

## SPECIAL REPORT: ENCORE

# Lost and Found

*Older volunteers are bringing their skills to search-and-rescue teams*

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'How come I have to play the dead guy?' asks Bob Boeder, plaintively. "Is it just because I'm the oldest one here?"

It's already dark, and at an elevation of 9,600 feet, the temperature is falling quickly in the Elk Mountains in Colorado. Mr. Boeder is one of five "victims" of a simulated plane crash, partaking in a training exercise for the graduates of a weeklong wilderness emergency medical course. Mr. Boeder's job is to lie under some willow shrubs on the steep hillside, groaning, so that his fellow classmates can locate him, diagnose his injuries (head wound and blood loss, leading, alas, to heart failure), and haul his body out to a waiting ambulance.

Like his fellow classmates, Mr. Boeder is upgrading his paramedic certification, which he uses in his volunteer search-and-rescue work. His classmates, scrambling around in the sage, are mostly in their 20s and 30s, predominantly forest firefighters and paramedics, although they also include a Secret Service agent from Park City, Utah, a handful of river guides and outfitters, a journalist, and a sushi cook from Malibu, Calif. Unlike most of his classmates, however, Mr. Boeder is 61 years old.

As a retiree, Mr. Boeder could have gravitated to all kinds of volunteer work. But with his interest in the outdoors, and his hobby of long-distance, high-altitude trail running, it isn't surprising that he ended up finding something more adventurous than supervising blood drives.

### **Heroes in Waiting**

Search-and-rescue volunteers are the folks who get called out, often in the middle of the night, to look for overdue hikers, lost kids, missing fishermen and snowmobilers buried in avalanches. And increasingly, in urban and suburban areas, they also search for abducted children and wandering Alzheimer's patients, and assist law enforcement with evidence searches in murder cases.



**A Third Career:** Bob Boeder in Colorado (top); Marian Hardy (in front of boat)

Though many volunteers are chest-thumping twentysomethings, most are in their 30s and 40s, and a growing percentage are in their 50s and 60s. Many get into the work after careers in medicine, the military, firefighting and law enforcement.

Mr. Boeder became the newest and oldest member of his local SAR team after he retired last year from his job of 20 years as an African specialist for the Army. After settling in Silverton, Colo., a former mining town at an elevation of 9,300 feet in the rugged San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado, Mr. Boeder was invited to a meeting of some local search-and-rescue members.

"It seemed like a way to meet some new people," says Mr. Boeder, a former college professor and Peace Corps volunteer. "Now it's like a third career." He had the time -- and the interest -- to take a training course to be an emergency medical technician, or EMT. The class met for eight hours a week for four

months.

Mr. Boeder's search-and-rescue debut was typical. His pager went off about 3 p.m. one day last December, signaling he was to call the sheriff's dispatcher for instructions. He grabbed his ready pack -- the all-purpose backpack filled with first-aid supplies, extra clothes, flashlights and other gear -- and rushed to the staging location, where the search teams store snowmobiles, ropes, harnesses, ice axes, medical kits and litters. Although Silverton is small -- with a population of 700 in the summer and 400 in the winter -- it musters up a presentable team of about 20 rescuers when calls go out. "Everyone in a small town like this has to give back something," he says.

In this case, a vehicle had gone off the narrow highway that links Silverton to Durango in the south. Amazingly, the driver was uninjured, but a passenger, an invalid, couldn't climb out of the canyon. The rescue team spent several hours getting the victim into a litter and winching him out of the ravine.

### **Off-Road Rescuers**

A lot of search-and-rescue teams do more rescuing than searching: In many states, emergency medical technicians aren't allowed to go more than 100 yards off the road, so they call the SAR teams.

A couple of months later, Mr. Boeder's team was called out to find some climbers who hadn't returned from a popular ice-climbing route, dubbed, given its risk level, the

Stairway to Heaven. In the dark and fog, the team couldn't see the victims, who were trapped on a ledge after their equipment failed, but they could hear them shouting for help. One climber flashed his camera, so the rescuers could tell where they were; but they could also tell there was no way to reach them in the dark.

"One thing you learn is when you can't rescue people," says Mr. Boeder. There was nothing the searchers could do except shout encouragement. The two climbers, who took turns sharing one parka, and jogging in place, survived and were helped down the mountain when it got light.

Not all victims are as lucky. In early June, Mr. Boeder's team searched two days for a six-year-old boy who slipped into a stream and drowned while hiking with his family, and in August they helped locate a bowhunter from Ohio, who had accidentally impaled himself on one of his arrows and bled to death. "It was tough on everybody," Mr. Boeder says. But bringing back victims nonetheless helps the families, he says. "They still thank us."

Older volunteers, with skills developed over a lifetime, can be especially helpful members of local SAR groups. Talie Morrison, 57, runs her own hiking and backcountry guide service, and has led everyone from troubled teens to church groups, in locations from her base in Crested Butte, Colo., to New Zealand.

Ms. Morrison became interested in search-and-rescue work about five years ago after a 15-year-old boy on a trip she was leading developed high-altitude pulmonary edema, a life-threatening condition in which the lungs fill with fluid. The local search-and-rescue team successfully evacuated the boy. Ms. Morrison joined the team soon thereafter and got certified as an EMT.

Given her medical training, Ms. Morrison is especially suited for the rescue part of the job. In summer 2002, her team was called to assist a young woman who was struck by lightning and blown out of her boots and hiking socks. The rescuers got the disoriented woman with second-degree burns into a stretcher and down to a road to a waiting ambulance. The woman made a complete recovery and the group saved the sizzled socks as a souvenir.

A couple of winters ago, her team helped find a young man who had gone backcountry skiing on a Saturday and was reported missing when he failed to pick up his paycheck on Monday. The skier had torn ligaments in his knee and spent the weekend scooting down the mountain on his bottom. He was pleased to be carried out the final mile.

"The best rescues are where you find the people alive," Ms. Morrison says. "I was able to get his mom in California on a cellphone to give her the good news." With two sons and five grandkids, "I totally related to how worried she was."

### **A Family Affair**

So how can you get involved? People interested in this kind of work can start by checking with their local sheriff's department, or with the National Association for Search and Rescue, a 32-year-old Chantilly, Va., organization with 15,000 members. The Web site ([nasar.org](http://nasar.org)) includes links to related organizations, such as the Civil Air Patrol, and

has lists of publications and classes, especially on search methods and medical training.

In some locations, volunteers join local "First Responder groups," which are generally people in townships who agree to go help people in distress, until the local ambulance crew can respond. Devvie Cersine, 53, volunteers in her group in Ely, Minn., and is also on her local ski patrol (as are her two sons, ages 19 and 23).

For Ms. Cersine, the appeal is the rescue, rather than the search. She grew up in a family of five kids in Minneapolis, where "everyone went hunting and fishing, and everyone always got hurt," she says. She worked for Outward Bound, and for outfitters in Ely, where she now lives with her husband, a retired miner. With a master's degree in outdoor education, she has taught first aid and backcountry skills at the country's first wilderness law-enforcement program, at Vermilion Community College, and has also taught first aid to Border Patrol officers.

Most of the members in the First Responder's group are in their 40s and 50s, but two are in their 70s, she says, including the retired chief executive of a local mining company. "We have need for people who are good at filling out reports, fixing snowmobiles, lifters, movers, communicators. Even the tiniest person has a role," she says, recalling how they hoisted up a petite paralegal in her 60s, weighing about 110 pounds, to help rescue two teens trapped in a chairlift.

The difference with younger people, she notes, is that they often seem more interested in the searching, rather than the rescuing. "The students are often very flippant about the first aid. They're more interested in body recovery." But she says that for adrenaline junkies, rescue work is "a natural fit if you like the out-of-doors."

At the other end of the spectrum are volunteers who specialize completely in searching, including Marian Hardy, 75, of Rockville, Md., who is a founder of the Mid-Atlantic Dogs, a seven-state search-dog group that locates missing children, abducted people and, recently, an Alzheimer's patient in Silver Springs, Md., who wandered from his home.

### **Training Search Dogs**

Ms. Hardy got into search work after 32 years as an astronomer and mathematician with the Defense Mapping Agency, where she helped map the moon for project Apollo. She wanted to do volunteer work, but "didn't visualize myself as a candy striper working at a hospital."

She was so taken by a demonstration of search dogs that she retired at age 53 and began training her own dog, a German shepherd named Kerry. Soon after, in 1983, she got called on her first search, to look for Jay, a 21-month-old toddler in Virginia who had wandered off when his mother's back was turned, wearing only a T-shirt and diapers. The boy had been missing overnight, but Kerry picked up a scent, and after scrambling a surprising distance up a rugged mountainside, "I looked over a log and there was this teeny face, all scratched and muddy and covered with tears." Although snagged in brambles, Jay was well, and is now in the Air Force in Germany. His family still stays in touch with Ms. Hardy. Kerry was killed in the line of duty -- hit by a car on a dark road while searching for a lost child.

Since that time, Ms. Hardy has been on 350 searches. She has helped locate victims of a multiple murder in a junkyard in Charleston, W.Va., and recently her team helped find a gun in a murder case. But for the most part, her searches have been about finding lost and abducted kids, dementia patients, drowning victims and victims at disaster sites. Two years ago, her trained handlers worked at the Pentagon and World Trade Center after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. (Although many police departments have K-9 teams, those dogs are trained to find and subdue perpetrators, or search for drugs and explosives.)

Ms. Hardy doesn't go out on missions anymore, but she travels widely -- most recently to Louisiana, Montreal, and soon to Spain, to train search-dog teams in water recovery. Most people in search and rescue, she notes, are in their 40s and older. Age is no impediment.

"When I started I had gray hair. People wondered if I could make it up the hill," she says. "But I have a lot of endurance. If someone said, 'You can't do it,' that could have been it. I like to give people the same chance." She's now training her toy poodle, Ping, a dog she rescued, how to track.

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