

Early history of the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference: The First Two Decades

in the nature of an oral history, transcribed

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This is an account, from famously-fallible memories, of the events that lead to the founding of the ASRC in the 1970s, and some adventures from the early years.

You can skip the first few pages, unless you want to learn what motivated us to form the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference. Most of this was written by Keith, so when you read “I,” except in the personal prologues, it means Keith.

Part I: The Founding

A Personal Prologue - Keith

As long as I can remember, I loved the outdoors. When I was just a wee child, my parents regularly took me to stay at Big Meadows in Shenandoah National Park. Now, my parents weren't particularly athletic or woodsy. For that matter, they didn't even want to go out on walks. They just wanted to hang around the lodge and absorb the (admittedly very pleasant) ambiance. The lodge there, like the lodge in Yellowstone, is one of the classic examples of Mary Coulter's National Park Rustic style. My daughter, when she was young, thought that the common room there was one of the best hangout places in the world. (It's different now as that's where the lodge's WiFi is and everyone is sitting using their phones and laptops instead of interacting with each other.) I started going on short walks, dragging along my mother or father or baby sister, even if just a few hundred feet to Blackrock cliff's outstanding view across the Shenandoah Valley to Massanutten Mountain. My parents gradually trusted me to go on short walks by myself.

One day, when I was about six, my parents allowed me to go for a “short walk” along the famous Appalachian Trail. It was a beautiful summer day, warm but with clear skies. (Crystal-clear days were common, even in the summer. It's well-documented that Shenandoah National Park in the late 50s and early 60s had clearer views, likely due to fewer particulates in the air, so it's not just fallible memory.) I followed the AT a bit, and then a bit more, and then there were more views out over the Shenandoah Valley as the trail curved around the campground, and then I found a trail sign that pointed to Franklin Cliffs. I guess I didn't understand about distances, because it took me a while to get there; it was a couple of miles. When I got to the cliffs, which were right next to Skyline Drive, there was a very nice Ranger there in a pickup truck who offered me a ride back to Big Meadows. To this day, I have no idea why my parents were concerned enough to alert the Rangers. My feet weren't tired. It *was* just a short walk, after all.

I kept up my interest in the outdoors. I joined a Boy Scout troop. But after a couple of miserable winter camping experiences, I awoke to the fact that these Scout leaders were pretty clueless about how to manage in the woods. When I was maybe about 12, I joined the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, which my parents approved of. The group was mostly made up of older people. (Not just older to me, “older than me” was pretty much everyone except babies and little kids. But these people were older even to my parents; very few teenagers, and even lots of people with gray hair.) The PATC was also devoted, not just to enjoying the outdoors, but also serving the outdoor public by building and maintaining trails (including a 400-mile section of the Appalachian Trail), and shelters and cabins along the trail. And as far as outdoor clubs go, PATC was quite rich and well-organized. It had a permanent headquarters building, maybe forty primitive rental cabins in the mountains to provide a steady source of income, and a lot of hardworking and highly-capable people investing a lot in the organization. And the PATC had been growing since it was started in 1927.

I was for a while a PATC overseer for the Overall Run Trail in Shenandoah National Park, and the Manassas Gap shelter in northern Virginia, where my high school outing club helped with maintenance chores. PATC established an Appalachian Trail Patrol to monitor the Appalachian Trail, much of which traverses private property, and its hikers, dealing with public safety and public education but not law enforcement. I was happy to be the first to serve as a Trail Patrol. Along the way, I joined the Mountaineering Section and learned to rock climb. I remember with fondness the section’s Dave Templeton, one of those older adults of whom my parents approved so highly. He was patient and always emphasized safety in everything he did, and safety became even more important to me after he died, years later, in a climbing accident.

In junior high and high school, I used thumbtacks to cover one of my bedroom’s walls with topographic maps of Shenandoah National Park. I kept track of my hikes by drawing on the maps; by the time I’d finished high school, I’d hiked every inch of trail in the park. Also in high school, my science teacher, Lyle Conrad, took a bunch of us students on a caving trip. We went to the *Sinks of Gandy*, in the shadow of West Virginia’s highest mountain, Spruce Knob. In a field there, Gandy Creek disappears into a hole and emerges on the other side of Yokum Knob, half a mile away. As far as interesting cave stuff, Sinks has a few calcite formations, and the trip consists mostly of a half-mile wade in a stream. But I was hooked. I spent most of my high-school weekends in the outdoors, often caving with the DC Grotto, a highly-organized and competent caving group. With others of my high school outing club, who were also members of DC Grotto, we would even occasionally spend a week or more at the DC Grotto Fieldhouse in southeast West Virginia’s Greenbrier County. Along with many others, we were exploring and mapping Organ Cave. It’s one of the longer caves in the world, and in places, one of the prettiest. It is long enough that, though most if it is now explored and mapped, few people have gone in one entrance and come out another. My one “first” in the outdoor world, along with climbing/caving partner David Engel, was to do an ambitious push trip. We entered the main Organ Cave entrance and exited the Master’s entrance, miles away via cave passage. As I remember, it took us more than 24 hours of continuous hard going. (To cavers, such a “first connection” is a lot like a “first ascent” to a climber.)

By the time I finished high school in 1971, I had advanced far beyond those early winter-camping miseries with the Boy Scouts. I certainly wasn’t any kind of athlete, but I was comfortable in a variety of outdoor settings. And along the way, I had learned a fair bit about self-rescue for climbing, caving and hiking.

A Personal Prologue - Gene

It's all Keith's fault! There I was, minding my own business, driving my new 1973 green Dodge van (my first rescue truck, of three). What should happen but a weird guy pulls beside me and starts honking and shaking his fist at me! OK, upon closer inspection, he was actually waving his hand. But what was unusual was that he was actually using all of his fingers, instead of just one!

So I took a chance and stopped. And discovered not only a fellow caver, hiker and medic, but also a life long friend.

Keith has more on the fateful, er, exciting meeting below...

I started my medical and electronics careers early, in grade school and high school. My Dad was in the Army and a Ham radio operator, and my Mom was an Army nurse. We traveled a lot growing up. And I was rebuilding Johnson & Johnson first aid kits, because I thought I could make them better. And taking our appliances and telephones apart to see how they worked. And getting them back together correctly, too, without getting killed, or fatally punished!

During high school, I joined the BSA Sea Explorer Ship 145, which met in Alexandria, VA, under the Woody Wilson bridge. In the mid 1960s, Explorer Scouting was divided into three programs, Air, Sea, and the traditional Land. Ship 145 was reportedly the largest Sea unit in the world, with over 100 members, and the Scouts ran everything and trained all their own members. I discovered I had a talent for knots, ropes, rigging, and other similar skills, and soon I began teaching and training others. And for organization, too, since in only one year I earned Chief Bosun's Mate, the second highest position.

Given my medical and electronics interests, I went to VPI in Blacksburg, VA, to study Electrical Engineering as a profession, and I decided to keep medicine and saving lives as an avocation.

So there I was, minding my own business, walking down the dorm hall. What should happen but a weird guy comes by, all beaten up, scratched, bloody, ripped and torn, and very dirty. I asked "are you hurt?" He said "No, I've been caving!" I said "what's kaayven??" He obviously possessed keen perception for identifying sacrificial (cave) lambs, because soon I was suckered, er, inducted into the notorious VPI Cave Club!

The Tech Troglodytes, or VPI Grotto, were the first student chapter of the NSS, and they were chartered in 1942, shortly after the formation of the first allegedly adult organization, the likewise notorious DC Grotto (more to come!).

The VPICC has traditionally been one of the strongest caving organizations in the NSS, especially in the mid Atlantic states. This is undoubted due to not only their excellent and grueling safety and training programs, but also the annual Fall influx of new waves of highly energetic, and evidently quite gullible, fresh fodder! It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it!

In learning & exploring, enjoying caving, and building new friendships, I was fortunate to contribute and grow my medical and rope rigging interests. And I also was involved in many cave rescue trainings and actual responses to emergency incidents. I expanded into training cavers, and developing innovations, in technical rope rescue, underground communications, field medical, and cave rescue organization and response.

One contribution that foretold certain doom, er, hinted at future events was the significant upgrade of the VPI Rescue Roster, also known as "Harrison's Handy Handout." This became the precursor for the later alerting and call-out systems of CRCN, NCRC, ASRC, and others.

Somewhat more exciting was the pleasure of blackmailing the dreaded (at the time, yes!) VPI

administration into providing free medical supplies for the VPICC. (Hmmm, the '60s are beyond the statute of limitations, aren't they?)

This was an assertive, yet necessary, response to the egregious medical mistreatment of a seriously injured student and caver by the VPI clinic. Sure, “guano happens,” but a State Institution should not be either negligent or complicit. So sometimes, bats really do have teeth!

With these sinfully acquired (heh, heh!) supplies, I created six specialized Caving First Aid Kits in small .30 Cal military ammo boxes. For many years after, the VPICC issued them to trip leaders before their adventures. The kits got a lot of use and patched a lot of hurts, and they were always there for our cavers.

During the 60's, caving and especially cave rescue was evolving rapidly and effectively in the mid Atlantic area, and it was well ahead of the surface ground SAR community.

The key leaders in this informal and disorganized cave rescue evolution were the “Four Cavers of the Apocalypse,” Chuck Hemple, Bob Barlow, Bruce Bannerman, and Gene Harrison. (Yes, cavers are always informal, and usually seem disorganized, but when necessary, they can together accomplish amazing things! Just like ASRC and all good SAR folk.)

Initially, we were individually struggling to develop cave rescue call-out, training, and response capabilities among our own individual organizations, such as VPICC, PSC, DCG, WVASS, VAR, MAR, and several others. Did I mention that, for as disorganized as cavers seem, they seem to have a lot of organizations?

As we discovered each other, and began to mutually plot, scheme, and collaborate, we developed the initial Cave Rescue Communications Network (CRCN) into a viable and effective training and response capability. It later evolved into the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC).

By the arrival of the 60's, cavers had learned a very bitter lesson. If they got injured or needed a rescue, they could only call one group for help: other cavers. And never ever call the fire, rescue or police! (Relatively fortunately in retrospect, we did not have 911 or cellphones...)

Why not call public safety? Because they were unfamiliar with and unsafe in caves, but would usually prevent skilled cavers from helping, and then they would likely get you, and themselves, killed underground. Repeatedly!

So Chuck, Bob, Bruce, and Gene developed a strong cave rescue orientation and training program, and diligently provided it to cavers from across the mid Atlantic region many times every year. From the repeat offenders, er, returning students, we started to build a skilled corps of instructors, and then team leaders and incident managers.

We also decided to approach the rift with public safety head-on in a positive and proactive manner. We started inviting selected non-cavers to the trainings, including rangers, military, troopers, deputies, fire-rescue, and others.

This evolution in inter-agency cooperation led to the establishment of a specialized cave rescue training course by the West Virginia Fire Extension at Morgantown, WV. The WV requested, and designated, the Four as the first WV Cave Rescue Instructors.

By the end of the first training event, and despite some rocky initial receptions, the cavers and the fire-rescue folk had built not only respect for each other, and understandings of their respective worlds, but also had developed strong friendships that lasted for years.

And in future events and evolutions over decades, our fire-rescue friends finally knew what they could, and could not, do safely and effectively, how to respond promptly to caving incidents, and how to recognize when they needed help. And that when they picked up the phone, their help was not only

on the way soonest, but they were also their friends and rescue family!

In the early 70's, the NSS selected the mid Atlantic VAR/MAR cave rescue training system as the model for the nation, and incorporated it into the new National Cave Rescue Commission. The Four were all mentors and founders of the new NCRC, and Gene Harrison was designated as the first NCRC Coordinator of the new Eastern Region. Several years later, due in part to commitments to the development of ASRC, he passed the ER-NCRC leadership role to Chuck, who performed the duties for almost two decades.

These types of mutual synergy and accomplishments became the models for future evolutions across the region, including the Cave Rescue Communications Network (CRCN), the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC), and later the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (ASRC).

A Personal Prologue - Ray

During the early 1970s I had been chairman of the DC Grotto and was then and continue to be the co-chairman of the Organ Cave System Survey in Greenbrier County West Virginia. When the four of us got together to discuss forming a wilderness rescue group my concern was how we were going to have a viable cave rescue capability. At that time the best we had was a callout list. I was very concerned about having to stabilize and extricate an injured caver that could be several miles from the nearest entrance. We decided that we could have a wilderness search and rescue group that could include a range of capabilities. This would provide the opportunity for the unit to maintain their skills doing a variety of missions and still be ready for the relatively rare cave rescues. Caving incidents can include people lost in caves as well as the potential for serious injury and unfortunately body recovery.

The early years were primarily focused on recruiting and training with very few actual

So let's return to Keith, Ray, Gene, and Rita, back in the 70s...

I hope you can imagine our deep disappointment in the dismal lack of effective or reliable ground SAR operations in the mid Atlantic area. Essentially, it seemed that you were better off to get lost or hurt in a cave, than in a park!

So what could the muddy SAR cavers bring to the ground SAR table? How could they, or anybody, solve such a complex and challenging problem?

Hmmmm!

Please consider this:

When confronted by a seemingly insurmountable obstacle or even an impossible task, there are certain words that, if you can speak them in truth, can give hope and lead to success::

“Dudes, we've done this before!!”

missions. We did a lot of training at local parks such as Great Falls where we became friends with the Park Director. On at least two occasions he asked us to help with searches. One involved a person whose car was found abandoned. We got to practice all our search skills but didn't find anything. It helped the Park Director show that he made an effort. On another occasion, we were asked to search an island in the Potomac River below Great Falls to find the remains of a person who had been missing several years. Again we got to practice our search skill but didn't find anything.

Because of the callout procedures for cave rescues, it's hard to say if we participated as individuals or as an organization. One of those rescues that Gene and I participated in resulted in getting a stuck caver out of a Western Maryland cave that had bad air. Two rescues to West Virginia caves turned out to be body recovery operations.

My wife Susan and I were active ASRC participants until our young children ~~needed~~ demanded more of our time. We have a lot of found

memories and some stories that are best shared over a cold beverage.

The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club Connection – and Cave Rescue

Before 1970, there were few if any search and rescue teams in the central Appalachians. Certain members of the PATC and DC Grotto and another caving club, the Potomac Speleological Club, had some expertise in search and rescue. Many were knowledgeable about self-rescue, some had military search and rescue experience, and a few had been members of Mountain Rescue Association teams in the western US before moving to the DC area.

In the late 1960s, a couple of prior incidents made members of these organizations think that their members needed better search and rescue training, and that the clubs should organize a bit so they could better respond if called for a search or rescue.

For example, one late fall, a boy scout troop was out for a hike along the Virginia/West Virginia border, on the west side of the Shenandoah Valley. The place is called Wolf Gap, and it's pretty wild compared to, say, Shenandoah National Park. As the crow flies, it's about twenty miles due west of Front Royal, Virginia, which is at the northern tip of Shenandoah National Park. The PATC maintains a cabin up the trail from the gap, and makes maps of the trails in the vicinity.

Wolf Gap is in the George Washington National Forest. I don't know if you know this, but the management and culture of National Forests and National Parks are as different as night and day. (Having been a summer-seasonal National Park Service Ranger for several years drilled this into me.) There are many differences, such as hunting being allowed in forests but not in parks. But for our purposes, the main difference is *jurisdiction*. National Park Rangers generally have "exclusive jurisdiction" – they are in charge of all search and rescue and other emergency services and law enforcement within a park. However, National Forest Rangers generally have "concurrent

jurisdiction" – most emergency services within a national forest are handled by the local counties and other municipalities.

Anyway, the boy scout troop was on the trail from Wolf Gap to Big Schloss ("big fortress" in German, a reference to the big blocky cliffs). Actually, they were on the way *back*, and they were behind schedule. It got dark. And it started snowing; hard, and fast. When they straggled back to the cars in misery and disorder, a couple of the scouts were missing. So two of the adults set out back up the trail, in the dark, and in heavy snow.

Well, the two kids showed up at the cars, but they hadn't seen the adults. As it got later and later, there was no sign of the two adults. After waiting, and waiting, someone finally went to a pay phone (remember, this was long before cellphones) and called PATC headquarters in DC and asked for help. They said they needed people with headlamps and snowshoes to go out and look for the two adults. Now, in those days the PATC had no callout roster, nor any sort of emergency response plan. This was even before the days of the Trail Patrol, not that even to this day the Trail Patrol is any sort of response team, or patrols in this area. The people at PATC HQ suggested they call the local County Sheriff and the Forest Service District Office, which they did. Finally, the next morning the local county and forest service people managed to get some people out on the trail, and of course they just found two frozen bodies.

Now, all the officers of the PATC were talking about this tragedy, and wondering what to do. There was some talk that there ought to be some sort of search and rescue training for those interested, and maybe a callout roster, so that PATC

could help if (or, more likely *when*) this sort of thing happened again.

Back in this same era (1950s-1960s), another incident got reported back to the PATC.

It happened at Harper's Ferry. Harper's Ferry is where the Shenandoah River joins the Potomac River, and the greatly-enlarged Potomac pours through the Blue Ridge. It's an impressive gap, with some nice cliffs on either side. The cliffs on the northern side are about 300 feet high, and known as Maryland Heights. I've climbed there, and it's a real challenge. There are some overhangs, but the real interesting challenge is that there's a train tunnel through the bottom of the cliff. And this is for the B&O mainline, so quite frequently a big freight train barrels through the tunnel and the whole cliff shakes. The area is a popular National Historical Park, but unlike most NHPs, it has plenty of backcountry and trails and cliffs (and even John Brown's Cave).

Here's the story as we heard it. Now this was back before the National Park Service Rangers at Harper's Ferry had their own vertical rescue capability. They do now and have had for the past several decades. Well, there was this climber who was hurt and stuck halfway up the cliff (or halfway down, I don't know if he was climbing or rappelling or what). The Park Rangers had a mutual aid agreement with a local fire department (Bolivar?) to handle cliff rescues, so they called the fire department. And the way we heard it, this fire department lowered a wire-basket Stokes litter down to the guy, with a rope on the head of it, and a tag line on the bottom. And I guess someone rappelled down and strapped him in the litter. But then, instead of lowering with someone tending the litter, they just lowered on the top line while pulling on the bottom line from below. And as they guy got lowered down, the litter kept spinning around, crashing against the cliff face, smashing his face pretty bad, enough to keep him in the hospital for quite a while. The Park Service was *not* happy.

So, what has this to do with the PATC, you ask?

Well, this fire department had reportedly told the park rangers that they'd been trained in mountain rescue by the PATC Mountaineering Section. Now the Mountaineering Section said they'd never trained any fire department and, other than self-rescue, didn't teach mountain rescue.

As you can imagine, the PATC Council, which was already pretty unhappy about the Wolf Gap incident, was even less happy when they heard this. Certainly, *someone* ought to be providing search and rescue training, but PATC wasn't sure it should be them. During the 1960's and about 1970, the cavers in the mid Atlantic region already had themselves well organized. This area generally consisted of the NSS VAR and MAR (Virginia and Mid-Atlantic Regions). Initially, they developed the Cave Rescue Communications Network (CRCN), and in the region evolved it into a viable and effective training organization, with a cadre of both instructors and skilled cave rescuers for incident responses. In the 1970's, this successful coordination and training system was adopted by the NSS as the model for the new National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC). The former CRCN and NSS VAR/MAR team evolved into the new Eastern Region of the NCRC (ER-NCRC) and continued operations. NCRC was originally intended to be a national group of regional coordinators who developed and maintained lists of people and support which could respond to cave rescue incidents, including lists of highly specialized cave rescue equipment. Later, NCRC even established actual caches of specialized cave rescue equipment, for both incidents and training. Emulating the prior mid Atlantic CRCN training and organization, NCRC also offered Orientation to Cave Rescue one-weekend classes across the country. NCRC later developed a series of longer classes, colloquially known as the National *weeklong*, which were actually nine days long because it included the weekend on either end.

In early days, many individual Grottoes (those were what the local chapters were called) of the National Speleological Society (that's the national caver's organization) ran cave search and rescue training for their members. It was sort of unofficial to start with, but by the 1970s had become pretty standardized, thanks to NCRC. Most Grottoes kept a callout roster of those qualified to respond to a cave rescue.

Like most public safety incidents, local authorities are officially in charge of a cave rescue. But imagine that a big bunch of organized people who seem to know what they're doing show up. And imagine the local authorities themselves don't know squat about cave rescue. So in many cases, the CRCN/NCRC people ended up pretty much running any cave search or rescue. Officially, to this day, NCRC is officially nothing more than a communications and resource management organization. But the people who are regular instructors at NCRC classes somehow end up running a *lot* of cave rescues.

Most recently, I (Keith) responded to a cave rescue in September 2016. We were holding a meeting of Eastern Region, National Cave Rescue Commission at the Old Timer's Reunion near Elkins, WV. Ten minutes after the start of the meeting we canceled it as someone came to the meeting and said "There are 7 cavers 12-hours overdue at Carpenter's-Swago." Both of those numbers turned out to be wrong, of course, as is usually the case with initial information: it was 5 cavers and more like 24 hours overdue.

There were two officers there from the West Virginia State Police, and two from the county sheriff's office. They pretty much just kept an eye on things while a large crew of NCRC instructors and staff ran the operation and the responders were entirely (as far as I could tell) NCRC-trained cavers.

When I started at the University of Virginia in 1971, I immediately joined the Cave Club and the Outing Club, becoming quite active in each. (I ended up being President of the Outing Club, and

Executive Secretary of the Intercollegiate Outing Club Association, but that's another story.)

The summer after my first year of college, David Engel and I decided we wanted to go out west and climb some there. So we headed first to the Pacific Northwest and did some climbing and hiking in Washington (Mt. Rainer of course) and Oregon, but after a few weeks of being wet and cold, we hitchhiked to California and ended up in sunny Yosemite Valley, staying in the climber's camp, which was then known as Camp 4, later Sunnyside Camp, and now back to Camp 4 again. After we'd been there for a while, we got to know some of the Rangers and then we got unpaid jobs with the Park Service through the Volunteers in the Parks program. We ended up as uniformed though unpaid Rangers, primarily doing naturalist, but also some fire/search and rescue work. I ended up working as a summer seasonal Ranger at different parks all through college. Through the Park Service, I got some training in search and rescue, though to this day, I still regret not being able to take the full search and rescue class at the Grand Canyon.

It also turns out that, one fine hot summer day back about 1972, I was driving down Route 7 in northern Virginia when I noticed that the green van in front of me had a license plate "CAVE RSQ". And of course it had the obligatory bat sticker (some black bats on a yellow reflective background) which is the unofficial official mark of an experienced caver. Also of course I honked at the driver furiously and he pulled over and so did I. and then we stood on the side of this busy highway in the summer heat for a couple of hours (at least it seemed like that long in retrospect) (at least four, Keith!) talking about cave rescue. Now Gene Harrison (that was the green van's driver) was with PSC and I was with DC Grotto and at that time, the two were pretty much rivals, but our shared interest in rescue completely overshadowed that, and we became instant friends.

Now back to about 1970 and the PATC Council, which was trying to figure out what to do about this

search and rescue business. As a big and respectable organization with a strong sense of public service, they figured they had to do *something*.

And indeed this was a big motivation for all of us that started being involved with this project. We all loved the outdoors, and thought we had a responsibility to take care of others in the then small, outdoors-loving public. We figured that if we didn't take care of ourselves, then the government would step in and start taxing us and making all sorts of regulations that we didn't like. Don't laugh, this was a really big motivator back then, and indeed was *the* primary reason for the founding of the ASRC. I'll have to digress for a bit and explain what things were like for outdoorspeople back in the 1960s and 70s.

You have to understand that back then, things were different. Only a small fraction of the public liked to hike or climb or cave, just a fraction of a percent. Seems like now everybody likes to hike or climb, at least a little bit. I know it's still only a fraction of our couch-potato population, but I'd guess that there are now several thousand times the outdoor-loving people there were forty or fifty years ago.

There were basically only two big places that sold hiking gear, REI in Seattle and LL Bean in Maine. Campmor in NJ didn't start until 1978. Yvon Chouinard didn't even start making chocks and other "clean climbing gear" until about 1970, before that he had a garage-style operation making pitons, and you had to basically know someone who knew Yvon to get any of his pitons before that. (I still have a few of those originals hanging next to my Great Room fireplace.)

We used to mail order a lot of our gear from catalogs, but as the 1960s and 1970s wore on, a few local outfitters started. In the DC area, there was Dan Couch's Appalachian Outfitters. It was only open a few hours a day, and was a single counter in the back of a hardware store in Oakton, Virginia, outside DC. In those days Oakton was a sleepy little

village with a few stores and lots of trees, not the booming suburb it is now.

I remember that when I was just into my teens my mom took me there and bought me my first pair of boots and a rope. She said that if I was going to do this outdoor stuff I should at least have the right equipment. The rope was the newest and best thing around, it was called Goldline, and it was made of twisted (laid) nylon. When I first learned to climb, though, we were using Manila rope, made from the fibers of a plant found in the Philippines. And even after we got Goldline, my first set of Prusiks for caving was made from Manila rope, as there was no small-diameter nylon rope at the time. Even once small Goldline was available for Prusiks, we stayed with manila, because the small Goldline quickly twisted up into small, unusable Gordian knots.

Anyway, back to the early 1970s. PATC turned to some of their members who had been involved in cave rescue, which in the East was much more organized than above-ground rescue, and said, basically, "HELP!" The three that were tapped by the PATC Council were Ray Cole of the DC Grotto, Gene Harrison of the Potomac Speleological Club, and me. We were joined by Rita Cloutier, a representative of the PATC Council, and the four of us talked it over, and over, and over. And we finally decided that it would be best to start a search and rescue training organization outside of PATC, though with some support from PATC, at least to begin with.

When we started, we didn't even have a name. And we started solely with the goal of providing better training in above-ground search and rescue to the members of the outdoor clubs in the mid-Appalachian area, starting with DC and nearby Charlottesville, where I started going to college. The four of us started recruiting other knowledgeable people to help.

We first started by making lists of those things that people needed to know for both search and rescue. We then grouped them under headings, and

started planning training sessions. We scoured the country for whatever information we could find. We contacted the western teams of the Mountain Rescue Association, who sent us lots of information, and suggested that at some point, maybe some of the people we trained might like to form a Mountain Rescue Association team in our area. We made many contacts with the National Park Service. Many Park Rangers rotated between different parks, so some of the local Rangers had been to the National Park Service search and rescue school at the Grand Canyon, or had experience doing search and rescue at some of the big western National Parks. Several park rangers helped in major ways in setting up this initial training, and some Mountain Rescue Association members who were traveling to DC for business met with us. We also continued the close association with the cave rescue community, so many of our early aboveground rescue techniques were adapted from cave rescue. For example, the ASRC pioneered the use of the rappel rack in lowering stretchers on a cliff.

We kept working at it through 1972 and 1973, and we scheduled our first training session for September 15, 1973, at Harper's Ferry National Historical Park. Check out

<http://archive.asrc.net>

for old ASRC records, including the announcement for that first ASRC training session. We used the PATC's cabin (actually, a very nice house) called Highacre, right there in Harper's Ferry, just a couple hundred feet from the cliff we were using for training. We had people from both DC and Charlottesville there, and from a variety of backgrounds: cavers, hikers, climbers, hunters. We devoted one day to search, the other day to rescue.

One of my fondest memories of that weekend was the sound of Gene Harrison's alarm clock going off. We'd been up late talking search and rescue the

night before, and so I guess it was understandable that he wanted to go back to sleep for a bit. The alarm kept going off, though, a continuous, mechanical bell-ringing. There were various muffled curses and bangs – apparently it wasn't turning off. Finally, that ringing sound changed – you could hear it flying out the window, and slowly getting fainter and fainter in sort of a bouncing-down-the-cliffs pattern, eventually landing in the Potomac River with a splash, and then silence. There was a chorus of laughter from the entire house and that was enough to get everyone up.

Part of the discussions that Saturday night ended up with a joint decision to establish standards and certifications for the various topics we'd come up with – a series of certifications available to members of outdoor clubs or whoever else was interested in search and rescue.

Since this was to be a consortium of clubs and individuals devoted to search and rescue training and certification (remember, initially we had no plans to be operational), we were having a hard time coming up with a name. Ray Fadner, then the Supervisor of Trails for the PATC, suggested the word "Conference." He explained that the term "Conference" can refer to an ongoing consortium – think of the Atlantic Coast Conference in college athletics – so we agreed on the name Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference.

Thus, in the fall of 1973, was born the ASRC. We started working on more training classes, and on getting the organization incorporated. At about the same time, we started discussing the need for operational response teams, and by the time we filed incorporation papers that winter, we'd agreed that we needed to become operational, and included this in the Articles of Incorporation, but the details remained to be ironed out.

Part II – Getting Operational

We started out with a variety of certifications – you can see some of them at

<http://archive.asrc.net>

– such as Basic Handling and Transportation, Basic Land Navigation, Basic Search, Basic Survival and Wilderness Travel, and the like. But soon it made sense to combine the various modules, and thus was born the idea of certifying people to various overall levels of competence. And once we started certifying people, we realized that, in effect, we would have members, and it was time to think about being

Patches and Uniforms

We sketched out some designs, with the final (and current) version being designed and drafted by Gene Harrison.

We decided that, instead of the cross like on the Mountain Rescue Association patches, we'd hop on the new Emergency Medical Services bandwagon, and use the Star of Life. We decided at the outset that search and rescue and emergency medical care went together like flotsam and jetsam, kith and kin, trial and tribulation, cease and desist, to and fro, hither and yon, hill and dale, vim and vigor, and all the other "Siamese twins" of the English language.

There was some controversy over the size of the ASRC patch. It lasted for months and months.

The question was: three-inch or four-inch patches?

After *much* debate, over many meetings, and several votes, we finally decided, by a slim margin of two votes, that we would get three-inch patches.

When the patches arrived, they had only charged us for three-inch patches, but we measured with a ruler, and the patches were four inches in diameter. The patch company had read the letter that said "three inches in diameter" but they worked off of the diagram that we enclosed, which was four inches in diameter. And everyone looked at the 4-inch patches and said "they look OK." Which serves as a lesson – sometimes things that, at the time,

operational. At first, we decided to have members but not local Groups. So we started membership, and started certifying members.

We started out with Basic Membership and Certified Membership, those were the two levels. Certified Membership was designed from the first to meet and exceed the Mountain Rescue Association Rescue certification standards.

The mark of certification was to be the official *ASRC patch*, which is a whole story in itself.

seem important, in retrospect are nothing more than a tempest in a teapot.

We sent in an order for one hundred 3-inch patches. Because the ASRC patches were essentially equivalent to a badge, and represented a level of knowledge, skill and especially trust, we felt it wise to carefully control their issue and distribution, like a police department only issues officer badges to fully qualified and trained law enforcement officers. Therefore, for tracking purposes, we used a marker to number the back of those first hundred patches, and we accounted for each one. Initially, we said that when people left the ASRC they had to turn in their patches. It also shows how valuable we thought that this certification was – and indeed, lots of people were interested in becoming members and getting one of those nifty patches.

In subsequent years, the ASRC patch has become famous for its distinctive design, immediate recognition, and very high visibility. In fact, it has been copied or emulated by numerous SAR and related organizations across the country, and it also has been a prized addition to collections.

(There still remain a few patch mysteries! What are the mathematics behind the ASRC patch, and why? Why is the ASRC patch worn on the left shoulder? What are the unique indicators that you have a genuine original ASRC patch? Ask Gene!)

I guess since you've now heard about patches, you should hear about uniform shirts.

Now, you need to put your mind into the right perspective; this was the early 1970s, and our members were mostly rugged, independent outdoorsmen and –women. Think of what passed as “current events” back then. The Vietnam war (1955-1975). The Chicago Democratic Convention (August 1968). Woodstock (August 1969). Kent State shootings (May 1970).

Even those of us who wore uniforms in our other lives (me as a park ranger, others in military or police positions) realized that uniforms were in general not well-respected at that particular point in US history. And, furthermore, we thought that if we were searching for little kids, they might be afraid of someone in a very official, military or police style uniform.

So we finally found something we thought would work. Something that was at least minimally uniform, that rugged, independent outdoorspeople would wear, and that would look at least acceptable to local police and other responsible agencies.

We chose a simple, blue chambray Sears work shirt, with a four-inch ASRC patch on the left shoulder. (Sears doesn't make them any more, but you can still get the same chambray type shirt, made by Dickie's, from WalMart.)

Who should be an ASRC member?

Here's another one of those early ASRC debates, the kind that kept meetings from ending for hours, and occasioned impassioned bull sessions over beer and pizza.

If we need more operational ASRC members, who should we recruit? Rugged outdoorspeople? EMTs and paramedics? Fire-rescue types?

There were many arguments on all sides. After considerable discussions, the final consensus was that our recruits should be outdoor people first.

I told you there was a fight over the patch sizes? There was also a fight over the uniform shirt, too, but it wasn't nearly as bad.

The main substantive objection was that, as we all know, “cotton kills,” and this was a *cotton* shirt! How could we?

Well, the arguments that won the day went as follows.

1. A cotton work shirt is a lot cheaper than any of the other alternatives.

2. This uniform shirt is mostly for use in base and when you're interacting with other agencies. Once you're off in the woods, you can strip it off and cram it in your pack.

3. It's good in the summer.

4. If worn over a wool (later polypropylene, and only more recently polyester like Capilene) undershirt or turtleneck, it's thin and serves as a sort of wind shell, and is actually pretty comfortable in semi-wet cool weather.

5. Did I mention it's cheap? We had (and still have) a lot of starving student members.

The chambray work shirt, along with that (accidentally-four-inch) ASRC patch has remained a symbol of the ASRC “blue-shirts” ever since.

Regardless of what other skills they might offer, they simply had to be comfortable in the outdoors. They might have other qualifications, but they had to be outdoorspeople first. Training outdoorspeople in search and rescue and medical care is easier, and produces a better SAR operator, than training those with rescue or medical experience in how to be competent in the outdoors.

And, if someone doesn't enjoy being outdoors, they'll never last in the ASRC.

Groups

Soon after the ASRC started certifying members, we realized that we needed local organizations to provide a locally-organized response and locally-organized training. Most of our members were in the DC area, but I was going to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, and had recruited some members of the Outing Club and the Cave Club into the ASRC.

So we started two groups. Potomac Valley Search and Rescue Group (PVSARG) in DC, and Blue Ridge Rescue Group (BRRG) in Charlottesville. BRRG was quite clearly a student group; When we started, we kept our wire-basket Stokes litter at my one-room apartment at The Molehole on Chancellor Street. It was hanging with bungee cords on the front porch. The earliest document from BRRG I can find (it's at the [ASRC Archive site](#)) is from September 1975, so I would guess we started the Group in early 1975 or late 1974.

BRRG was quickly, in late 1977, renamed to Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group (BRMRG), since we did *mountain* but not street rescue.

For quite a while, we just had the two Groups, one in Charlottesville and one in DC. At one point, there was an unlawful political coup in PVSARG, and most of the members resigned. I left Charlottesville and the University of Virginia for medical school at George Washington University at about this time, and we formed a new group, Shenandoah Mountain Rescue Group (SMRG), which replaced PVSARG. But it was basically all the same good people.

Later, ASRC Groups started to multiply like rabbits. People moved away from Charlottesville or DC and started new Groups. The first was Southwest Virginia Mountain Rescue Group (SwVMRG), founded by a BRMRG member [Henry St. Clair] who was from SW Virginia, and moved back there after attending University of Virginia.

When I finished medical school and moved from DC to Pittsburgh to do my residency, I suffered from SAR withdrawal and started the ASRC's Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group. Other Groups were also formed via this prolific process, and in the early decades, all new ASRC Groups formed this way.

One group, the Mountaineer Area Rescue Group (MARG) got a very special procedure, since they were so remote from the other teams at the time. The ASRC airlifted a special training team to jump-start them over an intense training weekend. [Keith says: can you tell that Gene added this section? He was the pilot.]

The four instructors flew from several airports in Virginia to a tiny military airfield at Camp Dawson, just south of Morgantown, WV. The camp is well known for its rugged terrain and opportunities for intensive and challenging tactical operations and training.

The camp airstrip is very very short, and it is very deep in a very narrow, dark, and winding valley. Normally, only Army helicopters visit the site.

The pilot employed proven bush pilot techniques as he approached the deep valley from the side, threaded the slot between two big radio towers, and then turned and dropped into the valley. Running along the curving river, he found the airstrip and memorized the landmarks and timing. Then he climbed back out for another pass to land. Again, he dropped into the valley, rounded the curves, passed over the last building, and landed on the tiny airstrip. Intact and alive!

He was concentrating so hard, that he hardly noticed his passengers' weeping, wailing, and pleas for deliverance!

In the ASRC, every team has exciting stories!

The ASRC and Other SAR Organizations

In the beginning, ASRC members tended to be quite committed to emergency services, and many had careers or side interests closely related to what the ASRC does. We have had, and continue to have, members who are also instructors for the National Cave Rescue Commission, who are police officers, professional paramedics, firefighters, emergency management professionals, Civil Air Patrol members, or work in some other emergency services capacity.

We've also had members who were members of other search and rescue organizations, for example with a search dog group, which sometimes made things complicated during an operation: which shirt should the member wear? This occasioned much discussion, finally more or less taken care of by the realization that people had to be in one chain of command or the other and declare this when they showed up on operation.

Given the ASRC had to interface with many other SAR and related organizations, ASRC members also served as leaders in coordinating SAR teams on the state level. In the 1970s, BRMRG members Chris Stubbs and I were instrumental in setting up the Virginia Search and Rescue Council. When I (Keith) moved to Pittsburgh, with the help of other AMRG members, I organized meetings leading to the founding of the Pennsylvania Search and Rescue Council, and served as its first President.

In its early days, the ASRC had particularly tight connections with two other national SAR organizations: the Mountain Rescue Association (MRA) and National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC). One important note about NCRC: it is not a response organization. NCRC is a training and resource coordination organization, much like the initial conception of the ASRC. But NCRC instructors tend to be the most prominent leaders during most large cave search or rescue operations, and many of the ASRC's founding members were

also NCRC instructors. And even in the early days, the ASRC and Eastern Region, National Cave Rescue Commission had initially informal and later formal agreements to cooperate. The deal was that the ASRC would provide above-ground resources, such as rigging the above-ground portion of a rescue, and provide above-ground incident management. What with ASRC Groups now becoming cave rescue teams, this distinction is now a bit more blurred, but in the early days it was quite clear-cut.

Perhaps even more important than the ASRC-NCRC relationship has been that between the ASRC and the Mountain Rescue Association (MRA). When the ASRC was formed, there were no MRA certified teams east of the Rockies. When we first set up the ASRC, we envisioned the ASRC as being the Appalachian Region of the MRA. We designed the original ASRC Standards to be as rigorous as the MRA standards, but applicable to the Appalachians.

Back about 1980, when the ASRC just consisted of two Groups, we applied for MRA membership. The MRA was a bit confused by our organization, and rather than considering us a region, they wanted us to apply as an individual team that was also a Region, as there were no other teams in our region. OK. So we went through unit testing, and the ASRC as a whole was accepted as a MRA-certified team/Region.

But by 1985, E. Henry St. Clair had formed the Southwest Virginia Mountain Rescue Group, and I had formed the Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group. This was confusing to the MRA. In 1988, the ASRC accepted a proposal to make the ASRC and the Eastern Region of the MRA one and the same. But the relationship was a poorly-defined one for a period of years. The MRA Eastern Region Chair was even appointed by the ASRC Board of Directors for a while.

Some of the ASRC's Groups really didn't want to be part of the MRA, as they primarily did search, and there were other teams in the East that wanted to be part of the MRA but not necessarily the ASRC. In the late 1980s, the MRA held a certification test for ASRC Groups, but testing individual Groups, not the whole ASRC. Not all Groups attended. Allegheny Mountain Rescue Group and Shenandoah Mountain Rescue Group passed the full test and were recognized as full MRA teams. ESAR Post 616 (later Maryland Search and Rescue) tested for and was granted Associate membership. Richmond Search and Rescue Group was given a conditional pass and awarded Associate membership. Southwest Virginia Mountain Rescue Group and Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group did not attend. Later, the MRA granted full MRA certification to the entire ASRC in retrospect, but finally, in 1992, after a couple of years of work by a group of people including Art Dodds, Peter McCabe, Chuck Ritenour and Keith Conover, we got the new Appalachian Region of the MRA established separate from the ASRC, and additional teams from outside the ASRC were accepted into the region. This was about the same time that independent groups started joining the ASRC.

Gene told me I (Keith) had to mention the GSAR College, too, so here goes. Back at the time the

Technical Rescue Contributions

As we noted before, the ASRC pioneered the use of the rappel rack in litter lowering.

In fact, all the original technical ropework and training for the ASRC was based on the existing, advanced, and robust cave rescue technologies. This included very strong hardware, locking carabiners, rappel racks and other strong rope management devices with wide dynamic ranges, strong bolt anchors, flexible and powerful hauling systems, and highly efficient and effective rope climbing systems.

This pragmatic approach was in marked contrast to the use of traditional rock climbing methods

ASRC was forming, I joined Virginia Wing, CAP, primarily to help with their ground search and rescue (GSAR) program. I met Dave Carter and Mark Pennington, and we jointly started developing a GSAR training program for the Wing, with assistance from the ASRC. In 1979, I published a manual called Ground Search and Rescue for Virginia Wing CAP. This manual and the VA Wing GSAR program ended up being adopted by Virginia and developed further into the official state Virginia GSAR College program. Given my medical education precluded me doing an update of the GSAR Manual in any reasonable timeframe, I assigned the rights to Search and Rescue Training Associates (SARTA: Dave Carter and Mark Pennington) who developed it further, and it became a standard text for the ASRC.

And, I suppose I should mention that I'm now (2016) working on a new search and rescue text called Appalachian Search and Rescue. As of the time I'm writing this, two chapters are done and available at

<http://www.conovers.org/ftp/>

including Legal Aspects (SAR-Legal.pdf) and Nontechnical and Semi-Tech Evacs (SAR-Evacs.pdf).

employed by MRA and other teams in the West. This included very light weight hardware, non-locking carabiners, carabiner or other small rappel systems, climbing or dynamic ropes, piton anchors, limited hauling systems, and especially very marginal rope climbing systems.

For example, at one of the first ASRC appearances at a NASAR conference, in the mid 70's in Nashville, TN, an ASRC team provided the first demonstration of their advanced cave rescue technologies to the appending SAR community. The team performed an long, continuous, and

smooth lower of a litter, with patient and handler, from the top of the hotel.

The operation demonstrated the significant advantages of low-stretch static ropes, and the caver-invented rappel rack.

Subsequently, many SAR folk wanted to know what we were doing, how we were doing it, and where to get the equipment and training.

In short order, the ground and mountain SAR community was adopting the ASRC and cave rescue technologies, and the manufacturers were expanding their customer base and product lines.

Why the ASRC was (and is) Unique

As the ASRC first grew, mostly by metastasizing (members of ASRC Groups moving to a new area and starting a new Group), we appreciated how the ASRC was different than other search and rescue organizations. How was it different?

- We all wore the same uniform.
- We all trained to the training standards.
- Our training standards were rigorous.
- We followed the same operational doctrines; when members of different ASRC Groups showed up, we put all the members into one big pool, and assigned them to teams based on their expertise and training, not which Group they belonged to.

When we set up the ASRC, we deliberately planned for *all* these things. Why? Well, we spoke to lots of people search and rescue teams from the

Notable Missions

I (Keith) think the first ASRC callout was in 1975, and was a search near Staunton, Virginia, with the Civil Air Patrol. I must admit I don't remember much about it. In the early days, calls were few and far between.

The evolution spread to the police SWAT and fire-rescue services, too. During the 1970s, every rescue truck still had manila rope for rescue and personal safety. And in only a few short years, almost all of them had been converted to static, caving type nylon ropes.

Therefore, if ASRC members or cavers visit a fire-rescue station or a mountain rescue team in North America, and arguably throughout the developed world, they will find the direct descendants of this ASRC and cave rescue legacy.

Rockies and California and the Pacific Northwest, mostly from members of Mountain Rescue Association teams. We heard tales (now remember, this was the early 1970s, so things have changed) about how teams there would arrive at a large operation and then leave because another team was there with whom they refused to work. And other teams would show up and demand that they be kept together as a team and not mixed in with the other teams, whose training and expertise they didn't trust.

So when we set up the ASRC, we consciously tried to structure things to avoid these problems. And for the most, part, we succeeded.

I do remember our first rescue call; it was a year or two later, and BRMRG was called by a local ambulance service. They had a call for a large woman with abdominal pain, and due to torrential rains, they needed a Tyrolean traverse across a

flooded stream to get her out. We did this simple but fun highline and got the woman to the ambulance without difficulty.

One of our early search calls was for a retarded boy who went missing at the Lynchburg Training School and Hospital. It was remarkable for the cooperation from the staff there. They provided us with excellent food 24 hours a day, allowed us to use their base station radio and handhelds with excellent coverage of the extensive grounds, put us up in visiting doctor quarters, and had the grounds staff there work with us as searchers. Eventually it was evident that he drowned in the river.

They asked us to come back a few weeks later, to teach search strategy to their administrative staff and search tactics to their maintenance staff. We did that, and never got another call from them. While from a public safety perspective this is ideal, I regret never having been to a search with that level of local support.

We had one truly frustrating search a year or two later. A hiker near Covington, VA had not returned. The local Sheriff organized a search. This consisted of lining up hundreds of untrained searchers along a ridgetop fire road, then marching down the hillside to the road at the bottom of the ridge. Then repeating this over and over. No hasty searches along the trails, just lots of people walking down the side of the ridge. And getting concentrated in all the little valleys coming off the ridge, leaving the subsidiary ridges unsearched.

Due to public pressure, the Sheriff called us in. But he told us "I had to call you people in, but I don't have to like it. You stay in this campground so you can help with the rescue while we search." After a day or so of sitting on our butts in a campground while untrained searchers kept marching down the sides of that ridge, we left and said "call us if you need us."

Later, a hiker was on a trail going sidehill up towards the summit of this same ridge, and right where the trail crossed one of the subsidiary ridges,

one of those areas that never got searched, he found the victim's body, with his broken leg wedged between a couple of rocks. It seems likely he was still alive while they were searching for him, and while we were sitting in that campground.

That was very depressing. Why were we spending all this time training and getting ready for search and rescue, only to have to let people die due to official stupidity?

But there was one mission in that first 20 years that used all our skills and expertise, saved a life, and gave the ASRC's morale a big boost. And a formal commendation from the Director of the National Park Service. I will quote directly from myself from the ASRC's October 1983 press release about the operation:

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 rappel led 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.

As an additional note, you may recall the close relationship between the ASRC and the caver rescue community, including the ER-NCRC.

For the extremely difficult terrain in the area, ASRC requested and received mutual aid assistance from many cavers. The cavers, with their highly capable vertical ropework skills, were specially assigned the task of vertical search along the long and high cliff walls.

These procedures were developed ad hoc, improvising as needed, since nobody had heard of such a challenge. The cavers would anchor and rig a rappel rope every hundred or so feet along the cliff

top. Then, they would rappel down a bit, observe all around their position, and make calls, then go further, and repeat, until they had covered the vertical terrain. Finally, they would switch to ascending, and climb the rope to the top, move over, and do it again.

This unique vertical search procedure was employed for hours, until finally, Roberta Swicegood spotted the brush anomaly, signaled the ground search team below, and Shawn was found.

Roberta should be recognized, since she was a strong caver, and not a member of ASRC, but responded and served when called.

Sadly, Roberta died in a cave diving accident in Pennsylvania several years later, but many of her friends were in, and continue to be in, the ASRC.

Dean Wampler and I were the two Incident Commanders for this operation, and I was the IC as we were getting everyone off the mountain. It was cold, it was wet, and all of our people were exhausted. I told the Park Ranger in charge of the operation that our people were not safe to drive home. Could he move the vehicles out of the Fire Cache at Big Meadows, and allow us to sleep on the floor there?

After a second's thought, he forcefully said "No! Gather all your people here." And he strode off, talking on his radio. I was a little shocked. A couple of minutes later, he returned, and with a little smile, said "Get all your people into vehicles and follow me."

He got into his Park Service vehicle and led us, in a massive convoy, from The Saddle down the fire road to the south, through the gate out of the Park, and several miles beyond – and suddenly turned into the entrance to Graves Mountain Lodge, an expensive and luxurious mountain hotel. He got out of his vehicle, directed us all where to park, and then took me into the then-empty lodge registration office. He pulled a large pile of keys off the board, dropped them on the counter, and said "Everyone

gets a room, and breakfast in the morning, on the Park Service."

The morning's breakfast, in the big lodge dining room, is one of my fondest SAR memories. Our members, some in wet wool Ragg socks as they couldn't bear to put their boots back on, and many in wet, dirty clothes, were sitting at their tables wolfing down food. While getting looks from people at nearby tables, even including a distinguished-looking man in a blazer and with cravat. But apparently, someone told the other diners why we were there and what we had done, as a bit later we received a hearty round of applause from them.