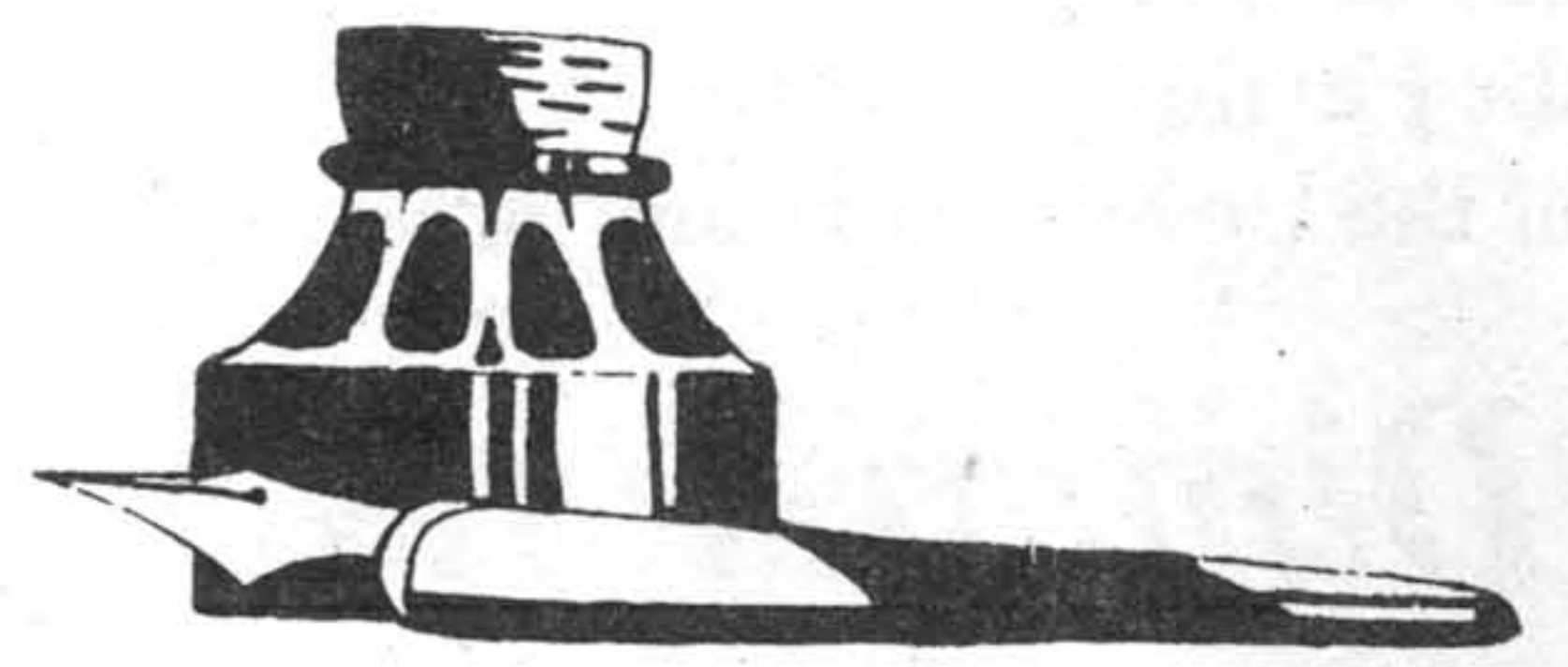


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**The Mission
is Possible**

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Taming the Wilderness

by Dave Troller

"Don't try to make us out to be glamorous," says Yorke Brown as we talk in the backroom of Pavilion XI. "Rescue is not glamorous or romantic. Most of it is drudge work, man, it's a pain. You try hauling that Stokes' litter for five miles late at night in the driving rain. Then tell me if you feel glamorous."

I decided to take his word for it.

So much for any preconceptions of bearded supermen effortlessly scaling vertical cliffs to snatch a helpless mountaineer from the jaws of death just as his grip falters. As the Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group chairman, Robby Robbins, says, "We don't have enough money for a St. Bernard. Hell, half the guys in the Group aren't old enough to buy the booze to put in the little barrel anyway."

What, then, describes the Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group? Start with the word competent. BRMRG members are all seasoned outdoorsmen, with years of experience in either backpacking, caving or climbing. Robbins freely admits "the reason I first joined the Group is that there are some damn good outdoorsmen in it. I mean, these guys are some of the finest around."

Years of outdoor experience, however, do not a rescuer make. The difference between the BRMRG member and the average weekend outdoorsman who bashes down rocks or hauls around a 50-pound pack is training. Wilderness rescue group members must be highly qualified in every aspect of rescue. And BRMRG members are.

Knowing the ropes. All field personnel train in rescue techniques, survival, land navigation, wilderness travel, rescue ropework and evacuation techniques. All, be they trainee or full-fledged basic member, must hone their skills by participating in one search and rescue, and one semi-technical evacuation training session every year.

To become a basic member of the Group, each trainee must also become a certified Emergency Medical Technician. The course taken by BRMRG trainees last fall, conducted by EMT coordinator Keith Conover, involved 110 classroom hours, over twice the time students spend in class for most 3-credit hour courses. The emergency medical training of Group members surpasses that of most ambulance personnel. "We pride ourselves in our medical qualifications. It's probably our strongest point," says Information Chairman Chris Stubbs.

The group, then, is qualified. But actual wilderness rescue is only one facet of the BRMRG's ultimate goal -- saving lives. The other side of the coin is

outdoor education. "Most wilderness accidents could be prevented," says Brown.

The Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (ASRC), of which BRMRG is a part, was born of a tragic case which dramatically brought home the need for a group providing both rescue capability and outdoor education. Two Boy Scouts were separated from their troop while camping in northwest Virginia in the winter of 1971. Their scoutmasters set out to look for them. The Scouts returned to camp; the scoutmasters never did. Their frozen bodies were found several days later.

For outdoor enthusiasts, the lesson was all too clear. "Those guys shouldn't have had to die," says Brown. "In the first place, they would have been able to survive that storm, had they been properly trained. In the second place, there should have been someone to save them." The ASRC was an effort by outdoorsmen "to take care of their own." The Group's primary efforts last semester were along these lines, as they totaled an incredible 3,833 manhours of training and education in EMT, Red Cross standard first aid, and outdoor safety seminars.

Anything Goes. The BRMRG claims to provide a "highly coordinated, well-trained group of people capable of handling almost any emergency situation, anywhere, anytime." Anytime means 24 hours a day, regardless of the weather. Anywhere includes most of Virginia, as well as parts of West Virginia and Maryland. Any emergency situation includes all types of land search, wilderness rescue or vertical rock rescue.

BRMRG provides a very specialized service. They admit they do not have the capabilities in terms of equipment to take over responsibilities of rescue squads, fire departments, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) or the local enforcement agencies. Their *raison d'être* is to offer their trained services to existing agencies in any capacity such authorities deem fit, and the Group is ready to handle as much as they're given.

Often, though they meet with frustration. The Group is still young and widely unknown among county enforcement agents, national forest rangers and other authorities. These authorities also have an understandable desire to run a search themselves. "The sheriff has a legitimate concern in running the operations himself," says Brown. "As far as he's concerned, he's got a lot to risk by calling on us or any other outside source. Yet we know we can help. We're still trying to build credibility. We want to be trusted, because we know we can be."



On Tuesday Feb. 21 the group got a chance to prove their skills. A young patient at the Lynchburg Training School and Hospital wandered off the grounds of that institution late in the afternoon. The Civil Air Patrol was asked to provide air support for a search which by Tuesday afternoon included 150 people, largely untrained personnel of the institute. Radio traffic was monitored by the Monticello Composite Squadron of the CAP, who got the word to Yorke Brown, head of the BRMRG quick response team, Tuesday night. Brown called the institution immediately to offer the Group's services for the search. That offer was accepted Wednesday morning at 10 A.M. and by 1 P.M. the quick response team was in Lynchburg.

The institution gave Brown, the mission coordinator, extensive freedom to run the search before pulling out so as not to interfere with BRMRG's efforts. Taking charge, the team mapped out the area to be searched, sectioned out high probability areas and broke up into smaller groups to run "scratch searches" through these areas. In a scratch search, the rescuer heads off into an area at top speed, then proceeds along paths, streams or up ravines, searching for clues such as tracks, clothing or personal articles.

Making Tracks. The searches continued through the night, turning up leads only to have them evaporate. At one point, a fresh set of tracks was found. The walkie-talkies started buzzing as the searchers raced up the trail, only to find a young hiker out for an evening stroll.

During the night, a team of search dogs was brought in from New York. The Group worked with the three dogs Thursday morning. By noon, the Group had thoroughly checked all high probability areas and no substantive clues had been found. School administrators said that the Group had done all it could, and it was mutually agreed that BRMRG should terminate its efforts. As of Feb. 26, the patient had not been found.

The Group returned to Charlottesville knowing they had done everything possible. The search was extremely well-executed. They also appreciated the chance to be able to take the lead. "We've usually run into a lot of interference, be that right or wrong," said Chris Stubbs, who participated in the mission. "This time they gave us the reins. It was the best thing we've ever run." The School administration and the local authorities concur, and are sending a citation for the Group's efforts.

"I'm not in the habit of handing out lots of praise to our people when they do well," said Chris Stubbs, "because we expect them to. We worked hard. We asked a lot from them, and they came through. But, then, that's expected."

"You gotta be hard, man."

