

RESCUE ON THE YAMPA

By John H. Adams
fellow traveler

It was Monday, May 23, 1994, day two of white-water rafting on the Yampa River in Colorado.

There had been no spills through the rapids. No one had fallen overboard. No one had been bitten by rattlesnake or scorpion while camping on the river banks.

So far, so good.

But Tom Tucker, an optometrist from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, slept fitfully Sunday night. He bravely kept his discomfort to himself that night. Early Monday he could gut it out no longer.

He told Dr. Robert "Buck" Buchanan, a Durham cardiologist, that he felt queasy. Buck took one look and knew the problem was serious. Even a layman could tell. Tom's skin was ashen. He could not stand or walk without assistance. He was disoriented. His left arm was numb.

Buck took his pulse. Tom's heart was racing through a drum roll -- 210 beats a minute. "We have to get him out of here," Buck said.

The occasion was an Outward Bound trip that began near the eastern end of the Yampa, a tributary to the Colorado River.

The Yampa is a rushing waterway that winds through sandstone canyons hundreds of feet high. Its ferocity peaks in the late spring after rising temperatures melt the winter snow that capped the Rocky Mountains. The river bed, nearly a mile above sea level, swells from the runoff, extending its width when the canyons allow elbow room and constricting to create frothing rapids when the canyons squeeze together.

Unsullied by dams or development, the Yampa is one of the great rafting rivers in Colorado, a state whose claims to geological fame are the Continental Divide, incredible heights and its rivers.

Mostly, you put in and you raft out of the Yampa. No highways or telephones are accessible except at the beginning and the end. That's 46 miles from Deerlodge Park, elevation 5,595 feet, to the Ranger Station at Echo Park, 5,060 feet.

Tom became ill at Teepee Hole, 36 miles and three days upriver from Echo Park.

The remoteness is stunning, wild and beautiful. But it presented an intractable dilemma for Tom. There was no easy way -- seemingly no possible way -- to get to a hospital.

The Outward Bound crew had no radio. Even with one, the likelihood of successfully transmitting a signal out of the canyon was slim.

When everything is going well, the scenery is breathtaking. You can see a bald eagle or falcon silhouetted against the sky. Horned mountain sheep are common. So are antelope, elk, beavers, marmots, deer. And, of course, scorpions and rattlesnakes.

But, because of Tom, the peaceful beauty of the Yampa -- a Fremont Indian word for a wild plant believed to have medicinal qualities -- became a harsh reality for the four Outward Bound staff members and 21 men who had begun this venture.

A note about the 21: Four physicians, three computer gurus, two ministers, a bank executive, a small businessman, a politician, the Southern correspondent for National Public Radio, a professor, a newspaper editor, a Ph.D. student, a drug manufacturing executive, a telephone company executive, a printer, an engineer and Tom.

Mostly, they were a forty-and-fifty-something group of Christians who enlisted in the river trip to test their spiritual and physical mettle. The common denominator for most of the adventurers was their current or former membership in Blacknall Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina.

Tom's predicament was an unwanted test. It reminded us of the bluntness of the form we had signed to release Outward Bound of any liability ... "in event of injury or death." It also reminded us of the reason we had signed up for this excursion: to enrich our faith. Tom's plight was to become the focus of that test.

We decided to gamble on a long shot. One Outward Bound staff member and one person from our crew would try to climb out of the canyon and hike back to the ranger station at Deerlodge Park. Maybe there was a crevice that could be scaled.

Outward Bound's Kelly Coburn, who was piloting the supply raft, was chosen. So was Mark Paulson, a rangy Durham businessman who appeared to be especially physically fit.

Kelly, a dropout from the rat race, had managed computer information systems before deciding with his wife, Becky, to become a full-time Outward Bounder. He and Becky sold their house and possessions and cut their lifestyle to the bone. They live in a trailer near Vernal, Utah. Off-river, they drive a wheezing, rusting car with pinging valves. They count their blessings by the number of nights they sleep on the ground: 185 in 1993. They have rafted the Rio Grande through the Grand Canyon and other rivers.

Mark is well-conditioned, an avid tennis player. He would acknowledge later, however, that jogging and playing tennis are not adequate preparation for trying to scale canyons.

This was the plan. Kelly and Mark, provisioned with enough food and water for a day, knives and matches, would try to scale the cliffs and find a road back to Deerlodge Park. Meanwhile, the rest of us would paddle down river to Harding Hole campground, about 12 miles. There, staff members assured us, was ample room to land a helicopter, assuming Mark and Kelly succeeded in getting the word out of the steep canyons.

Tom would ride lashed to the supply boat, attended by Buck and Dr. Charlie Clark of Raleigh, an eye, ears, nose and throat specialist and former Air Force physician.

About 9 a.m. that Monday morning, the hikers and rafters went their separate ways. Seven hours later we would know whether the rescue effort had succeeded.

It was a long day on the river. Anxiety dulled the beauty of the trip. We paddled harder than usual, rarely relaxing and drifting when the river settled into its gentle currents.

Tom did poorly. He drank water, but lost it. Buck worried because Tom was dehydrating. Tom's pulse slowed for a while, but began racing again.

When we stopped for lunch, Tom literally had to be carried off the raft -- no easy job because of the speed of the river and the unsteady footing on the slick stones. He tried to reassure us that he was all right. His pained expression said otherwise.

Buck was intensely worried and frustrated. His speciality is catheterizations -- snaking a tiny tube through a leg artery into the heart to determine whether there are blockages. But a top-flight cardiologist can do only so much without equipment and medicine.

There were many prayers along the river that day, and especially from the four physicians on the trip.

Lowrie M. Beacham III of Durham, who had worked for more than a year to get the group together to tackle the Yampa, was the most anxious. He was a veteran of three Outward Bound experiences -- one with a management group and two with his teen-age daughters. He had lured the participants with promises of a memorable, maybe life-changing experience. He had not mentioned life-threatening experiences.

For Lowrie, there was some irony. A former research scientist, he more recently was director of safety and health for Burroughs Wellcome in the Research Triangle Park, N.C. But he could offer little to ensure Tom's safety and health.

Worried nearly to tears, Lowrie assumed more than his share of personal responsibility for Tom's predicament. If he had not encouraged Tom, who had a previous heart problem, maybe ...

Buck and others told Lowrie to dismiss such notions. But Lowrie was not so easily dissuaded. Every time Tom winced in pain, Lowrie seemed to grimace in guilt. The "don't-blame-yourself" did not help.

Tom seemed neither to improve nor worsen as the rafts pounded through rapids and drifted over still waters that day. He held on, that's all.

Fortunately, the rapids were fairly light that day. The most notable were, in succession, Little Joe, Five Springs and Big Joe. Each provides a thrill, but none a heart-stopper, no pun intended. Before each of the rapids, we pulled ashore to scout them and make sure we knew exactly where to enter and at what angle. With ailing Tom in tow, this was no time for sloppy planning.

In negotiating the rapids, you must avoid boulders hidden by overflows. Behind those so-called "sleepers" are surly eddies that can swallow a raft and disgorge everything in it -- especially the crew. Passing over a sleeper is a ticket to serious injury or death. The swift water will bash you mercilessly against rocks and boulders.

But none of us worried about himself. Would Tom's heart be able to hold on through the turbulence? That was the issue.

Big Joe Rapids was the last hurdle. After that, it was four miles of calm water to Harding Hole -- and, we hoped, a helicopter. Tom was hanging on.

We arrived at Harding Hole about 15 minutes ahead of schedule. No helicopter. But it was early.

It was also hot and dry that afternoon at the river's bed hundreds of feet below Wagon Wheel Point. We rested Tom under a tree and looked for a place to spread Outward Bound-issued yellow rain gear to give an approaching helicopter a target.

Then we waited.

At almost exactly 4 p.m., a chopper descended into the canyon. Simultaneously, the cheers went up. The plan had worked, we imagined. Help was on the way. Tom smiled painfully.

After circling the area, the emergency medical team from St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, Colo., landed.

Before the rotors had stopped, two medical technicians were out of the chopper and jogging toward Tom. They were A-one. In minutes, they had Tom on an IV to help regulate his heartbeat. They gave him a field EKG with a portable machine. Buck hovered over them and read the printout.

We were all amazed at the gentleness and professionalism of emergency medicine practiced in a remote area that Fremont Indians had abandoned hundreds of years before because of its cruel demands.

Tom managed a reassuring smile while the helicopter team prepared him for transport to St. Mary's. Many of us took photos during the rescue, held our breath and mumbled private prayers. We had not been given much hope by the Outward Bound staff that Kelly and Mark would be able to surmount the canyons and find help.

But they did. Or so we thought. Within 15 minutes after landing at Harding Hole, the medical team had Tom aboard the helicopter. They lifted away smoothly. In three days, at the end of our trip, we would find out how Tom did. There was still much anxiety, but for the moment we were consoled that he would get the treatment he needed.

Surprisingly, Kelly and Mark arrived at our campsite less than an hour later that day. They were amazed to learn that the rescue effort had succeeded. To our astonishment, they told us that they felt their mission had failed.

Having hitchhiked a ride to Harding Hole with other rafters on the river, Kelly and Mark provided an account of their efforts that convinced us that perhaps the principal cause for the rescue was providence.

Here is what happened from their perspective: They could not find a way to scale the canyons. Several times, they had to backtrack from canyons that appeared scalable but weren't. They trudged up and down and got nowhere.

Their hike was arduous and dangerous. Mark nearly stepped on a snake but luckily avoided being bitten. At one point, he slipped and was tumbling off a canyon toward the river. He grabbed a tree limb and dangled there precariously.

Along came a kayaker, who told Mark to drop. He did. The kayaker ferried Mark, who was hanging onto the rear of the tiny kayak, around the cliff. Another kayaker did the same for Kelly. With the water temperature around 45 degrees, the escort service was excruciatingly cold.

On the other side of the cliff, Mark and Kelly told the kayakers about the unsuccessful rescue mission. The kayakers on their own decided to try to find a rafter with a radio.

They succeeded, they later told Mark and Kelly, but the rafter's radio could not transmit the message through the sandstone canyons. No one answered.

Tired, wet and cold, and seeing no more possibilities for climbing out of the gorge, Mark and Kelly caught a ride with other rafters. They dreaded facing the rest of us and relaying word of their failure. They imagined that Tom's condition might be worse -- or that he might not have survived.

They were incredulous when we told them that he was airlifted to St. Mary's Hospital.

So what really happened?

It took days and an investigation by Ed Henegar, one of the ministers on the trip, before we knew how the message had gotten out of the canyons.

One of the kayakers who assisted Mark and Kelly located another kayaker, Doug Baskins, who had a portable ham radio in his gear.

Doug was asked to try to transmit a message out of the canyon. His first response was "not a chance in a thousand" -- and then he began chasing that chance.

At river level, no response. "His hand-held radio with an output of only seven watts requires line-of-sight contact with the receiving unit," Ed wrote in a later report to the river rafters.

"Doug climbed onto a large rock just below the rim of his canyon and his transmitted signal was returned by a repeater, an electronic device which hams install at the highest elevations available to increase the range of their communication," Ed wrote. Ed, a ham operator who keeps in touch with missionaries all over the world, said Doug's barely audible signal was picked up by Marty Rosenweig.

"Mayday, Mayday, heart attack, Yampa River," was the message Marty heard while he was in his shop in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

But the transmission was so weak, Marty could not piece together the information. He asked Doug to move about, a process that took hours. Finally, the message came through clearly enough. Marty called the state Highway Patrol at Craig, Colorado. The troopers set up a conference call with Park Service rangers in Dinosaur National Monument.

Because of the expense, there was some reluctance to dispatch a helicopter.

But Doug, who stayed on the conference call, told Marty and the authorities, "All I know is that the guy is sick and there are two doctors with him."

That sufficed. The helicopter was ordered.

Incredibly, the message, although third-hand, was entirely correct and produced a medvac team that was right on time. Also, we learned, stationed hundreds of feet above us on Wagon Wheel Point as we rounded the bend in the river to Harding Hole were two rangers who had been notified about the rescue effort. Unknown to us, the rangers -- make that guardian angels -- were monitoring our progress down the river and talking with the helicopter crew.

Ed's account underscored the amazing transmission of the Mayday message. "As remarkable as shortwave communication is in the best of conditions, this instance was well nigh miraculous," he wrote. "Doug's signal from the canyon was picked up by the repeater at about 8,500 feet, above Meeker, Colorado, forty miles away. No one in the Meeker area responded. The Meeker repeater, though, is connected by a special VHF communications link to the repeater at 10,400 feet near Steamboat Springs, seventy-five miles further, where Marty was monitoring the frequency while working in his shop. The VHF link, without which this message would not have gotten through, had been installed just two days earlier."

On the evening of the rescue, we sat around the campfire and recounted the day's event with gratitude and joy. We were still worried about Tom, of

course, but we marveled at the unknown circumstances that had resulted in his rescue.

We had begun this venture with a common bond: Our belief in a sovereign and providential God.

On a raging river, over its rapids and through its stark mountains, far from televisions and telephones, we had discovered fresh evidence for that faith.

Geologists who have studied the mountains and river bed along the Yampa say they were all covered with water 150 million years ago. Earthquakes and volcanos twisted and tore the land and the waters receded into the gorges.

What was null and void became marvelous and brutal -- landscape unimaginable to flatlanders from central and eastern North Carolina.

And, we learned, the one who shaped this earthly beauty had not abandoned it -- or Tom Tucker.

Tom had a close call, even after the rescue. In St. Mary's Hospital, his heart stopped briefly. A fast response by the hospital staff got it restarted quickly. Tom was able to fly home the next day.

But in Chapel Hill, he experienced severe abdominal pains and was admitted to the hospital again. Doctors discovered that he had developed more than a dozen blood clots. This time he was in the hospital 10 days. A few weeks later, Tom attended a dinner for the adventurers. Everything was working fine, he beamed, full of heart.