

LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS



They knew the dangers before they left. The forecasts called for severe blizzards and also, possibly,

avalanches. Still, a group of four men and three women decided to go cross-country skiing in the Colorado mountains. They felt sure they could handle any storm that might blow up. After all, they were fine skiers. Some of them had already survived fierce winter storms in the mountains. And the avalanche danger? "There is always an avalanche danger on this route," said Elliot Brown, one of the skiers. To them, this ski trip was just another wilderness adventure.

2 Not everyone agreed with that assessment. Some people thought the group was nuts. Doug Bitterman, manager of the local ski touring center, saw the skiers head out. Shaking his head, he cracked, "That's going to be the Rescue of the Year."

1 Bitterman didn't know how right he was. When the skiers took off on Friday, February 19, 1993, they were heading into the most frightening and dangerous experience of their lives. They departed from Ashcroft, Colorado, and headed for a hut about seven miles up Express Creek.

Dee Dubin is carried off a helicopter after she was rescued from the backcountry southwest of Aspen, Colorado.

The skiers, who ranged in age from 34 to 50, began their trek late in the morning. For such an experienced group, they did not plan their trip very well. Only two of their sleeping bags were waterproof. They brought no insulated sleeping pads and no tent.

⁴ It wasn't long before the winds began to howl and the snow began to fall. Still, the group pressed ahead. Slowly, however, their confidence began to sag. "We were in snow that was knee deep, at times waist deep," said Rob Dubin later. "One minute you could see ahead and the next you couldn't see the tips of your skis." Only after they had gone too far to turn back did they realize exactly how much danger they were in. At that point, Brown said, "we couldn't do anything about it anymore."

⁵ Blinded by the snow, the group lost the trail and turned the wrong way. Now they had no chance of reaching the safety of the hut. Night fell, and the temperature plunged to below zero. The skiers tried to construct a snow cave for shelter, but it soon collapsed because the snow was too dry and fluffy. So the seven skiers spent a sleepless night huddled together in a hole they dug in the snow. By early morning they were all cold, wet, and tired.

⁶ At this point, the skiers couldn't agree on their next move. Should they stay put or move on? Should they remain together

or split up? The two strongest skiers, Ken Torp and Elliot Brown, suggested a difficult route as their best bet back to Express Creek. Richard Rost protested, saying it would be too hard for the women. Rost believed they would be better off retracing their steps. In the end, Torp and Brown headed out on their own. If the route was impassable, they said, they would return in 25 minutes. If they didn't come back, the rest should follow them.

⁷ Torp and Brown didn't return. The three women and the two men waited for more than an hour but then decided not to follow the same trail. Instead, they took Rost's advice and headed back toward Ashcroft. Initially, Rost and Rob Dubin led the way. But 50-year-old Brigitte Schluger began falling behind. Her tiny body was no match for the elements. "She was falling," recalled Dubin, "getting blown over by the wind."

⁸ Dubin wanted to slow down for Schluger's sake, but Rost resisted. Rost feared that Andrea Brett, his girlfriend, might freeze to death if she slowed down. At last, Rost and Brett went off on their own while Dubin, his wife, Dee, and Schluger continued at a slower pace. The first rule of mountaineering is to stay together. The skiers had now broken that commandment twice.

⁹ After seven grueling hours, Rost and Brett made it back safely to Ashcroft. By then it was late Saturday afternoon. They told rescue workers about their five lost companions, broken into two groups. Starting the next day, searchers braved a



Having recovered from her ordeal, Dee Dubin talks to reporters during a news conference at a Denver hospital.

series of blizzards to look for the lost skiers. For two days, rescuers searched the mountains. As time passed, however, hope slowly drained away. By Tuesday morning it looked doubtful that any of the five would ever be found alive. Sheriff Bob Braudis began to worry about the safety of the rescuers. "We are using real, live rescuers," he said, "to search for probable dead bodies."

¹⁰ Actually—against all odds—the five skiers were still alive. Torp and Brown had spent a miserable Saturday night. Brown's sleeping bag was very wet and provided no insulation. To keep from freezing to death, the two men forced themselves to stay awake all night, talking and flexing their muscles. The following day they got lucky. They stumbled upon an unlocked cabin owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). As Brown later put it, "that was a lifesaver."

¹¹ The two men spent Sunday night in the cabin. They built a fire in the stove, using it to melt snow for drinking water and to dry out their sleeping bags. The next morning, despite the continuing bad weather, the two men decided to leave the cabin. They felt that the storm would prevent anyone from rescuing them, so they pledged to save themselves. Before leaving the cabin, they stamped the word HELD in the snow and hung an American flag upside down—a distress signal. Torp also left a note just in case anyone else came to the cabin. The note read, "Our plan is to ski all the way to Taylor Park Res. on 2/22. The snow is deep. The trail

unpacked.... We have food for one day. We apologize for using the cabin."

¹² The situation for the Dubins and Schluger, meanwhile, was even grimmer. The three were completely lost. The two women had grown very weak and were suffering from severe frostbite. Snow had fallen into Dee Dubin's boot, numbing her feet. "I woke her up 30 times during the night and told her to flex her fingers and toes so they wouldn't freeze," Rob Dubin later said. Unable to carry her backpack or her sopping wet sleeping bag, Schluger had just dropped them along the trail. For two nights she used Dee Dubin's sleeping bag, while Dee shared her husband's.

¹³ Then, on Monday morning, something miraculous happened. The Dubins and Schluger stumbled onto the very same cabin that Torp and Brown had found. Seeing Torp's note, they figured the two men were still alive and in pretty good shape. Incredibly, Schluger and the Dubins had arrived at the cabin just two hours after Torp and Brown left it.

¹⁴ Torp and Brown had used all the firewood, so Rob Dubin broke up the furniture and burned it. He knew this cabin was their last hope. They would never be able to ski out on their own like Torp and Brown. They would just have to wait and hope to be rescued.

¹⁵ On Tuesday morning, Torp and Brown made it to Taylor Park Reservoir. There they ran into some snowmobilers. "Are you the two lost guys?" asked one snowmobiler.

¹⁶ "Yes!" they both shouted.

¹⁷ Torp and Brown were overjoyed to be rescued, but their happiness was clouded by thoughts of the friends they had left back on the mountain. They heard that a helicopter had spotted Schluger's blue backpack and sleeping bag. To Torp, that evidence meant Schluger and the Dubins had probably died in an avalanche. Rescuers thought the same thing. They had scoured the region on skis, snowshoes, snowmobiles, planes, and helicopters and had found nothing.

¹⁸ A lot of snow had fallen since the skiers had started out the previous Friday, and now another storm was moving in. There was just enough clear weather to give the rescue effort one more try. And so the rescuers headed out again. Luckily, a helicopter pilot saw some tracks in the snow. The tracks led to the BLM hut. The pilot landed in a snowfield nearby and moments later, he radioed the good news: "We have all three." ❧

If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on page 133 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 134.

Reading Time: Lesson 12

Minutes _____ Seconds _____

Problem and Solution

"LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS"

Name#:

Block:

Directions: *Read the following story and record the different problems and solutions presented in the passage. Also, there may be additional questions that follow a problem and solution, so be sure to answer those as well, COMPLETELY and in complete sentences.*

1. Problem: Temperatures plunged below zero at night.

Solution:

2. Problem:

Solution: Rost and Andrea Brett went off on their own.

3. Problem:

Solution: For two days, rescue workers searched the mountains.

4. Problem:

Solution: Torp and Brown built a fire in a stove to melt snow for water and to dry out sleeping bags.

5. Problem: Torp and Brown might freeze to death at night.

Solution:

6. Question: What others survival methods have you heard of or know of that could have helped the issue Torp and Brown were having? Which solution of yours or from the passage would think is most effective and why?

7. Problem:

Solution: Dee needed to flex her fingers and toes.

8. Problem: Rob Durbin did not have any firewood to burn.

Solution:

9. Problem: The storm will keep anyone from rescuing Torp and Brown from the cabin.

Solution:

10. Problem: Rescuers might now know where Torp and Brown were or that there was even a problem.

Solution:

11. Problem:

Solution: Schluger used Dee's sleeping bag and Dee slept in her husband's.

12. Problem: The Dubins and Schluger not being able to ski out of the cabin to Taylor Park on their own.

Solution:

13. Problem: Rescuers spotted Schluger's blue backpack and sleeping bag, but not any of the hikers.

Solution:

14. Would it be accurate to infer that Torp and Brown forgot about their friends after being rescued? Use evidence from the text to support your answer **AND** explain how the evidence supports your answer.