



T O T H E

*All-volunteer North Shore Rescue saves lives
in British Columbia's busiest mountains*

*BY STEVEN THRENDYLE
PHOTOS BY JAY PIGGOT*



R E S C U E !

North Shore Rescue members use their probes during an avalanche rescue drill on Cypress Mountain.



The 911 call came on the evening of November 3, 2015. Two hikers were stranded and hunkered down in a gully on Crown Pass, a short distance from Grouse Mountain in North Vancouver.

Immediately, a call-out was issued for searchers from the North Shore Rescue, most of whom were likely looking forward to a relaxing night of TV or helping their kids with homework. It was too dark for the team to order a helicopter from Vancouver airport, and so the rescue team set out on foot in the dark to locate the two out-of-town hikers.

They were extremely lucky—cellphone coverage cuts out a short distance from where they were huddled in a creek, and their rescuers were able to quickly locate them via “pings” on their GPS-enabled phone.

The following day, North Shore Rescue spokesperson Doug Pope didn't mince words: “If we hadn't reached them, they would have died out there. They were shivering and hypothermic, and not at all prepared for the winter conditions.”

ON A SCALE of one to 10, the mistakes made by those two hikers likely warranted a nine. They were inexperienced hikers—walkers, really—who had found the trail by consulting Google Earth and thought it would only take seven hours to complete. They chose Hanes Valley Trail, the most challenging day-hike in the North Shore Mountains.

They were ill-prepared to spend the night—with the recent switch from daylight savings time to standard time, the hikers got a late start—and weren't carrying any extra clothing or even a headlamp. Even in the full light of long days in June and July, the Hanes Valley Trail sees rescues for people who run out of daylight and are befuddled by tricky navigational challenges where the trail disappears and becomes a “route,” requiring not only physical stamina but mental acuity to keep heading in the proper direction.

They weren't prepared for winter weather—indeed, for the previous three days a drenching rainstorm lashed the Vancouver region and blasted the mountaintops with their first layers of snow and ice. Footing on the trail is notoriously dangerous even in dry weather, as critical portions of the route are nothing more than an unstable field of large boulders and scree slopes that require almost goat-like footing to successfully traverse.

They weren't wearing traction spikes, let alone crampons.

The North Shore Mountains ensnare both the neophyte and the experienced trekker. The three main trailheads—Cypress Mountain, Grouse Mountain and Mount Seymour—are busy ski resorts that have direct car access from downtown. (In fact, Grouse even has regularly scheduled shuttle service from the downtown hotels to its parking lot, and public transit drops locals and visitors alike at Grouse's doorstep at 45 minute intervals.)

Many, it seems, are simply blind to the dangers that surround them, in some cases just a few metres off a well-defined trail. After all, Canada's third-largest city sits less than a half-hour drive below the trails. Between hubris and oblivion lies perhaps the most dangerous mountain range close to a major city anywhere in the world.

The 10 Essentials

Carrying these 10 essential systems on any backcountry adventure is a good habit to get into, and could save your life. Here is the updated list from The Mountaineers' seminal book *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*.

1. Navigation (map and compass)
2. Sun protection (sunglasses and sunscreen)
3. Insulation (extra clothing)
4. Illumination (headlamp/flashlight)
5. First-aid supplies
6. Fire (waterproof matches/lighter/candles)
7. Repair kit and tools
8. Nutrition (extra food)
9. Hydration (extra water)
10. Emergency shelter



THE ERRORS, in many cases, seem ridiculously innocuous, if not stupid, and they compound very, very quickly. Stories abound, like that of British tourist Tim Billings, who, in November of 2014, didn't tell anyone that he was heading out for a hike and remains missing to this very day. On another occasion, rescuers were clued in to a snowshoer's whereabouts by following droplets of blood into a steep gully that he'd rag-dolled down the day before. In another incident, former team leader Tim Jones discovered a missing British tourist who had been snowboarding near Cypress Mountain and had followed a creekbed down the mountain. He was found face down with two broken legs, dead. Then there was the dawn rescue of a trio of experienced trail runners, who spent a mercifully balmy night “spooning” to conserve their body heat under a tree.

Unlike the topography of, say, Alberta's Rocky Mountains, the vast majority of Coast Range terrain is covered by dense forest that looks impenetrable, even from the bubble of a helicopter. And if there is a clearing on a mountainside, usually it's a sheer rock bluff with no possible route down. Even on the sunniest July days, the trees cast deep shadows, which further obscure vision. As NSR team leader Mike Danks says, “most of our rescues take place in Class Five terrain where some kind of rope rescue is needed to remove the victim.”

Objective hazards and dangers lurk everywhere. “The first instinct for a lot of lost hikers is to go down,” says Danks. “On the North Shore Mountains, going down in the hopes that you'll run into a road or trail is a really, really bad idea.” Disoriented snowboarders have post-holed in chest-deep snow for days on end, like Sebastian Boucher did in 2012. (His rescue is estimated to have cost over \$10,000 in helicopter time alone.)

Hiking has been long-established in the rugged outdoor mountain culture of Vancouver, pretty much since the first British settlers arrived here in the late 19th century. Though their elevation is rather modest at around 1,500 metres, a fascination has always existed around iconic peaks like The Lions, Mount Seymour, Cathedral Mountain, and, farther east, Golden Ears and Mount Cheam/Lucky Four Group. Early ascents became front-page news in the Vancouver Sun newspaper; one intrepid explorer signaled his successful ascent by lighting a fire on top of the Lions that was visible from downtown Vancouver.

THE OLDEST MEMBER of North Shore Rescue is 84-year-old Karl Winter, who participated in his first rescue at the age of 17 on his very first mountain climb in the Austrian Alps. “My partner and I were staying in a tent outside a hut, when word came down that there were climbers stranded high on the mountain.” The hut master requested that Winter and his partner help out with the rescue, and he's been helping out ever since, especially after moving to Canada in the early 1950s. In 1965, Winter attended the very first meeting of a new mountain first aid committee that would later become known as North Shore Rescue.

“During the Cold War, some of the scenarios we were preparing for concentrated more on civil defense than recreational rescues,” he says. Rescues often put the searchers at as much risk as the victims themselves. “We didn't have very good radio contact. Sometimes, our search teams would fan out and one team would find the victim, take him home, and then go to bed. The other teams would complete their assignments and return home much later, unaware that the rescue was over.”

Winter says that the creation of Mountain Equipment Co-op in the 1970s was an early turning point in recreational hiking, climbing and snowshoeing—although organizations like the Alpine Club of Canada, the B.C. Mountaineering Club, Varsity Outdoor Club and North Shore Hikers had been quite active, going all the way back to the early 1900s. Even the name of one of the North Shore's most heavily used trails—the Baden Powell Trail—commemorates the founder of the worldwide Boy Scouts organization who helped build the 48-kilometre trail in 1971.

Of course, a lot of technology has changed since that time, or, as NSR member Scott Campbell puts it, “helicopters and cellphones have changed the game when it comes to mountain rescue.”

Nowhere, perhaps, do helicopters and cellphones go together like on the Grouse Grind.

The Grind is a steep, stiff and not terribly scenic trail that has become synonymous as a fitness test more than a mountaineering achievement. The climb is known for being a tough, almost outdoor gym-like workout; indeed, the term “Mother Nature's Stairmaster” has often been used to describe its difficulty. Even superbly fit individuals can succumb to the exertion, in June of 2015, a 55-year-old man died



Not only is the volunteer work demanding, NSR members go through an intensive two-year training program.



from a cardiac arrest; the third such person to do so in the past decade. On sunny summer days, the Grouse Grind lineup is almost like a vertical group fitness class; according to Danks, thousands of people chug up the trail each day. Many of these novice hikers tackle the trail carrying little more than the shirt on their back, a cellphone (for the obligatory selfie) in one hand and maybe a water bottle in the other.

Inside the Tim Jones Rescue Centre that the team recently procured from the City of North Vancouver, Danks turns on a computer monitor and shows a video of a recent rescue from the side of the Grouse Grind on a perfect autumn day. The GoPro footage shows tiny, ant-sized people on the side of an impossibly steep drainage, looking after a gentleman who had fallen 40 metres off the trail. "We're not quite sure what happened; the fellow seemed to have wandered off the trail, under the rope, and then passed out. When we got to him, he was pretty banged up."

NSR is even taking an active role in locating lost souls wandering the city streets. "We've been called out to look for Alzheimer's patients, and even people with autism who may not be aware of their surroundings. In North and West Vancouver, even the suburban streets are

only a block or two from a swift-flowing creek or dangerous ravine," says Danks.

"TEAM" IS THE operative word for the North Shore Rescue. "The two-year training period is intense," Danks says. "First-aid, rope rescue, avalanche courses, backcountry navigation and, of course, working around helicopters are all skills that need to be mastered."

Not surprisingly, some of the rescue team is drawn from fire fighters, paramedics and ski patrollers, which makes sense until you realize that very few of these people might get much in the way of time off. Two rescues in a day aren't uncommon. An unseasonably dry spell this summer meant that the team was kept hopping virtually every week; one day, NSR members were called out for three separate rescues.

There was a time before cellphones



Remembering Tim Jones

With 20 years and more than 1,500 rescues as a member of North Shore Rescue, not only was Tim Jones the most active member but he was also one of its most colourful and beloved volunteers. Jones died from cardiac arrest in January 2014, but his legacy will live on in NSR's history. **By Ryan Stuart**

TIM JONES BY THE NUMBERS

1962: The year Jones moved to North Vancouver with his parents and two siblings.

20: number of years Jones was a member of North Shore Rescue

1,500: Approximate total number of rescues he took part in.

100: Average number of rescues per year NSR responds to. Jones took part in almost every one.

10: In addition to the four large decentralized equipment caches

around the North Shore, Jones also built 10 smaller ones deep in the backcountry, where rescue teams could find water, food, stretchers and supplies while working on searches.

\$2 million: The amount of money raised, in an effort spearheaded by Jones, to build a new rescue base in North Vancouver's public works yard. They moved in 2013.

6: Number of radio repeaters spread around the Lower Mainland,

considered one of the best networks in the world, which ensures searchers have VHF radio reception even in the most rugged corners of the North Shore. Jones helped build it.

250: The max length, in feet, of the long-line helicopter rescue system pioneered by Jones to make it easier to pluck people out of steep, forested and difficult terrain. Before Jones started tinkering, it was 150 feet.

40: Hours per week Jones worked for the NSR, all volunteer. That's on top of his career as a full-time paramedic.

\$50 million: Total annual cost if BC search and rescue volunteers were paid salaries similar to the RCMP. Instead, the province allocates \$9 million annually to Emergency Management BC. Jones lobbied to raise that amount.

when responsible hikers made sure to carry the 10 essentials in order to survive a night or two in the bush. Danks agrees, though, that the culture around hiking has changed, and the easy access to trails like the Grouse Grind draws far more inexperienced city slickers than, say, the Alpine Club of Canada members who would set out to a more ambitious summit such as the West Lion or Cathedral Mountain.

From the team's perspective, perhaps the most exhausting aspect is the effort it takes to merely keep going. "When Tim Jones (the former NSR Team Leader who suffered a massive heart attack and died near Mount Seymour in 2014), was alive, he constantly stressed the need for a consistent source of funding," Danks says. That's a lot of pressure to place on corporate donors and individuals, not the least of who are NSR members themselves, who spend significant time doing community outreach and fundraising. Take, for example, the rescue vehicles serving as mobile command posts. One of them, a specially-equipped Ford F-350 that is valued at over \$150,000, was just in the shop and needed \$5,000 in repairs.

And people aren't always necessarily grateful. "One time, we rescued a well-known physician who has several private clinics around Vancouver," Danks says. "We were really hoping that we might get a nice donation from him for saving his life, but he pretty much just thanked us and that was it."

North Shore Rescue, and indeed community rescue groups across Canada, might have a new friend in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trudeau's brother Michel was a keen backcountry skier who perished in an avalanche in B.C.'s West Kootenays and the elder brother spent several years fundraising for the Canadian Avalanche Association (now Avalanche Canada) to increase public awareness about winter backcountry safety. During the recent federal election, Trudeau actually filmed one of his most effective television commercials on the Grouse Grind, where he logged a respectable time of just under 55 minutes.

But Danks and his crew aren't waiting for that. On the afternoon that I chatted with Danks and his brother Gordon in the expansive new storage facility they'd finally managed to secure, I mentioned that I'd met Scott Campbell doing community outreach at Capilano University the week previous. Danks smiled and said, "Oh, Scott's over at Save-On Foods today. We're raising funds by selling hot dogs in the parking lot." 🐾



© Michelle Valberg



ADVENTURE CANADA

THE EXPEDITION CRUISE SPECIALISTS

Adventure Canada is a family-run travel company with more than twenty-five years experience, specializing in small ship cruises to the Canadian Arctic, East Coast, Greenland, Galapagos, Haida Gwaii, and select Canadian wilderness destinations. Our pioneering approach to expedition cruises emphasizes scientific discovery, art, culture, learning, and fun.



Call us at 905-271-4000 or 1-800-363-7566 adventurecanada.com

ADVENTURE CANADA 14 Front St. S. • Mississauga, ON • L5H 2C4 Ont Reg # 4001400. Adventure Canada is a Member of TICO and ACTA.