

The Mountain Rescue Page

Community Voice of the
Rocky Mountain Rescue Group



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60th Anniversary Retrospective Issue

1940s THE BEGINNING

Mark Scott-Nash

The Rocky Mountain Rescue Group (RMRG) has a long and colorful history, which to a large degree is the inevitable outcome of a rare combination of its mountain location and recreation-minded populace. Few places in the the world can claim this unique combination, so it's no surprise that one of the country's earliest mountain search and rescue organizations originated here.

The autumn of 1946 witnessed a sharp increase in mountain-related accidents near Boulder. Several fatalities in the Flatirons were followed by a tragic accident on Navajo Peak. Then, despite a massive search effort, the heartbreaking death of a lost three-year-old girl near Sugarloaf drove the community to form a volunteer rescue group. The first meetings for what was originally called the Boulder County Search and Rescue Group were held in early 1947. Its members were University of Colorado students and professors and other interested Boulder residents.



One of the first big missions for the new group was to locate a missing C-47 aircraft which disappeared in January 1948. The plane was flying between Denver and Grand Junction when it disappeared after reporting turbulent conditions over the mountains. It was assumed that the plane had disappeared in the labyrinth of the Indian Peaks, but nothing was found for months despite a large multi-agency search effort which included the military. In May of that year, RMRG located the wreckage in what is now known as Airplane Gully on Navajo Peak. The group received much publicity for its search and recovery efforts. The media attention not only established RMRG as an expert in finding downed-aircraft missions, but also solidified the group's growing reputation as a mountain rescue team. ■



LEFT:
Headline from the December 6, 1949 issue of the Rocky Mountain News.

RIGHT:
Tom Nielson and Robert Curry on an early Flatirons mission.



1946
Dramatic increase in mountain-related accidents

1947
Formation of RMRG

1948
C-47 crashes into Airplane Gully on Navajo Peak, RMRG finds wreckage and receives widespread recognition

Timeline of key events from the last 60 years

1940

1950s

April Christenson

In the early years, RMRG had very little funding, minimal group equipment, and a loose organization. When you're one of the first mountain rescue teams, it can be difficult to find a role model. With the vision and talent of some key individuals, the organization of RMRG quickly developed. Our association with the Red Cross brought a donation of much needed rescue gear.

1952 saw a major winter search on Hallet's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park for a missing party who ended up being a fatality. The body recovery mission that followed was filmed and produced as a documentary.

Although downed-aircraft missions have made up a relatively small percentage of the group's overall rescue load, they have played a key role in shaping RMRG and its reputation. In October of 1955 a few members of the group responded to a

United Airlines (UAL) crash on Medicine Bow Peak in Wyoming. The president of UAL, who had just flown in, asked for whatever help RMRG could give and the rest of the team was brought in. Less than a year later, in June 1956, RMRG was called to assist with the recovery efforts of a mid-air collision of

UAL and TWA airliners over the Grand Canyon — an extremely high-profile accident that led to the formation of the current FAA air traffic control system. Continuing the trend, in September 1956 RMRG helped with the recovery of a US

Air Force plane crash on Mt. Yale.

Early RMRG leaders knew that rescue teams like RMRG would be needed throughout the Rocky Mountain region and made efforts to organize region-wide subunits of the group. The fall 1958 Call List shows RMRG units in Boulder, Laramie, and Fort Collins. ■

Downed-aircraft missions have played a key role in shaping RMRG

LEFT: Tyrolean system used at Medicine Bow recovery. RIGHT: Evacuation in Gregory Canyon.



1954
First rescue truck ("Yellow Monster") purchased

1957
Arapahoe Rescue Patrol formed
Frozen peat bog fire on Caribou Plate

1958
Mountain Rescue Association formed

1959
Evac of lighting survivor from Pawnee Pass
Alpine SAR formed
Austrian cable rig donated to the group
"Yellow Monster" taken out of service as too costly to maintain

1960s

April Christenson

During the 1960s RMRG participated in eleven missions involving plane crashes. One of the most memorable occurred on the summit of Mt. Sherman in January of 1967. Five people were in the plane — all survived the initial crash but were not out of danger. Chuck Demarest, a 30-year member of the group, recalls that the winter conditions were extremely harsh: 70 mph winds and temperatures below -20 °F. Rescuers battled their way up to an elevation of 14,036 feet through these difficult conditions. During a brief break in the weather, they succeeded in evacuating the victims to an area that was safe enough to land a helicopter. This now classic mission was featured in the February 1993 issue of *Readers Digest*.

The 1960s also included multiple missions on Long’s Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, including several epic rescues

of injured climbers on technical climbing routes such as the Lamb’s Slide and the Cable’s Route.

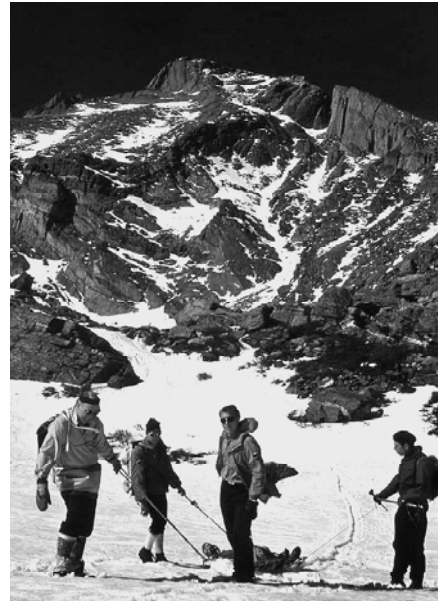
In 1969 RMRG held the first ever practice mission on the Diamond, a 1500-foot vertical face on Long’s Peak that was quickly becoming known for some of the world’s most difficult

rock-climbing routes. The goal was to lower a litter and two rescuers to an “injured climber” in the middle of the rock face, load the patient into the litter, and then lower all three to the base. Such a practice had never been done before

and there were many unanswered questions: How much would the rope stretch? How much overhang was there on the rock face? Could the litter above be aligned with the victim below? However, with careful planning and execution — and a lot of untwisting of the lowering ropes — RMRG was successful. ■

*Rescuers battled
their way up through
difficult conditions*

LEFT: *First practice mission on the Diamond.* RIGHT: *Evacuation of injured climber from Long’s Peak.*



1960

Evac of three people killed by lightning on Arapahoe Peak
RMRG becomes a member of the Mountain Rescue Association

1963

RMRG moves into UMC and establishes first “cage” to store gear
C-46 crash on Arickaree Peak

1965

Mountain Rescue Aspen formed

1966

Search and evac of lost hunter in Eagle

1968

Cable winch first demonstrated to public at MRA conference

1969

First Diamond evacuation practice
Routt County SAR formed
Colorado Search and Rescue Board formed

1960

1970s

April Christenson

The Mission Logs for the year of 1970 contain three plane crash recoveries. The largest was the tragic crash of a Martin 404 on Loveland Pass. The plane was carrying half the Wichita State football team. Although there were 30 fatalities, ten people survived.

In 1973 RMRG's cable-winch device was put into service. The winch was a revolutionary design that was intended for use in long, difficult evacuations that require moving rescuers and victims both up and down steep terrain. A crucial design feature

allowed the device to be separated into two pieces, making it light enough to be carried into the field on the backs of rescuers.

Unusual missions in the 1970s included carrying out the wing from a plane crash in South St. Vrain Canyon, and providing assistance to 19 hikers with food poisoning. In May 1977 RMRG evacuated two people caught in an avalanche on Arapahoe Peak. One of the biggest mission in RMRG history occurred on August 1, 1976, when RMRG assisted with search and rescue during the Big Thompson Flood. ■

LEFT: Early version of RMRG logo.

RIGHT: "1960" – a 4x4 International Harvester 1210.

BELOW LEFT: Crash site of plane carrying the Wichita State football team.

BELOW RIGHT: RMRG's revolutionary gasoline-powered cable winch system.



<p>1970 El Paso County SAR formed</p>	<p>1971 Intensive vertical uphaul and evac at Boulder Fall Purchase of new rescue truck ("1960")</p>	<p>1972 Summit County SAR formed</p>	<p>1973 Power cable winch put into service Western State Mountain Rescue Team formed</p>	<p>1974 Start of Westminster radio base ("1920" but later changed to "1950") Evac of injured climber from Arapahoe Glacier</p>	<p>1975 Five missions on a single day</p>
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1970

1980s

Dave Christenson

The decade of the 1980s began with two dramatic rescues in 1981. On October 10, RMRG responded to the Black Canyon of Gunnison (then Gunnison National Monument) to recover the remains of BASE jumper Larry Jackson. Jackson and companions had parachuted from the top of a 2000-ft cliff on the Painted Wall. Although the rest of the party landed safely in the bottom of the gorge, Jackson was killed when his parachute became

entangled on the cliff and suspended him 1000 feet above the canyon floor. RMRG responded from Boulder with the powered cable-winch system, and retrieved his remains the following day.

His parachute became entangled and suspended him 1000 feet above the canyon

On December 27, 1981, RMRG responded to Buena Vista, Colorado, to assist in a search for a downed aircraft in

the Collegiate Range. RMRG personnel utilized their expertise with radio direction-finding equipment to find the crash site on the slopes of Mount Yale. There were four survivors. Three were evacuated by military helicopter, the fourth was carried out in a difficult over-snow evacuation.

The rest of the 1980s saw the now familiar pattern of RMRG's approximately 130 missions per year, including search and rescue activities in high alpine terrain, throughout Boulder Canyon and

at Boulder Falls, on the vertical faces of Eldorado Canyon 600-foot cliffs, as well as lots of activity in Boulder County's Mountain Parks and Open Space. ■



LEFT: Steve Poulsen with patient located 1000 feet above the ground in the Black Canyon.

RIGHT: Wreckage of plane crash found on Mount Yale.

1979

Larimer County SAR formed

First reported use of wheel on litter evacuation (King Lake, Indian Peaks mission)

1983

Materials purchased for building 10 "superlitters"

1984

Front Range Rescue Dogs formed

1985

Ray Sundby begins a record 4 year term as group leader
Grand County SAR

1988

Evac of two climbers hit by lightning on the Naked Edge, Eldorado Canyon State Park
Crested Butte SAR formed
RMRG replaces 1960 with a Ford Van ("1970")

1980

1990s

April Christenson

In March of 1991 a plane crashed during a winter storm just east of Devil’s Thumb pass, one of the most remote parts of Boulder County. This “Henry and June” mission was another successful downed-aircraft search and rescue. RMRG used its radio direction-finding equipment to locate the plane and a passenger named June. The pilot, Henry, had tried to ski out for help but had fallen into a tree well several miles from the crash site. He was located by searchers who were able to follow his ski tracks.

In September 1991, rockfall left a huge boulder on the train tracks just west of Gross Reservoir. A freight train crashed into

the rock, derailed, and rolled down a steep embankment into South Boulder Creek. RMRG evacuated the remains of two crew members.

A freight train crashed derailed and rolled down into South Boulder Creek

was the evacuation of the remains of two climbers killed in a fall from the North Ridge of Mt. Toll.

The 1990s included an historic event when Jenny Paddock became the first woman Group Leader, serving from 1995 to 1997. Jenny is still an active member today. ■

In 1992 RMRG responded to an avalanche at Lost Lake in the Indian Peaks Wilderness that killed one snowshoer. Another major mission in the Indian Peaks

LEFT: Freight train derailment in South Boulder Creek. RIGHT: Scott Whitehead assisting a lost/stuck hiker near Pawnee Pass.



1990

Evac of injured climber on Navajo Snowfield
New stainless-steel superfilters put in service

1991

“Henry and June” crash near Devil’s Thumb
Train derailment near Gross Res

1992

Rescue of three backpackers stuck in coullor near Shoshone Peak
Recovery of snowshoer killed in avalanche at Lost Lake
Evac of two climbers killed on Mt. Toll

1994

Record number of missions: 159 (99 field missions)

1995

Jenny Paddock elected as first woman group leader

1996

Douglas County SAR formed

1990

2000s

Katie Johnson

The years between 2000 and 2006 brought several important changes to RMRG. Perhaps one of the most significant was a change in the ropes used for rescue — not once, but twice. Rope is clearly one of the most critical pieces of equipment for a mountain rescue team and RMRG always has several miles of rope in service.

Goldline had been the group’s standard for over 50 years because of its overall strength, resistance to abrasion, and elasticity. However, it had become increasingly difficult to obtain. RMRG therefore conducted an exhaustive study of more than a dozen other ropes, comparing them for tensile strength, abrasion

resistance, stretch properties, and ease of use. After a lengthy examination period was concluded, New England Rope’s Braided Safety Blue rope was chosen and put into service. Within a year, however, Mamutec came out with a revolutionary new design, Paraloc. Because of its lighter weight and significantly better abrasion properties, RMRG once again replaced all of its rope and now has several miles of Paraloc in service.

In 2005, RMRG added a second rescue vehicle to its “fleet.” A truck was donated by the Boulder County Sheriff’s office and revived the “1960” designation. In addition, the team began to assign group-owned radios to selected Support members,

improving mission-response communication capabilities.

The average year between 2000 and 2006 saw about 135 missions, including rescues, searches, and incidents both in and out of Boulder County. Newsworthy missions included several associated with the March 2003 snowstorm, which dumped up to seven feet even in low-elevation areas along the Front Range. In August, 2006, what seemed like a straight forward evacuation of injured Marine Lance Hering, on leave from Iraq, turned into Boulder County’s largest-ever search. It lasted seven days, involved 13 different emergency service organizations, and totaled over 7,000 person-hours scouring the steep and rugged terrain of Eldorado Canyon. ■



LEFT:
Jeff Sparhawk and Clint Dillard during the evacuation of a critically injured extreme skier from steep couloir near Forest Lakes.

RIGHT:
Stephen Price points out designated search areas during the Hering Search.



Boulder County’s largest-ever search. It lasted seven days, involved 13 different emergency service organizations, and totaled over 7,000 person-hours scouring the steep and rugged terrain of Eldorado Canyon. ■

2001
Avalanche fatality at Yankee Doodle Lake

2002
Happy Hour Crag rappelling fatality

2003
Massive snowstorm hits Front Range in March, hundreds of skiers stranded at Eldora Mountain Resort

2005
RMRG adds second rescue vehicle (“1960”) Massive search for Ranger Jeff Christenson in RMNP

2006
400-foot evac of injured climber on Third Flatiron Lance Hering Search

2007
RMRG obtains its first headquarters

2000

60th Anniversary Year

Lisa Sparhawk

With 2007 marking the 60th year of the group's existence, members decided to use the occasion to put on a few special events. The hope was to increase RMRG's interaction with the general public as well as to reconnect with past members of the group.

The March publication of *Playing for Real: Stories from Rocky Mountain Rescue*, authored by member Mark Scott-Nash and published by the CMC Press, was the perfect kick-off event for such an occasion. Mark's recount of both 'typical' rescue scenarios as well as some of the most paramount in the group's history, targets a much broader audience than the general climbing community. The average readers, including our own friends and family members, are now better able to comprehend not only to WHAT we members devote our time, but the stories provide a better insight into WHY we do rescue and what drives us to keep up on training and response to calls for help. Several book-signing events were held throughout the year, which allowed Mark and other members to have an informal dialogue with the public about RMRG.

In August, we took part in the "Outdoor Safety Expo," an event that was organized in conjunction with several other Boulder-based agencies to promote safety education to the public. Participants included City of Boulder Open Space/Mountain Parks, Front Range Rescue Dogs, Boulder Emergency

Squad, and Boulder County Emergency Services. Each group set up a display along the Bluebell Road at Chautauqua and had the opportunity to meet and greet many of the hikers and climbers on the beautiful summer morning. Not only was it a great opportunity for RMRG to spend some quality time with the others agencies that we work with on a regular basis, but we

were able to reach out to the very people who are likely to need our services one day. Members gave hikers and climbers a few tips about calling for help and stressed the important fact that we never charge for our services. A few of the youngsters in the crowd were even given a test ride in the RMRG litter system.

September brought the event that many members had been looking forward to all year long — the 60th Anniversary celebration. Guests included current and past members (as many as we could track down) plus special guests, including Sheriff Joe Pelle, City Council member Crystal Gray and County Commissioner Will Toor. The catered dinner was

held at the Avalon Ballroom, a pleasant and spacious dance hall located east of town. It was a night of reminiscing, meeting or reuniting with past members (several of whom came from out of state!), sharing stories and gaining appreciation for all the effort that has been put forth over the years to make the group what it is today.

The evening started off with a social hour, but was then

*Appreciation for
all the effort
that has been put forth
over the years*

SOME OF RMRG'S PAST PRESIDENTS REUNITE



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Dave Lewis, Dexter Brinker, Kelly Lucy, Joe Stepanek, and Bill May.*



Group Leaders, past and present. BACK: *Jim Gallo, John Clark, Ray Batson, Dixon Hutchinson, Rik Hendrikson, Joe Stepanek, Mark Ryan.* MIDDLE: *Guy Burgess, Lewis Dahm, Chuck Demarest, Dexter Brinker, Dave Lewis, Bill May, Jonathon Hough, Jeff Sparhawk.* FRONT: *Tom Nielsen, Scott Whitehead, Ted Krieger, Jon Horne, Steve Chappell, Kevin Harner, Jenny Paddock, Ray Sundby, Rod Smythe.*

quickly under way with the President's welcome. Kelly Lucy recalled the sad story that is known to be the catalyst for organizing a search and rescue team in Boulder County — a child became lost child not far from home who ultimately did not survive because she was not found in time. Kelly pointed out that just days before the anniversary celebration, the group's 60 years had come full circle. RMRG had been called out once again to search for a missing five-year-old who had wandered away from his father on a construction site. The resemblance was chilling, but the story drove home the realization that the fundamental necessity for search and rescue services have not changed over the decades. The outcome of this mission was much happier — father and son were reunited within a few hours of the call.

The rest of the evening consisted of a slide show presentation, photo displays organized by decade, a display of equipment from over the years, and exhibits of old newspaper articles about past missions and other significant events. The audience was honored to hear stories from past members such as Dex Brinker, Jonathan Hough, from special guest Pat Ament, as well as from current members Chuck Demarest, Steve Chappell, and Rich Farnham. In all, it was a wonderful evening and it did not last nearly long enough!

The next event that RMRG chose to partake in was a fundraising affair in conjunction with another Boulder institution, the Walnut Brewery. On November 8th, the Mountain Rescue Ale, a Belgian Dubbel brew, was tapped and RMRG was named as the beneficiary of the proceeds of a two-week long sales run. On tapping night, the patrons of the restaurant showed much support and appreciation for all that our members

do for the community by filling up our helmets with generous donations. It was also a great opportunity to let the public know that we are always going to be there for them if they are ever in need of help while recreating in Boulder's backcountry.

The number and variety of missions that RMRG has performed over the last 60 years has given its members an invaluable amount of experience in mountain search and rescue. The group's 60th year was no different. In addition to all the activities described in this article, members were still as busy as ever with regularly scheduled trainings and, of course, responding to missions. It could not have been accomplished without the ambition and dedication of its members, and it was certainly a wonderful way to kick off the NEXT 60 years! ■



IN SERVICE

If you would like more information about RMRG, please visit our web site at www.rockymountainrescue.org. Also, please consider that we are an all-volunteer organization with no paid positions. About 40% of our yearly budget comes from private donations. RMRG is an IRS 501(c)3 charitable organization, and all contributions to RMRG are tax deductible. We accept donations at our web site or by check (made out to Rocky Mountain Rescue Group). Checks can be mailed to:

Rocky Mountain Rescue Group, Inc.
P.O. Box Y · Boulder, CO 80306

Celebrating Sixty Years of Rocky Mountain Rescue

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This special issue of *The Mountain Rescue Page* is a commemorative retrospective, highlighting of some of the key events which have taken place over the seven decades of the Rocky Mountain Rescue Group's (RMRG) existence. Many of the missions and events mentioned in this newsletter are described in much more detail in the recent book *Playing for Real: Stories from Rocky Mountain Rescue*.

We hope you enjoy reading about our group's historic past.



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by headlamp for sixty years*