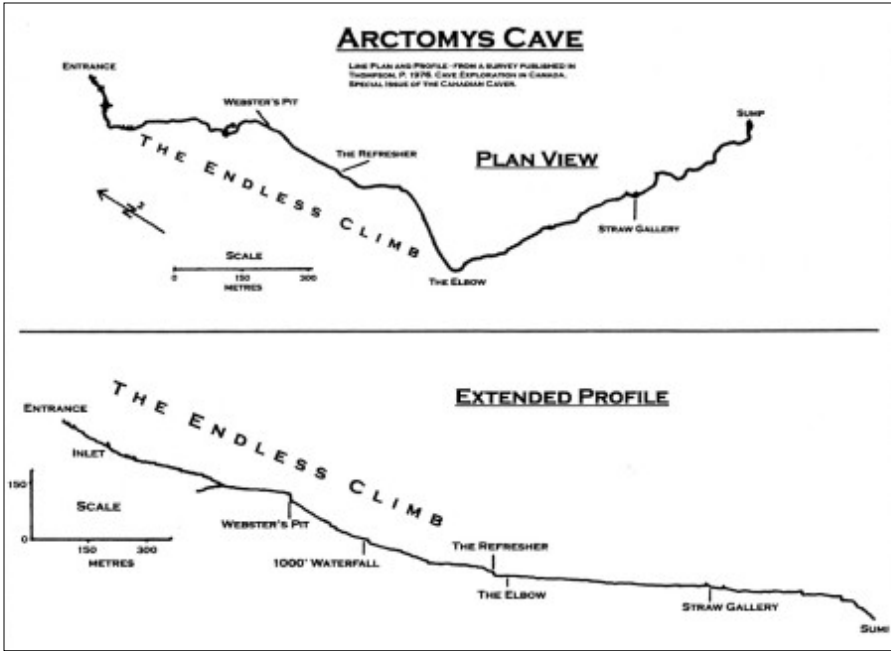
Ron and Hugo broached the rock slide in front of them, reaching the accident site within fifteen minutes to find Rick conscious and in agony. He was unable to use his right leg, and his speech was slurred. The three men tried to rescue Rick themselves, and they began to carry him toward the Elbow; however, after less than an hour, they realized they needed help. Chris, a Mount Robson park ranger (as were Rick and Hugo), had industrial first aid training, so he stayed with his colleague. Chris had no space blankets, garbage bags or extra clothes to keep Rick or himself warm.

Ron and Hugo reached the mouth of the cave at 5:30 a.m. on October 18, after climbing back in almost virtual darkness because of trouble with their headlamps. Their base camp was under fresh snow. Their VHF radio calls to BC Parks failed to hit a repeater and were unanswered. After considering their options, they set off for the highway at eight that morning. Eight and a half long hours later, they reached a telephone booth and called the RCMP and BC Parks for help.

BC Parks called Phil at 5:15 p.m. on Friday, October 18, within forty-five minutes of receiving Ron and Hugo's call from a telephone booth on the highway that they hiked to after getting out of the cave. A massive rescue, involving over a hundred first responders and volunteers, was launched.

Into the early morning of Saturday, October 19, SAR and Parks Canada personnel arrived at Mount Robson and cavers converged from Prince George, Vancouver Island and Alberta. The cave rescue equipment cache and three cavers from Vancouver Island were flown to Kamloops airport, where Phil, a Kamloops resident, met them at 2:30 a.m. They then drove in Phil's truck to the rescue base at Mount Robson Park, arriving at 7:25 a.m. Having good luck with the weather, nine other Vancouver Island cavers were able to be flown directly to Valemount and by the end of the day, thirty-nine underground and five surface support personnel had been airlifted to a camp at the cave entrance. A Bell 204 helicopter was on standby and radio communications from the cave to the base camp were set up with a portable repeater.

The plan to extract Rick was to move the ninety-kilogram stretcher up 405 metres through a passage of about one-kilometre from the Elbow to the entrance, which required considerable rigging.



This map shows the Straw Gallery, where the cavers met up deep in the cave prior to the accident, and the Cascades, downstream from the Elbow, where the accident occurred as Rick tried to traverse the water on the three-metre climb. You can see how steep and long the rescue was back to the mouth of the cave. Arctomys Cave Map. Source: Phil Whitfield

The stretcher would be moved using head and tail belays—ropes and attachments that allow the stretcher to be lowered vertically or horizontally in a controlled manner by including both a self-braking function and backup rope to protect against human error or the failure of components of the system²⁰—up to five metres above the floor of the cave. This required rotating a huge team of members underground so they could take turns to prevent burnout.

Chris and Rick had discussed that it was better for Chris to head out of the cave. They wanted to save the rescuers from potentially having to recover two bodies from the narrow passageways and depth of the cave.²¹ With great reluctance, Chris left Rick's side and started his climb out of the cave. His light failed before he reached the entrance, but he was found and led out by the members of the first rescue team at around 9:30 a.m., hypothermic and shaken after having spent forty-three hours underground.