



**SEARCH AND RESCUE - A BROKEN FOOT AND RESCUE**  
**27 November 2001**  
**Name Removed**

NOTE: This post covers a little bit of everything, hiking poles, hammock, cell phones, SAR. Only the writer's name has been deleted. Endnotes have been added where necessary for clarity. They are shown at the end of the handout. Otherwise it is presented as written. Typographical errors have not been changed..

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I headed out south, solo, from Rockfish Gap at 1630 on November 27th (Tuesday), aiming for the fish hatchery in Montebello three to four days out. I arrived at the Paul Wolfe shelter (5 mi.) at 1830 and had the place to myself, having passed three northbound day-hikers on their way out. Having had dinner before heading out, I decided to read myself to sleep via the register, etc. while nestled in my bag. Temp. was an unseasonable 56 degrees. The night passed without incident except for dense fog and acorns falling on the sheet metal roof. Fog had lifted by breakfast and, being overly anxious to get moving, I had a cold breakfast of pop-tarts, granola bar, and water and filtered another quart from Mill Creek.

Headed across the creek and began ascending to the wonderful view from the overlook .6 mi. from the shelter. After taking a picture and fiddling with the adjustments on my pack, I hit the trail again - following those white blazes. 25 mins. later I came upon a shelter!

Agggggghhhhhhhhh!!!! I had just descended the ascent I had accomplished minutes before. I was back at the Wolfe shelter!! Who was it who recently posted the comment that "90% of the trail looks like 90% of the trail"? Of course, the immediate descent from what had been a pretty vertical ascent should have been a hint. An omen maybe? Reascended and continued south without further difficulty, until . . .

I had spent Wed. night in my Hennessy Hammock off the blue-blaze trail to the Laurel Springs picnic area. Everything remained wet because of another night of dense fog and I headed out, after donning the wet smelly clothes from Weds. hike, to attempt to reach Three Ridges Overlook (5.5 mi) before stopping for lunch. I passed Dripping Rocks on the Blue Ridge Pkwy. and on past Rocks Overlook and Raven's Overlook. The trail was typically rocky for this area and had an added layer of wet leaves on top of the wet rocks. I made a mental note to myself to be extremely cautious. I attempted to ensure that my hiking poles provided a three or four point foundation before crossing particularly treacherous, wet, rocky areas. I was doing pretty well until . . .

I began a descent and observed that this was, indeed, a treacherous area. Almost immediately my leading (left) boot lost traction and my leg shot out in front of me and I attempted to get my left pole in position to substitute. It, too, skidded off the wet, leaf covered rocks and I realized I was going down.

My right leg apparently slipped as well and ended up under my right buttock now weighing my 175 + 37 lbs. pack weight. I knew I was in trouble when I leaned over and looked backward at my right foot which had assumed a 90 degree angle from my leg. Oooooouch! I knew it was broken but thought I would attempt to favor it while hobbling the rest of the way to Three Ridges . I stood and my right foot wobbled around on the end of my leg as if it was only attached by my sock. I realized that there would be no walking on that foot.

I retrieved my Tyvek footprint from my pack and sat it on the rocks to provide a dry seat while I entertained my options. I had been hiking for two+ days and had not seen any other hikers except the three day-hikers headed the opposite direction on the first day. It was 1230 and I realized I had 4 or 4 ½ hours of daylight left. The forecast was for scattered showers Thurs. night and showers on Friday. I started to cool down because of the morning hike sweat, my slowing metabolism and the wind was now cool and noticeable coming off the ridge. My butt started to chill so I retrieved my closed cell pad and placed that under me and against the rock wall next to me so I could lean against it. Again I assessed my situation. The foot began to throb. I was somewhere between Dripping Rocks and Three Ridges but only knew that I was closer to Three Ridges but didn't know by how much. Regardless, I determined that would be the direction for my egress or for rescuers' ingress. One last look around and I resignedly (God, forgive me) reached into my pack for my (dare I say it?) cell phone.

I dialed 911, got Va. State Police dispatch who connected me with NPS ranger . [All names omitted for lack of permission.] He asked where I was and then told me he was about seventy miles away on the Pkwy. but would dispatch local rescue personnel and he would also be enroute. Minutes later I heard a siren in the distance - a long way in the distance. Somehow I thought I was closer to Three Ridges than that. I began to get colder so I took out my synthetic bag and wrapped it around me. I settled in for the wait. An hour and a half passed and then . . .

From the north a figure appeared. It was another hiker! He had his headphones on and was intently watching the ground in front of him. Not wanting to startle him, or worse yet, have him stumble over me, I waved my arms and called to him. He finally saw me and showed immediate concern. "Are you o.k.? Can I help?", he asked. I told him my situation and that help was on the way. He asked if I would like for him to stay with me. I assured him that would be nice and he took his pack off and sat down. He was solo thru-hiking and had taken a few weeks off to go home for Thanksgiving. We talked about gear and he told me that he no longer carried a tent since he usually made it to a shelter each night. I told him I was concerned that daylight would soon be waning and he needed to get going if he intended to make it to Maupin Field shelter by nightfall.

He agreed and said he would let the responding rescuers' know the time difference between his leaving me and his meeting them so they would know how far away I was. The time was 1409 hours. At approx. 1430 hrs. , two rescuers from the Wintergreen Fire Dept. rounded the trail from Three Ridges. I had purchased a disposable camera in Waynesboro before hitting the trail and, as the rescuers rounded the corner, I snapped a picture of them. I don't know whether they thought that was really amusing or what but they were good sports about it. Various radio transmissions followed and the primary rescuer began to take vital signs and assess the injury. He said, "I'm going to have to cut your pant leg off". I showed him that I had a zip-off pant leg and he thought that was cool. He did, however, have to cut off my Thorlo and sock liner. The deformity was immediately discernable and that info was radioed back. At about that time, two more rescuers arrived from the north. They had entered at Dripping Rocks and had apparently maintained a pretty good pace. One of them turned out to be the search and rescue chief from Wintergreen. (Wintergreen is a ski resort and its fire department is a private entity but has to follow certain service-need mandates by search and rescue certifying agencies, and therefore are responsible to respond to calls within a certain distance of their resort. After watching them in action, I can tell you that I would pit them against any governmental fire/search/rescue entity for professionalism and efficiency. I have almost three decades of government law enforcement experience that has allowed me certain insights into such things.)

I offered up my hiking poles for use as a splint and they provided one of their fire jackets as padding. It was decided that my sleeping bag would serve as a litter with two saplings providing the handles. When it was discovered that my bag did not unzip all the way around, there was concern from the rescuers about cutting a hole in the end of it. I insisted that it could be re-sewn and since it was synthetic we didn't have to worry about feathers blowing around. (Hey, another plus for the synthetic vis a vis down bag discussion!) Two saplings were cut down, a hole was produced and I mounted the litter. It wasn't working real well as my head had no support and therefore was hanging down awkwardly. They decided to use my closed-cell pad to place across the two saplings under my head. Worked great! Next problem was the insufficient width of the trail. With me between two rescuers at each end caused one or the other of the two slipping/sliding off the trail. The incline wasn't dangerous, just rough going. They decided it wasn't working. I suggested that I place my arms around two of their necks with a third rescuer out front supporting my injured leg. They agreed to try it but it posed the same problem with the too narrow trail. More radio transmissions and a Stokes stretcher was enroute. (This is a basket-type stretcher that one normally associates with helicopter rescues. However, this one had a suspension system with a single large air-filled tire beneath it.) We decided to sit and wait for it. More rescuers arrived - we now had six.

It was getting close to 1600 hrs. , when most volunteer SAR persons are getting off their day-jobs. The call for more support was "toned-out" and soon more rescuers were literally coming out of the woods. The Stokes basket arrived and we started up the trail. It was slow going over the rocky terrain and word was passed that support personnel were up ahead searching the trail-side to determine a short cut up the side of the ridge to get to the Blue Ridge Pkwy. above us. A shortcut was discovered, or better - was manufactured, and we made the 90 degree turn to head up the mountainside with a dozen rescuers manhandling the stretcher with me in it. Not a comfortable ride, but certainly shorter than continuing on the trail below to Three Ridges . We arrived on the Pkwy. and I was extremely glad to be there if not a little embarrassed. There was fire equipt. and personnel all over the place. I also felt a little guilty - you know - you place yourself voluntarily at risk and then call for help from others when things don't work out - oh well, guess I'll get over it. :-) I was certainly thankful for every one of them. They had come from communities as far away as Waynesboro and others. Great bunch of people!

They loaded me into a Wintergreen ambulance and gave me the choice of University of Va. hospital or Augusta Medical Center. Since AMC was closer, I chose that one. It was now approx. 1730 hrs. and by 1800 hrs. I was lying on clean sheets (in my wet, smelly, three-day old hiking clothes) in the ER awaiting x-rays. The x-rays confirmed that the fibula was broken and the tibia had dislocated from the ankle socket. Tendons and ligaments had been damaged and surgery would have to be scheduled. The ortho doctor gave me the choice of staying in Fishersville (AMC) and scheduling the surgery for Fri. or I could return to Hampton, VA and schedule with my own orthopedic surgeon (who knows me well, BTW ). I opted to call my wife in Hampton and have her come pick me up for the return trip home and subsequent surgery with my MD. She was surprised (to put it mildly) to hear from me and left from her work as an RN at the local hospital, picked up my son (to drive my car back home from Rockfish Gap), and arrived at AMC (200 miles) in almost half the time it had taken to get me off the trail and to the hospital!

Surgery occurred on 12/1/01 and a plate and screws were used to hold the tibia in the joint of the ankle. A reassessment will occur in ten days to determine if further surgery is necessary for the soft tissue damage.

Oh, the doctor says I should be ready to start my nobo thru-hike in mid-April as planned. I'll keep you guys posted.

Thanks for listenin',  
(name removed)

ENDNOTES:

1. . 1630 = 4:30 p.m.
2. . 1830 = 6:30 p.m.
3. . He meant Three Ridges Overlook at about milepost 13 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, just north of Reeds Gap.
4. . 1230 = 12:30 p.m.
5. . He was *v-e-r-y* lucky. In many locations in our mountains, Maupin Field included, cell phones will *not* work !!!
6. . He meant Three Ridges Overlook at about milepost 13 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, just north of Reeds Gap.
7. . sobo = southbound.
8. . 1409 = 2:09 p.m.
9. . 1430 = 2:30 p.m.
10. . 1600 = 4:00 p.m.
11. . SAR = Search and Rescue.
12. . He meant Three Ridges Overlook at about milepost 13 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, just north of Reeds Gap.
13. . 1730 = 5:30 p.m.
14. . 1800 = 6:00 p.m.
15. . BTW = By The Way.
16. . nobo = northbound