

Fitzgerald Search and Rescue After Action Report
1001S-1995

Report prepared by:

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Operations Captain
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Summary of Events:

On Tuesday, January 19, 2010 at approximately 7:44 PM, the Teton County, Wyoming Sheriff's Office (TCSO) dispatch was notified by the Teton County, Idaho Sheriff's Office (Driggs SO) dispatch that they were receiving 911 calls from a lost skier who travelled out of bounds from Grand Targhee Resort.

The calls were placed from a cell phone and reception was intermittent. The caller did not know where he was or how to use the GPS he had in his possession. After three calls in a one minute period, no more calls were received.

At the time Driggs SO was receiving the calls, their search and rescue (SAR) team was holding a meeting and had people at dispatch who were familiar with the area, including Kelly Circle, their SAR Coordinator. Circle requested that Doug Meyer, TCSO SAR Coordinator, be notified.

As Meyer was being notified, Driggs SO contacted Grand Targhee Ski Patrol. From the 911 phone calls, the Driggs SO dispatcher learned that the skier had ridden up a 2-chair chairlift and was in an area with Aspen trees. From this information, Driggs SAR and the ski patrol thought perhaps the skier was in an area known as Rick's Basin.

Doug Meyer had been notified and spoke over the phone with Kelly Circle. Meyer also called Teton County SAR board member Ray Shriver asking him to represent the WY team and to keep him advised. Shriver is a TCSO board member, past Teton Valley SAR member and was closer to the event as he lives in Idaho. Meyer left a phone message for TCSO SAR Board Director Tim Ciocarlan advising him of the event.

Meyer called Circle and asked that Circle keep him advised. Meyer was also standing by to hear from Shriver. Shriver was standing by to receive more information expecting the lost skier to call back. He never did.

Shriver talked with Circle. Based upon the skier telling the Driggs dispatcher that he had ridden a two-chair chair lift, they thought he could be in Rick's Basin. A plan was devised to search Rick's Basin by snow machine. Shriver advised TCSO dispatch, that if the skier was not found, they would launch the TCSO SAR helicopter at first light. At

approximately 8:59 PM, Driggs SAR members on snow machines were sent into Rick's Basin. According to Shriver, the skier was believed to be fit and mobile, just lost.

At 23:53 TCSO dispatch was advised that the ski patrol found tracks they believed to belong to the lost skier going down into South Leigh Creek. The tracks were followed for a ways, but due to conditions and safety concerns, ski patrollers decided not to pursue any deeper into the steep canyon.

Shriver communicated this to Meyer. Shriver and Meyer agreed to postpone the search until it could be completed by helicopter at first light.

South Leigh Canyon was not searched from the bottom.

The following morning, Wednesday, January 20, 2010 at 7:56 AM, the TCSO helicopter with Meyer and Shriver on board began an aerial search of South Leigh Creek.

Fitzgerald was located at 8:37 AM. He was spotted face down in the snow. Meyer and Shriver were dropped off in the area at 8:44 AM and skied approximately 15 minutes to the scene.

Fitzgerald was found fully clothed, but very wet. It appeared he had fallen into the creek. His skis were not on scene.

Fitzgerald was monitored for a heart-beat by way of an automated external defibrillator (AED). The AED indicated a "flat-line". Meyer called emergency room Dr. A.J. Wheeler for medical instruction. Meyer was instructed to perform rescue breathing on the patient.

Meyer tried to contact Idaho SAR but was unable to make contact. He was able to contact Targhee ski patrol. They were asked to assist at the scene. The SAR helicopter picked up two ski patrollers from Grand Targhee and brought them to the scene to assist. Fitzgerald was still unresponsive.

Meyer maintained contact with Dr. A.J. Wheeler. Dr. Wheeler wanted to have the patient flown to Idaho Falls, but due to weather, this was not an option.

The SAR helicopter was then used to pick up Kelly Circle who is also an EMT. Circle was flown from the South Leigh Creek trail-head and brought to the scene.

During this period the helicopter had to refuel in Driggs, ID.

Dr. Wheeler directed Meyer to bring the patient to St. John's Hospital in Jackson. Rescue breathing continued throughout the entire period.

At approximately 10:58 AM the helicopter was airborne to St. John's hospital with Fitzgerald on board. Upon arrival at the hospital, Fitzgerald's core temperature was

measured at 66 degrees. Fitzgerald was later pronounced dead by Dr. Wheeler. The Teton County Coroner declared hypothermia as the cause of death.

All times listed above were taken from TCSO dispatch event notes.

Doug Meyer Interview:

On Friday, January 22, 2010, I received a phone call from SAR Coordinator Doug Meyer. Meyer said he was calling to give me a “heads-up” that he was hearing criticism from Idaho that the Teton County, Wyoming SAR had abandoned the search early and had never searched South Leigh Creek from the bottom using snowmobiles.

Meyer explained that the Targhee ski patrollers had located what they thought were the tracks of Fitzgerald going out of bounds and down a steep canyon into South Leigh Creek. And, that due to conditions including darkness, avalanche danger and the steepness of the terrain, they pulled out and did not travel down the canyon into South Leigh Creek.

I told Meyer that if the conditions were unsafe for skiers, it would certainly be unsafe for snow machines and to not worry, we would look into it on Monday.

On Monday, January 25, 2010, I spoke with Meyer again. Meyer showed me a topographical map of Grand Targhee and the surrounding area. The map showed the steep canyon Fitzgerald had gone down into South Leigh Creek and South Leigh Creek itself, along with the location Fitzgerald had been found. From looking at the map, it was apparent that South Leigh Creek was fairly flat in the bottom and appeared accessible by snowmobile from the bottom.

Meyer told me substantially the following:

Meyer received a call from TCSO, WY dispatch advising him that a Grand Targhee skier had called the Driggs SO by cell phone saying he was lost. Meyer was directed to contact Kelly Circle of Teton county ID SAR. According to Circle, the Driggs SO dispatcher received 3 calls within a one minute period from the lost skier.

Meyer called Circle and learned that SAR (ID) was in dispatch with a team member who was familiar with Grand Targhee. They were waiting for another call from the lost skier and were going to give him advice on how to get out.

In a later conversation between Circle and Meyer, Meyer learned that during the initial 911 calls, the reception was poor, but the dispatcher was able to learn the skier had gone

up a two-chair chairlift and was now in a meadow area with trees. Meyer did not have any idea where the skier was other than outside of Targhee.

Kelly said he had snowmobiles and riders available and they discussed their use, with Meyer saying to wait until they had a better idea where the lost skier might be. Ultimately Circle and Meyer decided to search Rick's Basin by snowmobile.

Meyer called SAR board director Tim Ciocarlan, leaving a message. Meyer also called board member Ray Shriver. He spoke to Shriver and asked Shriver to contact Circle and to report back on the progress of the event. He called Shriver particularly as Shriver was a past member of the Idaho SAR team, was familiar with their protocols and had served as their lead trainer.

Meyer was under the impression that they would locate the skier when he, the skier, called back with a better description of his location.

Around 11:30 PM, Shriver called Meyer back telling him that Rick's Basin had been searched by snowmobiles; and Targhee ski patrollers found tracks believed to be those of the lost skier going out of bounds and down a steep canyon into South Leigh Creek. Shriver told Meyer that the ski patrollers thought it was too risky to go after the skier that night (down the canyon he had skied). Meyer was told "everyone" wanted to postpone the search until morning.

Meyer called Ciocarlan again and this time spoke with him advising him of the situation.

Being aware that Idaho had snowmobiles on hand and their past protocol for out-of-bounds skiers in South Leigh Creek was to search the bottom by snowmobile, Meyer assumed this had been done.

Meyer then made a decision to continue the search at first light with the use of the SAR helicopter.

The following morning at approximately 5:30 AM, Meyer called Circle asking him to stage Idaho SAR at the base of Targhee. Circle said he would have his SAR team at the base at 7:30AM.

At 7:65 AM, Meyer and Shriver were flown by helicopter to South Leigh Creek. Here they found the skier's tracks going up South Leigh on an old snowmobile track. The tracks turned around and backtracked down the snowmobile track. Eventually, the tracks came to a bridge across the creek. Instead of going across the bridge, the tracks led downstream, along the creek. As the tracks continued, they crossed the creek at least six times. Ultimately, the tracks led to Fitzgerald, who was found laying face down in the snow.

Meyer did not know who was acting as incident command. He thought of it as a “shared command”.

Ray Shriver Interview

On Monday afternoon, January 25, 2010, I spoke with Ray Shriver. Shriver told me substantially the following:

Shriver said he felt terrible about Fitzgerald’s death. He described the incident as “the perfect storm” saying the victim was not a local experienced in the backcountry but from an east coast city, not dressed to spend the night out, without survival gear, had a GPS he didn’t know how to use and skied out of bounds into very rugged terrain. That, coupled with a search involving 3 different search entities, no one clearly in charge and assumptions being made about who was doing what, a catastrophe occurred.

Shriver had been called by Meyer and asked to contact Kelly Circle. From Circle he learned that a skier phoned in on a cell phone saying he was lost. The skier said he had ridden a two-chair Grand Targhee chair lift up the mountain and had skied down and out of bounds. He was calling for help and described the area he was in as a meadow with trees. Grand Targhee ski patrollers were out looking for tracks that could be attributed to Fitzgerald. And, a team of snow mobilers was searching in Rick’s Basin as it met the description given by the lost skier.

Shortly before midnight, the ski patrollers, including Jason O’Neil, a Teton County Idaho Search and Rescue Member, had found a set of ski tracks leaving the resort and going down a steep canyon into South Leigh Creek. Due to the conditions, including avalanche danger, the skiers climbed back out and chose not to endanger themselves by searching down the canyon further.

As a past Teton County Idaho SAR member and training director, Shriver knows that the Idaho team has practiced on this very scenario; someone going out of bounds into South Leigh Creek. The protocol has been to search South Leigh Creek from the bottom by using snowmobiles. He had assumed that Kelly Circle had organized this very thing.

Shriver relayed the ski patrollers’ information to Doug Meyer and the search was called off for the night with plans to resume at first light by helicopter.

It has always been Shriver’s experience that skiers who were lost and not injured, always walked out or were found just fine, although cold and tired, the following morning.

Shriver received all his information via telephone and had not responded to the scene that night.

Tim Ciocarlan Interview

Ciocarlan recalled that he was home sleeping the night of Tuesday, January 19, 2010 when his phone rang at 11:38PM. The call was from Doug Meyer. Meyer advised him that a New York man who had been skiing was lost at Grand Targhee, that Driggs SAR was on scene and that Ray Shriver had been notified. The only information known to date was that the man had ridden a two-chair chairlift up the mountain and was now lost in “a meadow with trees”. Ciocarlan suggested to Meyer that they begin a ground search. Meyer rejected that suggestion saying it was 25 degrees out, that the lost skier would be alright and that they would find him in the morning.

Ciocarlan responded that that would not be his choice and he would begin the search. Meyer said he would try and get more information and would call Ciocarlan back. Meyer did not call back that night.

Grand Targhee Debriefing

On Wednesday, January 27, 2010, a debriefing of the incident was held at Grand Targhee Ski Resort. Those present included Sheriff Whalen, Doug Meyer, Tim Ciocarlan, myself, Teton county Idaho Sheriff Tony Liford, Teton County Idaho SAR Coordinator Kelly Circle, Teton County Idaho SAR Member/Grand Targhee Ski Patroller Jason O’Neil, Resort General Manager Scott Pierpont, Resort Director of Risk Management, Karen Cameron and others from Grand Targhee Ski Patrol.

During the debriefing we discussed the event as it unfolded and who played what role. The primary concerns expressed at this meeting were:

- Why wasn’t someone from the Teton County Wyoming SAR, or a WY team, on the ground?
- Why was the search called off that night?
- Why wasn’t South Leigh Creek searched from the bottom with snowmobiles that night?
- Why were ski patrollers flown by helicopter to the rescue site instead of WY SAR members?
- Who was the incident commander?
- Kelly Circle states he specifically offered the use of snowmobiles and searchers to search South Leigh Creek to Shriver, but the offer was declined. Unless directed to do so, Circle did not have the authority to send a team into Wyoming.
- Did SAR members forgo basic ground operations due to an over reliance on the availability of a helicopter?

Sheriff Whalen acknowledged that mistakes were made during the execution of the search, offered his apologies, and informed those present that based upon review, changes in protocol would be made.

New information learned during the debriefing had to do with the three original calls. Kelly Circle said that he had reviewed the recorded calls and discovered that 1) the caller's voice sounded slurred; and 2) the caller told the Teton County, ID Sheriff's dispatcher that not only had he left the resort and was in a meadow with fallen trees, but there was a stream. No one from Teton County, WY had heard the information about slurred speech or a stream until this point.

After Debriefing Observations

Meyer and Shriver believe this new information is important and had it been known the night of the search, different decisions would have been made. The information about the stream was critical as the only stream in the immediate area of the double chair lift is South Leigh Creek. If searchers had known there was a belief that Fitzgerald's speech was slurred, they would have interpreted that as a sign of hypothermia. If this information had been shared when it came in around 7:44 PM that night, a ground search of South Leigh Creek by snowmobile would have been organized immediately.

A copy of the phone calls made by Fitzgerald to the TCSO, ID 911 line was requested and received. They have been reviewed and transcribed. See attached.

Additional information learned from this review was that the TCSO, ID dispatcher had received Fitzgerald's cell phone number and had been told by Fitzgerald that his cell phone battery was going dead.

The information regarding the cell phone number and battery was important as the WY contingency was operating on the belief that Idaho SAR was waiting for a call back to more accurately identify Fitzgerald's location.

From my review of the 911 tapes, I could hear that Fitzgerald's voice was unique, but I could not determine if it was slurred and an indicator of hypothermia or due to a speech impediment or unique accent. In any event, it is my belief that best practice would have been to assume it was slurred due to hypothermia and to have shared that information.

Subsequent to Kelly Circle's statement that Shriver rejected Circle's offer of snowmobiles to search South Leigh Creek from the bottom, I spoke with Shriver. I asked him directly about Circle's offer. Shriver said he has been trying to recall the entire incident, but could not recall Circle's offer. He is not insinuating the offer wasn't made, he just does not recall.

911 emergency locating services is a system available by which emergency dispatchers can receive GPS coordinates of a caller when that caller phones a 911 line by way of a cell phone.

When I asked Teton County WY SAR members if Driggs SO had these capabilities, they did not know.

An inquiry to TCSO, Idaho revealed they do not have 911 emergency locating services capabilities.

Findings:

Unfortunately, this incident is fraught with mistakes. The “perfect storm” reference made by Ray Shriver perhaps is the accurate depiction.

- 1) While placing any responsibility on a victim is difficult, it is still important to make mention of his choices leading up to this incident:
 - Mr. Fitzgerald skied alone in an unfamiliar area.
 - He skied out of bounds.
 - He carried a GPS he did not know how to use.
 - His cell phone that was not fully charged.
- 2) All evidence suggests the dispatcher in Idaho did not give out all of the pertinent information relative to Mr. Fitzgerald’s whereabouts. Specifically, that he was near a stream with fallen trees around him. This should have narrowed the scope of the search to South Leigh Creek immediately.
- 3) Wyoming SAR members made the conscious decision not to respond to the scene of the rescue; this was a critical error.
- 4) Assumptions were made by the Teton County, Wyoming, SAR Coordinator that were erroneous and a wrong decision (calling off the search) was made as a result of these assumptions.

Recommendations

I suggest the Teton County, Wyoming Sheriff’s Office implement the following changes to the search and rescue protocol:

- 1) Instead of SAR notifications being made solely to the SAR coordinator, notifications are made to all SAR board members. Once notified, TCSO dispatch makes an effort to conference call the board members so a group discussion can convene. This recommendation is made based on the theory that “group thinking” may act as a check and balance, thus reducing the possibility that things are overlooked.
- 2) That an Incident Command System (ICS) single Incident Commander (IC) is identified at the onset of any operation and the identity of the IC is clearly communicated to all involved.
- 3) SAR operations require “boots on the ground” and are not managed by telephone.

- 4) A SAR member is assigned the responsibility to review dispatch tapes of the call(s) received, as an experienced/trained SAR member may pick up on clues unnoticed by the original call taker.
- 5) SAR members are trained to know which jurisdictions have 911 emergency locating services and how those services can be applied.
- 6) Draft a checklist of operational considerations to be reviewed and checked off by the IC as the incident unfolds, including questions similar to “Are we relying too heavily on the availability of a helicopter and neglecting possible ground operations?” and “Has an attempt been made to use 911 emergency locating services?”

Additionally, Sheriff Whalen has drafted a proposed agreement between this office and Sheriff Liford. The proposed agreement would authorize Sheriff Liford’s Office, upon request, to take full command and control of incidents occurring in Wyoming, on the west side of the Tetons, until Teton County, Wyoming has resources on the ground at the incident. This agreement would be reciprocal, should Sheriff Liford request the same of Sheriff Whalen.

Fitzgerald Search and Rescue After Action Report
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Supplement

February 8, 2010
Prepared by Scott Terry
Operations Captain

On the morning of February 8, 2010 I received a phone call from Edward Fitzgerald, the father of the deceased. Mr. Fitzgerald had read this report and wanted to clarify some misunderstood information.

Mr. Fitzgerald said that his son did not possess a stand alone GPS unit. When he told the dispatcher he had GPS, what he really meant was that his cell phone was GPS enabled. He didn't know how to turn the GPS on, as he couldn't - the phone's GPS capabilities can't be turned on and off or viewed. The GPS coordinates are only accessed through a tracking service.

After speaking with Mr. Fitzgerald, I phoned Teton County Coroner Bob Campbell. Campbell confirmed that the deceased Fitzgerald did not have a stand alone GPS unit on his person.

On the Afternoon of February 8, 2010 I spoke again with Mr. Fitzgerald. He told me that his son's cell service was through Sprint. Mr. Fitzgerald had called Sprint and asked them to check their records for his son's phone in an attempt to find out how many attempts had been made to call 911. They checked the details for the account and found that the deceased had attempted to call 911 seven times on 1-19-10. The attempts were made at 3:54PM; 3:58 PM; 4:13PM; 5:35 PM; 7:34 PH; 7:37 PM and 7:43 PM.

These early calls unsuccessful calls may explain why Fitzgerald had initially gone upstream in South Leigh Creek – to gain altitude in an attempt to receive cell service.