Next General Meeting is Monday, February 3, 1997, 7:00 pm at the Granlibakken Resort’s Ski Hut

Dead-eye Dick

Radio traffic...

SooP: No, this is Soop, do you read me?

RANdALL: Go ahead Soop.

SooP [slightly excited]: RO, I’ve spotted a blue jacket here. What color jacket is this guy supposed to be wearing?

RANdALL: He was reported to be wearing a turquoise jacket, Soop.

SooP: No, I’ve spotted a turquoise jacket here.

These radio transmissions came at the end of the search, and the start of the rescue, in what was to be the first in a long line of searches for the Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. The following is a summary — with minimum hyperbole — of six search and rescue the Nordic Team responded to between December 22, 1996 and January 5, 1997.

Cotton Tries To Kill

John Wells, 22, of Incline Village, hiked away from the Mt. Rose Highway (at Tahoe Meadows) with overnight gear the afternoon of December 20 with the intention of pitching his tent under a tree to “contemplate life and think.” The snow surface was old and hard and the walking easy. A storm started that afternoon which would drop more than six feet of new snow over the next 48 hours. John made camp in the falling snow and awoke the next morning to a collapsed tent and the blizzard running full throttle. It had snowed three feet overnight. He gathered his gear and in poor visibility started breaking trail back toward the highway. Or so he thought. He in fact began wallowing toward the SE, about 110 degrees the wrong direction. Exhausted after several hours and covering only a quarter mile, he decided to make camp but could not repitch his tent. He crawled inside it — sans poles — bivy-sac style. But before he hunkered down for his second night he had the wits about him to tie some colorful clothing to trees surrounding his bivy. (This clothing is what Team member Scoop Remenih spotted the next morning (December 22) from his snowcat.) It snowed an additional three feet that night; John became buried alive in his soggy tent canopy. When the Team found John, he was very wet and very cold. All four cotton layers of his clothing were completely soaked through. He had minor frostbite on one foot and eight fingers. His body temperature, measured orally, was 92°F. John was transported to Lake Tahoe Medical Center, he was released later that afternoon.

Cotton Kills

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was next called out at 2:00 A.M., December 23. James Augstino, 48, and his son Harley, 18, both from San Francisco, had gone for a day-ski on December 20 and had not been heard from since. Their two cars were discovered on Donner Summit buried under six feet of new snow. With little more than the cars’ location as a clue, 10 Nordic Team skiers and one Team snowcat began searching the Castle Valley area. The terrain was fat with new snow. After several hours of searching, the skiers had found no evidence of the Augustinos. It was then that Team skiers Doug Read and Steve Maten decided to peel off from the main search effort — concentrated in Castle Valley — and began skiing and searching the Lower Castle Creek drainage. As the afternoon wore on, the now three-day-old storm subsided and visibility became excellent. Two helicopters were called in to assist with the search. At 2:30 P.M., a CH7 helicopter spotted Harley skiing down the Lower Castle Creek drainage about 20 minutes ahead of Doug and Steve. Harley was rescued by the helicopter and informed the media on board that his father had died earlier that day. Doug and Steve, assisted by an Air National Guard helicopter, located and recovered the body of James from the bottom of a crude tree-well shelter. This was quite an effort in the chin-deep new snow and 60 mph rotor wash of the overhead helicopter. Doug and Steve were then winched Till-a-Whirl style 200 feet up through the tree tops to the helicopter and flown out.

James and Harley had intended to ski only a few hours the afternoon of December 20 but quickly became lost in the storm. Dressed poorly in cotton street clothing and with only a couple energy bars as survival gear, the two were extremely vulnerable to the fury of a major Sierran snow storm. Trouble with their rented cross-country ski equipment lent no security to their situation. They spent three stormy nights in clumsy shelters under fallen trees and logs, cold and soaked. James succumbed to hypothermia about noon, December 23.

Deep Snow Immersion

The Nordic Team was called out again at 7:00 P.M. on December 23 to help search for a missing snowboarder at Sugar Bowl ski area. Four Nordic Team searchers responded and combed the Sisters area of Sugar Bowl, the area the missing boarder was last seen, from about 9:00 P.M. to midnight. At 3:00 A.M. on December 24, Zephyr, a 3-year-old black lab (handled by Lynn Macaulay of Reno), located the frozen body of Joel Busath. Joel’s body was 3 feet below the snow surface at the base of a cliff; he was 16 years old. The previous morning Joel had apparently stood up at the 30-foot cliff and, after removing his snowboard, jumped. He was immediately buried.

Skiing Geometry

At 4:30 A.M. on December 27, Washoe County requested the Nordic Team’s assistance in finding three overdue cross-country skiers thought to be in the Tahoe Meadows area. Several Nordic Team skiers and two Team snowcats joined the search effort of the Washoe County Hasty team. The missing skiers, Patricia Corner, 42, Sara Corner, 19, and MaryAnne Doyle, 37 (all of Incline Village), were located by a Washoe County snowcat driver about 10:00 A.M. The women became disoriented in the previous day’s storm and had skied in circles trying to find the way back to their car. It became dark.

More action other side...
and they took shelter under some trees, huddling together throughout
the night. They tried, but couldn't kindle a fire. Little did they know
they were only 200 yards from the Mt. Rose Highway. All three were
dressed in fairly good mountain clothing and had food and water but no
map or compass. "We were foolish to go out in such bad weather,"
Patricia said.

**Tahoe Meadows — Encore**

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was called back to the Mt.
Rose area the evening of December 30 to look for Dennis McGelligan,
30, of New York, New York. Dennis had inadvertently strayed from the
boundary of Mt. Rose ski area about 11:30 that morning. He was
reported missing when he'd not shown up at day's end. 10 Nordic
Team sisters and one Team snowcat concentrated their search effort
down the Ophir Creek drainage. It was snowing and blowing hard;
sideways at times. About an hour into the search, assisted by the
Wasco County Harly team, the Nordic Team lead sisters picked up a
set of downhill skis tracking heading into the eroded depths of the lower
Ophir Creek drainage. This area, the eastern escarpment of the
Carson Range, is renowned for its unstable soils and has been the site
of numerous large debris flows. The Nordic Team sisters tracked
Dennis down to snow line (6000') where they found his rented skis. He
had thrown them into the sagebrush. It was now 11:00 P.M. and pouring
rain. The Team continued to track Dennis, and found him, muddy, wet,
and scared at about 11:30. He'd lost his gloves above and was
scooped through by the storm.

The Nordic Team sisters surveyed their position. It was precarious;
the conditions horned. Rain poured in sheets upon a mass of eroding
terrain to the maximum angle of repose. "It was really hairy down
there," explained Nordic Team member Jeff Rieger. "The mud was
knee-deep and rockfall rained down from the dark above. At one point
we heard this big rock crashing toward us. It was every man for
himself." The Team members turned on their route-finding mojos and
rescued one-and-all down to the Maranatha turnoff of the Franktown
Road.

**Opéra Bouffe**

The Nordic Team was next called out January 5, and spent many
hours searching for three snowmobilers missing since the day before.
They had been last seen riding on Martis Peak and Mt. Baldy.

As it turned out, two of the snowmobilers had crashed into each
other (January 4) effectively disarming their machines. Trying to
figure out what to do next, the three North Tahoe snowmobilers
decided to abandon the third (perfectly fine) snowmobile and walk
"only three hours" down to Glenshire for help. Well, they walked and
walked, missing Glenshire by a little less than a parsec. Instead, they
ended up descending Gray Creek, reaching Interstate 80 the next
afternoon.

**Education — Better Than A Refrigerator Magnet**

The January 5 callout was the ninth incident Tahoe Nordic Search
and Rescue Team has responded to this season. It is also the one
hundredth search and rescue to which the Team has ever
responded. Though all of the Team's searches have been highly unique,
there exist at least a few fibers common to each. The misfortunes that
befall the subjects of our searches almost all start with a small but
significant misjudgment, a wildlife miscalculation, a backcountry faux pas.
Dressing poorly, the inability to assess direction; underestimating
mountain weather; these are the most common mistakes made, and
once made, the consequences of these errors compound faster than
tweaked plumitum.

I recently had a conversation with a retired surgeon, a man of
considerable talent and experience. We talked about one of the Team's
recent searches and I commented on how sacrificed the lost guy had
become because he wore cotton clothes. My surgeon friend looked
puzzled, then asked, "What's wrong with cotton clothes?"

You and I take for granted dressing in polypropylene, knowing the
local magnetic declination, and having a rudimentary knowledge of
winter weather. But these skills are not necessarily public wisdom.
Not even local wisdom. This apparent vacuum enforces how
essential — and perhaps even urgent — the Team's self-appointed task
of educating the public continues to be. So get out there and do it,
locally and regionally. Spread the gospel of the nylon, the romance of
orienteering, the power of being "Winter Aware."

**Training Calendar**

Please give Seminar Committee chairs Dirk or Peter a call if you
want more information on training specifics. I've been told they take
calls 24 hours a day. The Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team garage
is located at 223 Fairway Drive in Tahoe City (behind the Tahoe City
Chevron). Here's the pulp:

- **February 2:** Familiarization of the terrain surrounding Squaw
Valley. Meet at the Nordic Team garage at 8:00 A.M. or in front of the
Squaw tram building at 8:30.

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**The Great Ski Race**

**March 2, 1997**

**9:00 A.M., SHARP!**

**Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team Officers**

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**Committee Chairs**

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**Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team garage**

All phone numbers area code (916).

Photograph scanned courtesy of Compass Art, Tahoe Vista, CA

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**Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team, Inc.**

Box 7703
Tahoe City, CA 96145

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