

**Old Main Rescue
Medicine Bow Peak, 16 May 2009**

Summary

On Saturday 16 May 2009, members of the Albany County (Wyoming) Sheriff's Office, two Laramie mountaineers, and Medicine Bow Nordic Ski Patrollers rescued an uninjured man who got stuck during an attempt to ski a steep, narrow couloir on Medicine Bow Peak, west of Laramie.

Log of events

All times are approximate; vertical distances are estimates based on rope lengths.

- 1000 The male subject (M_1 , in his thirties) and his adult sister (N) place separate cell phone calls to Laramie dispatch to report that M_1 is stuck in a steep, narrow couloir on the face of Medicine Bow Peak, somewhere on its south ridge between a formation called Schoolhouse Rock and the peak itself. M_1 entered the couloir from above, on skis. After getting stuck, he had found a stable perch, jettisoned skis and poles, and called for help.
- 1040 Sheriff's deputy Neil Mathison calls Jerry Hamann, asking for Medicine Bow Nordic Ski Patrol help in a mountaineering rescue. Hamann then calls fellow patroller Myron Allen. Mathison also calls local mountaineers Ken Cramer and Mark Jenkins.
- 1200 Hamann and Allen carpool to the eastern winter closure on Wyoming Rte. 130, where they meet Mathison, Cramer, and Jenkins, forming a 5-person rescue team.
- 1300 Rescue team drives through the closure and establishes a staging area for gear assembly and snowmobile unloading, at a turnaround near where Rte. 130 crosses Libby Creek. (Beyond this point, unfinished plowing makes it difficult to turn a snowmobile trailer around.)
- 1400 Rescue team loads 5 people on 4 snowmobiles and proceeds westward along Rte. 130 to the vicinity of Lake Marie, a glacial lake beneath the south ridge of Medicine Bow Peak. They meet an adult male (M_2) who is a member of the subject's party and walking northeast along Rte. 130. M_2 descended the south ridge of Medicine Bow Peak on foot, after riding a snowmobile up with M_1 . He gives a very rough description of the subject's location. His FRS radio traffic with N indicates that she is within sight of M_1 , doesn't know which direction to go to find Rte. 130, and can't give a useful description of her own location. Her radio is losing power.
- 1415 Mathison, Jenkins, and Cramer depart with M_2 on snowmobiles toward the south shoulder of Medicine Bow Peak, to try to reach the top of the couloir where the subject is stuck. In the meanwhile, Hamann and Allen snowmobile eastward, stopping at a knoll between Sugarloaf Mountain and Lookout Lake, another glacial lake beneath Medicine Bow Peak's south ridge. From that vantage they scan the face of the south ridge and locate the subject. He is about 200 feet down from the top of a prominent couloir called Diagonal Gully, which forms the southern edge of a rock buttress known as Old Main (point 11755, south of Medicine Bow Peak). The subject appears to be crouched by a tongue of rock jutting into the snow-filled couloir.
- 1430 Mathison, Jenkins, and Cramer, having decided against a snowmobile ascent, proceed northeast along Rte. 130, drop off M_2 near a hairpin turn close to Sugarloaf Mountain, then join Hamann and Allen on the knoll.
- 1445 Allen walks southwest to Lookout Lake. Mathison, Jenkins, Cramer, and Hamann snowmobile to the lake via the drainage immediately to its east. The rescue team reassembles near the foot of the cirque immediately to the north of Old Main, west of Lookout Lake.
- 1510 Mathison, Jenkins, Cramer, and Hamann ascend the south ridge to build rescue rigging, while Allen traverses to the base of the couloir, just west of Lookout Lake, to monitor the subject and guide the anticipated roped travel via radio. While en route, Mathison radios a request for two additional Sheriff's deputies to bring snowmobiles to the staging area. Perhaps because of

- noisy meltwater in the couloir, Allen cannot establish voice contact with M₁.
- 1615 Mathison, Jenkins, Cramer, and Hamann reach the top of Diagonal Gully, from which the subject is not visible. They build an anchor for a rappel, backed up by a lowering system with a second rope tied to the end of the first. During this period, Allen hears a female's shouts from the low ridge east of Lookout Lake but sees no movement on the ridge and cannot locate the source.
- 1630 Sheriff's deputies Josh DeBree and Billy Meyer arrive at the staging area and begin a search for M₂ and N.
- 1715 Jenkins rappels into the couloir with visual spotting from below. Since the rappel rope isn't long enough, Hamann, Cramer, and Mathison revert to the lowering system and lower Jenkins about 150 feet further to the subject.
- 1730 Jenkins makes physical contact with M₁, who is uninjured and lucid, albeit scared. Jenkins attaches him to the rope with a bowline, builds a rock anchor about 20 feet above him, then puts a climbing harness on him. Jenkins shows him how to jumar up the rope, pass the knot, and kick steps to climb the steep snow.
- 1745 DeBree and Meyer arrive at Lookout Lake and, after some searching, locate N near the place where Allen heard shouts, roughly half a kilometer from the base of the couloir. She had been filming M₁'s descent and, apparently, had stayed in place even after the rescue team arrived at the couloir. DeBree and Meyer transport N to the staging area, finding M₂ en route as he is traveling by foot along Rte. 130.
- 1845 M₁ arrives at the top of the couloir. He returns on foot to his snowmobile, parked on the ridge south of Old Main. Hamann, Cramer, and Mathison add a third rope to the lowering system and lower Jenkins about 100 feet further to the subject's skis. Jenkins loads the skis on his pack, then lowers past the lowest rock band in the couloir. From there he unties from the rope and downclimbs to Allen with crampons and an ice tool.
- 1900 After Jenkins is out of the line of fire, Hamann, Cramer, and Mathison pull the ropes up, take down the rigging, and proceed north along the ridge, toward the cirque where the rescue team's snowmobiles are. Allen and Jenkins also return to the snowmobiles.
- 2000 M₁ arrives at the staging area. Mathison, Hamann, and Cramer arrive at the rescue team's snowmobiles and, together with Jenkins and Allen, depart for the staging area. M₁, M₂, and N depart for the eastern winter closure of Rte. 130, where they have a parked vehicle.
- 2045 The rescue team sorts gear and departs the staging area. Mathison stops at the eastern winter closure of Rte. 130 to return M₁'s skis.

Analysis

Terrain difficulties were the most significant factors in this rescue. The subject dropped into a steep, narrow couloir that was beyond his skiing ability and in which a fall would likely have been fatal. The average slope is between 50° and 55°; Jenkins, who descended the entire couloir, estimates that the steepest part is between 65° and 70°. The presence of a significant rock band midway down the couloir suggests that the subject had not carefully inspected the route from below before choosing to ski it. The couloir may have been tempting because it was one of the few along the southeast face of Medicine Bow Peak where it was possible to enter by skirting the prominent snow cornice that hangs over the face of the entire range for much of the year. Still, a six- to eight-foot cornice loomed above the spot where the subject spent much of the day.

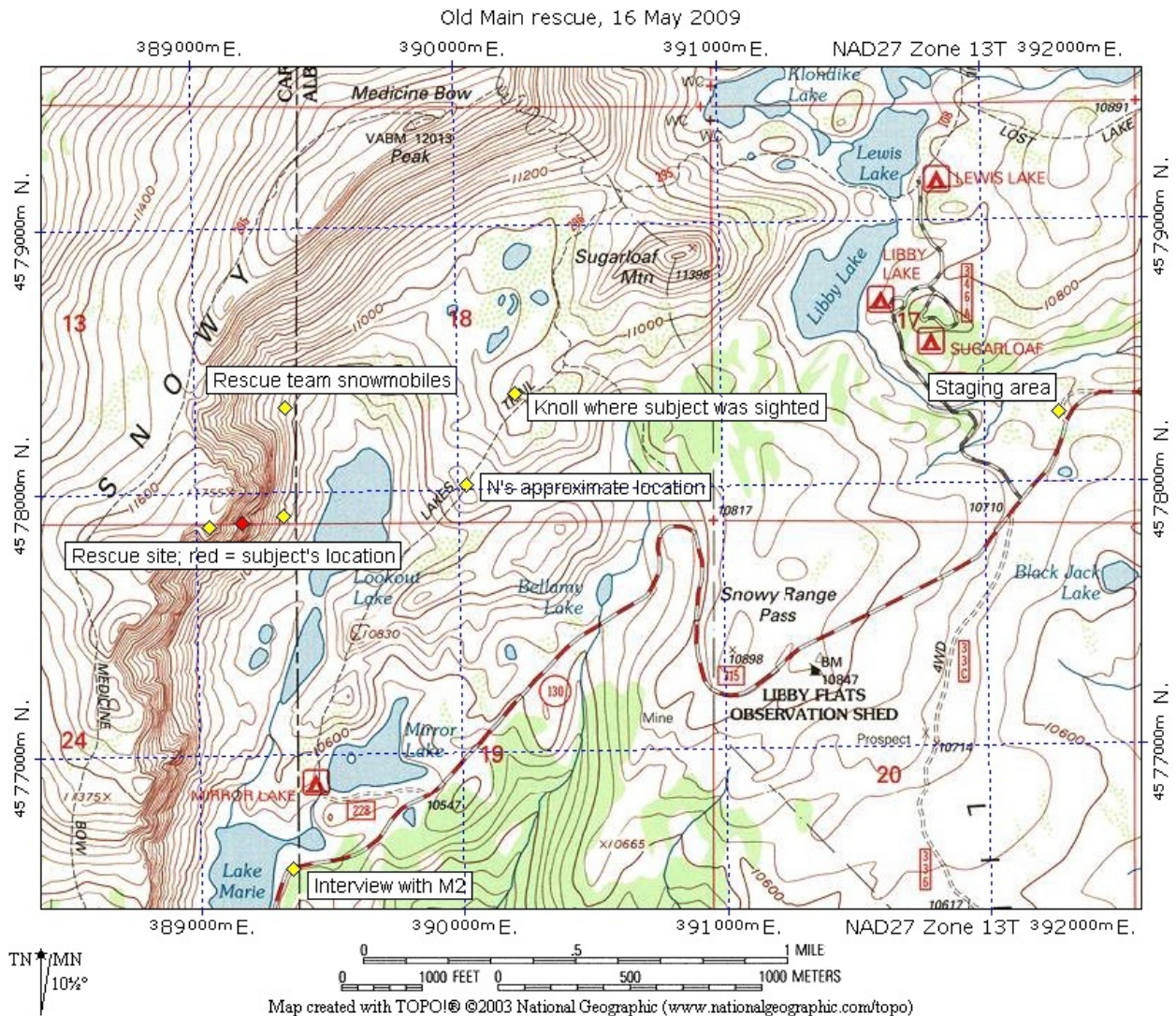
The subject's equipment and use of it deserve comment. He had an ice tool, which he used to help anchor himself after bailing out of the ski descent, and crampons, which he did not use. He had no harness. By jettisoning his skis, he abandoned two tools that he could have used to build a snow anchor

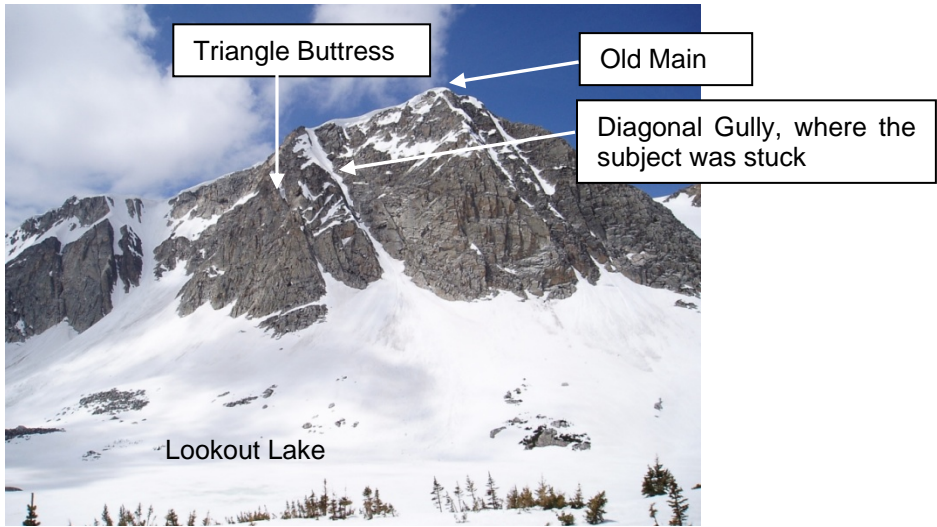
for himself. And had he worn a harness with a leash or cordelette, he could have attached himself to the anchor and been much more secure during the long wait for help.

The group dynamics of the party of three (M_1 , M_2 , and N) added complexity to the rescue. None was a local. N was so unfamiliar with the area that she was unable by radio to direct the rescue party to the subject and unaware of a routefinding device easily deduced from a glance at the map: if you travel with the cliffs of Medicine Bow Peak at your back, you'll reach paved highway in less than a mile. Even so, had N joined the search party when she saw them at Lookout Lake — an easy walk from her filming site — she could have provided useful information (such as M_1 's cell phone number) and would have avoided making herself the subject of an additional, superfluous search.

Warm weather, sunshine, uncharacteristically light winds, the absence of injuries, and an early call for help made it possible to complete this rescue before nightfall.

Compiled by Myron Allen





Old Main and Triangle Buttress, showing Diagonal Gully and the subject's approximate location. Medicine Bow Peak is about 1 mile to the viewer's right. (Photo by Myron Allen, 23 May 2009.)



Diagonal Gully on Old Main, showing location of rescue team's anchor and the subject's location. (Photo by Myron Allen, 23 May 2009.)



Members of the rescue team building an anchor at the top of Diagonal Gully. (Photo by Mark Jenkins, 16 May 2009.)



Subject climbing to safety. (Photo by Mark Jenkins, 16 May 2009.)