

Get Wild: Critical decision making saved a life

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Charles Pitman
Get Wild



A member of the Summit County Rescue Group at work on Quandary Peak.

Charles Pitman/Get Wild

Sometimes a mission coordinator on a search and rescue team has muted expectations before the mission even commences. A case in point was two out of state hikers attempting Quandary Peak in the winter. Weather conditions were horrible and we had no idea where the man was located.

But if there is anything I have learned over my years on the team, it is that some people become resourceful when they are faced with a dire situation. The person you think might succumb to the elements may be just the person who survives unscathed.

Case in point was this young man. In February 2019, two men attempted to summit Quandary in deteriorating weather, one on snowshoes and one in boots. They were from out of state from a low elevation and barely acclimatized. However, around the false summit the hiker in boots decided to descend, leaving his friend in snowshoes to continue on. Based on photos sent to family and friends, he reached the summit at 2:30 p.m., but how far had he descended?

At 7:45 p.m. the reporting party called 911 to say his friend had not returned. Because of the rapidly deteriorating weather we initiated a search for the man. Flight for Life was called to provide an aerial search but was unavailable due to weather. Two teams commenced searching at 11 p.m. At nearly 1 a.m. we suspended the search for the night because of weather, very poor visibility and plummeting temperatures. We strategized for the following day's search operation and at 2 a.m. we wrapped up for the night.

The search recommenced that morning around 6 a.m. Overnight temperatures had been well below zero and the hiker was





Winds on Quandary Peak often approach 80 mph. In such hazardous conditions a few critical decisions can mean the difference between life and death.

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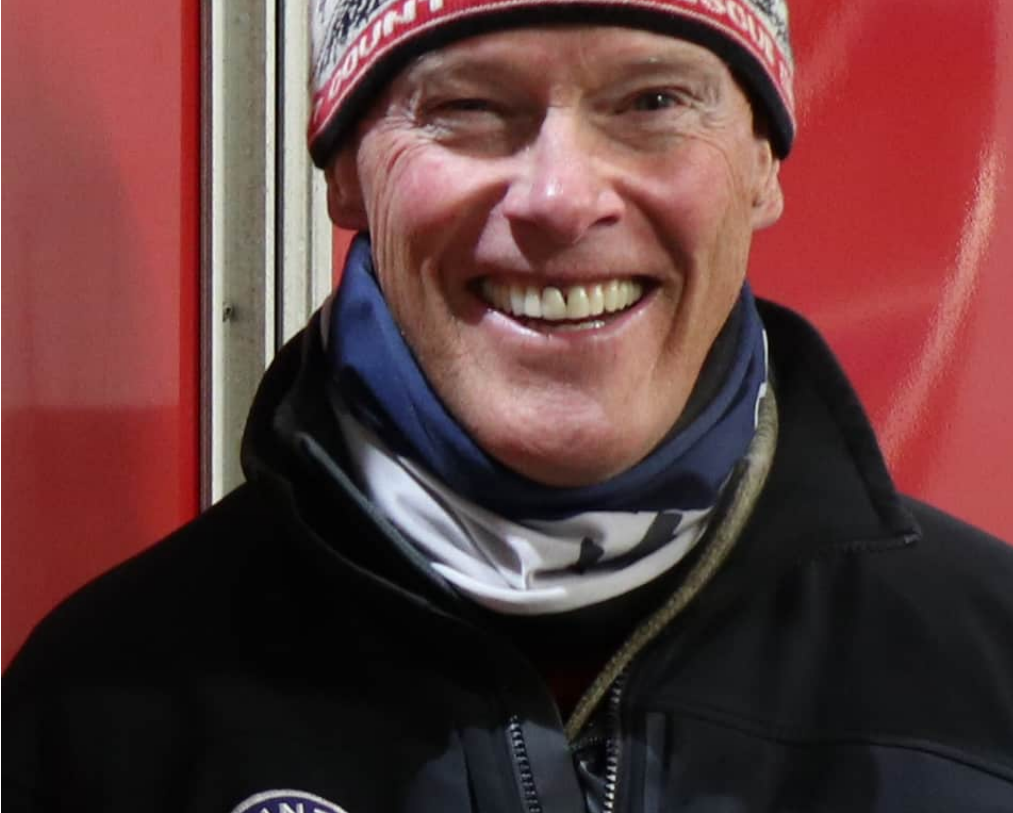
The morning weather was clear and Flight for Life was available for launch at first light. They focused on the East Ridge trail, and the steep couloirs to the north and south. After an early morning flight crew change, our plan was to fly search teams to the summit to work their way down, and to send a snowmobile team up McCullough Gulch Road.

At 8:10 a.m. there was a major stroke of luck. Summit County Dispatch had received a call from the man and was able to obtain his coordinates. We quickly sent in several teams with extraction gear and lots of medical equipment thinking we might be dealing with serious hypothermia. The man was located and found to be relatively fine and in good spirits. He walked part of the way out and was taken out in a toboggan for the remainder of the trip. He was out of the field at 10:30 a.m.

Why did this man survive? He made several critical and lifesaving decisions. Realizing he would be spending the night, he found some pine boughs to sleep on and keep him off the snow. He got out of the wind. His phone battery was dead and he had no cell phone service, but he also knew how to possibly remedy both of those issues. That morning he placed the phone under his armpit and started hiking up the mountain to obtain cell phone service. Ascending a couple hundred feet, he checked his phone and now, with a warmer battery and higher elevation, it registered 30% battery and had good cell service. He dialed 911.

This was, by all accounts, a miraculous outcome. His critical decisions saved his life. When people ask why I do search and rescue, this encapsulates it perfectly.





Charles Pitman

Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 Mission Coordinators. He is also one of the team's Public Information Officers and has served on the Board of Directors. SCRG, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, fielded 216 calls for assistance in 2021. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.

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