

SHENANDOAH MOUNTAIN RESCUE GROUP

* Member, Mountain Rescue Association

* A Group of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference, Inc.

* A Section of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (pending)

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PRESS RELEASE

Date: 14 October 1983 (Friday)

Subject: Search and Rescue Operation on Old Rag Mountain, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia; for Shawn Crawford, age 18

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OLD RAG MOUNTAIN SEARCH AND RESCUE MISSION

With its precipitous cliffs and ledges, and its well-known Ridge Trail with caves, rock mazes, and other rock formations, Shenandoah National Park's Old Rag Mountain is a favorite of climbers and hikers. Last Sunday afternoon (8 October), Shawn Crawford, a freshman at Shepherd College, was hiking on Old Rag with friends. At about 1:30 in the afternoon, they were on the summit; rather than following his friends down one of the trails, Shawn decided to travel directly down the north face, so he could beat them to the bottom. He never made it. His friends reported him missing, and the Park Service sent Rangers out to check for him. Finding no sign of him on the mountain, they began planning a major search effort. At first, Park Rangers and a few search dog teams from the Virginia Search and Rescue Dog Association began searching, but it was quickly apparent that the search area included many areas accessible only by special mountaineering techniques. On Monday afternoon Shenandoah National Park requested assistance from the Mountain Rescue Groups of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (ASRC). ASRC members responded from the Shenandoah Mountain Rescue Group in Washington, DC and the Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group in Charlottesville, Virginia. These ASRC members provided night foot patrols of the Ridge and Saddle Trails and camp-ins at strategic locations, so as to be certain that Shawn did not wander out of the search area during the night. The weather began to deteriorate, with increasing fog

and rain. On Tuesday, additional dog teams from Dogs East began searching, and ASRC teams began using ropes and mountain rescue equipment to search cliffs near the summit and on Pinnacle Ridge. The weather continued to worsen, with fog limiting visibility to about 30 feet; with increasing wind and cold rain, exposure and exhaustion became major dangers to all personnel on the mountain, especially ASRC members, few of whom had slept more than a few hours the night before.

One ASRC searcher was at the end of a rope, 200 feet below the summit and 40 feet above the next ledge, when through the fog she noticed something suspicious below. She directed nearby searchers to the area, and Shawn had been found, more than 48 hours after he was last seen on the summit. He was suffering from extreme hypothermia from the cold and wet, able to respond only weakly and incoherently to the searchers' questions, and he appeared to have head and leg injuries. A rappel rope was quickly rigged from the summit down to the ledge where Shawn lay, and ASRC Medics were soon at his side; ASRC members then coached a Parkmedic Ranger and a Madison County Rescue Squad Cardiac Technician down the rappel rope. A Stokes rescue litter with medical and rescue equipment was lowered down the cliff, and a warm intravenous line and warmed oxygen were started. Shawn was carefully packed into the litter, and additional ASRC rescue team members rappelled down to him. Already hampered by the fog, wind, and cold rain, operations became even more difficult as darkness settled. Since it would be a very complex operation to raise the litter up the cliff to the summit trail, it was decided to send a team from Shawn's location at the base of the summit cliff down to blaze a route to the trail lower on the mountain. This bushwhacking team was beset by difficulties, including slippery footing, driving rain, and the everpresent fog. The team kept encountering cliffs and chasms in the dark, and had to painstakingly backtrack and start again and again. The Mission Coordinators came very close to directing the litter team to spend the night at the base of the cliff, so that a vertical raising operation could be started at first light. Finally, at about 10:30 pm, the bushwhacking team was able to make visual contact with a team coming up from below. The two teams were separated by a high cliff, but one the litter could be taken down, rather than up, to get to the trail. With great effort, the ASRC rescue team carried Shawn down the mountainside to the cliff, lowered him down the cliff, and then Park Service personnel carried him out the remaining mile to the fire road; there, a Madison County Rescue Squad ambulance was waiting to take him to the University of Virginia Hospital. Although it is difficult to say for certain, some rescue personnel observed that Shawn was found just before dark, and he would not have survived the night alone.

This was one of the most difficult mountain rescue operations in Virginia or Maryland in recent memory. It was only through the combined expertise of the Shenandoah Park Rangers, ASRC's Mountain Rescue Groups, and of the other volunteer search and rescue groups involved, that such a challenging operation could be successful, allowing Shawn Crawford to be alive today.

--Keith Conover