



THE TRACKER

Monthly Newsletter of the Inland Empire Search and Rescue Council

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The Worst Day of My Life

David Atchley, San Gorgonio SAR



Hello fellow Teams and Friends. Now that some time has passed I thought I could write to tell you all about the exact facts of the collision that took Phil Calvert's and Scott Johnston's lives. As we all know the facts of any story that passes either through the media or many people can be anything but accurate. I think a clear story can help all of you who loved and cared for

Phil and Scott. Maybe this story will answer some pending questions.

For our team the page went out for the missing young man search in Joshua Tree on Friday afternoon July 16, 2004. We all decided to go Saturday morning to give a full day and we would be fresh after a nights sleep. We all arrived at our SAR house at Mill Creek Ranger Station at 0400 on Saturday morning. Our responding team comprised of Dave Atchley, Phil Calvert, Scott Johnston, Bob Blanck, Paul Butler, Julie Haggerty, Shane Elliot, Tom Ziech and Kevin Newland. Wanting to take air conditioned units due to the desert heat in July; we split up into three units. Paul Butler and Kevin Newland in Deputy Kovich's unit, Doc Evans from Valley of Falls SAR and Julie Haggerty in the VOF Suburban, Tom Ziech in the command post van and the remainder of us went in the SAN G Suburban. I drove, Phil was shot gun, Shane was behind me, Scott sat behind Phil and Bob was in the rear most third seat. We had a lot of gear

and put what would not fit in the roof rack.

Some time after the accident I looked at Scott's pack and gear. I think Scott was dreaming of a rescue whereas he could use all his rope toys as he had his Five Ten rock shoes, a climbing rope and lots of rock pro with him. Scott loved Joshua Tree, as did Phil. In fact on many occasions Phil, Scott and I had done day and over night trips to rock climb and to teach Boy Scout groups climbing skills for their merit badges. This scout group was Phil's son's old troop and he recruited Scott and I to help out. We had a lot of fun doing this.

We left Mill Creek at 0415 for Joshua Tree. We all talked amongst each other as we drove in the unit except Scott. Scott had the ability to fall asleep anywhere at anytime and he did. So Scott slept the entire trip and one point sort of breathed heavily. Well for me this was a chance to make fun and poke at Scott even as he slept. I said "With as much air as Scott is passing through him, when he gets old and fat he'll be a great snorer!" Scott was asleep at the time of the collision and never knew what hit us, and for that I am thankful.

I know highway 62 quite well and knew what was coming next along the road in terms of terrain and where we were at all times. We came up the narrow canyon and entered Morongo Valley as I looked for the first hill to climb into Yucca Valley, it was dark out still and the sky had started to turn blue from the rising sun. I was dreading the oncoming hot day. When I spoke

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What's New in Volunteer Forces?

Lt. Virgil Merrett, Volunteer Forces Unit

First and foremost I would like to say Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a Thank You for all the time and effort given by so many of you this year.

As you all know the 2004 year was full of tragedy for our San Geronio SAR Team. Please keep their families, the team, and the other team members in your thoughts and prayers as we move into a new year.

The end of December 2004 will bring about some sworn personnel changes to the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department Volunteer Forces Unit and the SAR Council.

On January 8, 2005 Corporal Darren Goodman will be promoted to the rank of Sergeant and reassigned to the Central Detention Center (the jail). Darren has been the SAR Teams coordinator and has been a major supporter of the SAR teams and their missions. We would like to thank SER-GEANT Goodman for his many contribu-

tions to the Volunteer Forces units over the years. Corporal Mike Schlax will assume the duties of the SAR Coordinator in Volunteer Forces.

Also on January 8, 2005 the newly promoted Corporal James Mahan and Deputy David Pichotta will join us here in the Volunteer Forces Unit.

During January - February 2005 the Volunteer Forces Unit will be ordering some of your Wish List equipment requested by the teams. We will advise when it arrives and is ready for pickup. The Sheriff's Department budget was restored to normal for January 2005.

*Merry Christmas & Happy
Holidays,
Virgil Merrett*

In Parting...

Darren Goodman, VFU

By now, most of you have heard that I was promoted to Sergeant, and will be leaving Volunteer Forces on January 8th, headed for my new assignment at the Central Detention Center. Well, here's the hard part...formally saying goodbye to all of you.

I had hoped I could get around to all of your team meetings, SAR Council, or somewhere that I could personally speak to each of you. I was just getting to know many of you, but several of you have become friends that I will keep for life. Collectively, you guys taught me a great deal about selflessness, dedication, and teamwork. Not to mention, a thing or two about Search and Rescue!

As most of you who've grown to know me realize, I'm always straight with you. So believe me when I tell you that I will sorely miss every aspect. I will miss the 2am phone calls, the pursuit of Blue Cards, and even fielding those tough questions like, "WHERE'S OUR ROOF RACK!" Yes, I enjoyed all of it! I especially enjoyed being a part of the group that built the best snow cave in BMC history!!

In parting, I trust that all of you will continue doing your best supporting the Sheriff's Department in all volunteer related issues. The Sheriff's Department could not provide the excellent service that we have become known for if it were not for your efforts, and commitment. Thank you for the support and the memories.

Darren L. Goodman



Why They Do It

Mike Ward, Inland Empire Search & Rescue Council Director

In San Bernardino County we have some of the most versatile and dedicated search and rescue teams in the country, quite possibly in the world. We train and deploy into conditions that range from unforgiving winter alpine to scorching deserts. From underwater lakes and rivers with zero visibility and swift water rapids, to hanging off one skid of a helicopter at 8000 feet.

The Cave team that works in quarters tight enough to give most of us a screaming case of the heebie jeebies, I won't go into the bat guano. Off road quads eating sand, dirt, and dust. Mounted teams busting brush holding onto 1200 pounds of sometimes unpredictable animal while sliding down loose shale. Our search dog team that is nothing short of amazing, and the technical rope and repelling folks who hang off mountains by what appear to be all-to-small of a rope.

And last but not least, our foundation, the unstoppable ground pounder. Over it, around it, or through it, all with a 48-hour pack on their back weighing in at 35 plus pounds. 48 hours worth of stuff seems like an awful lot to lug around, until the command post tells you the helicopter that dropped your team on top of the mountain and was going to pick you up in a couple of hours has been reassigned and won't be back. You'll have to spend the night; in fact you'll have to hike down the mountain tomorrow. The teams constantly train, losing precious time with their families that can never be recovered.


So the natural question is why do they do it? Why do they put themselves in places of inherent danger and discomfort that normal people wouldn't dream of? It can't be the great pay, in fact it costs them money. Some individuals spend as much as \$2500 a year, or more, to care for their animals and purchase equipment in order to keep things up to snuff. It can't be for

the glory, most of our people run the other way anytime they see the press or a camera. So what is it? If not for fortune or fame, WHY?

At San Gorgonio's team meeting, that took place just after we all learned of the deaths of Scott Johnston and Phil Calvert, Sergeant Nash of our Yucaipa Station shared his thoughts as to why. He said he believed search and rescue people were cut from a different kind of steel. His way of honoring their strength and pointing out they're "*different*."

OK, so SAR people are different. But what drives them? I believe it's their ingrained ability to feel. To have such compassion for others they MUST ACT. It's not within them to look the other way; to sit at home while bad things happen to good people is just not an option. They measure their honor, integrity, and success in life by deeds, not by the size of their wallets.

I use to take offense when someone would raise an eyebrow cock their head to the side and point a finger in my direction and accuse me of being different in that way. Now I just quietly smile. Because I now know, I now realize that being "*different*" puts me in with some pretty good company!

Our SAR community has adopted a credo that best describes the way we feel, the way we operate, and the way we live. To the families, teammates, and friends of **Phil Calvert** and **Scott Johnston** please realize they upheld that credo and gave their lives. so, "*...that others may live.*" 

Accident

on the phone to Phil the day before I said “Do you consider yourself as dumb as me or dumber than me for deciding to take a search on in the desert in the middle of the summer”. Phil answered “I am dumber”; I thanked him for the compliment. He continued to say and provide his explanation “It’s a kid lost out there Dave I gotta go”. I thought the same as did everyone else.

We were just a short ways east of Morongo when I very clearly and completely saw an oncoming vehicle heading west make a very abrupt move into our lane; we were aimed bumper to bumper. I saw the vehicles head lights headed straight for us. It appeared that the vehicle would continue across our path and to our right.

Shane indicated that I yelled an expletive “Oh —”, I don’t remember saying anything. My instinct was to steer to the left and avoid the

impending head on collision. I cut the steering wheel left to avoid a hit and thought we would be mowing down yucca trees any second. Wish we had but that was not what was to happen. I never lost consciousness and remember the impact as deafening loud, seeing the air bags retreat to the dash broad and some awful smells as well as being thrown about.

When we all came to a stop I was somewhat confused, I looked around the cab. Seeing some smoke coming from the dash a slight panic came about me and I thought of fire, and I knew if I could move it was time to get out. I put my shoulder into the door twice with much force and it would not open. I then laid down in the seat next to Phil and put the full force of both boots into the door, it opened and as I left the door way the roof light bar struck me on the head. I looked back into the cab for my cell phone to call 911 but it was trapped within the crushed dash. As I turned around a pair of head lights beamed

at us and I yelled at the occupants to call 911.

The Suburban was hit in the right head light with the right head light of the other vehicle. The Ranger truck impacted the right side of the Suburban and traveled the right side of the unit to the rear most side door where Scott sat. The unit was completely crushed down to the frame almost down the entire right side and this is why Phil, Scott and Bob were severely injured They all sat on the right side of the unit.

Well reality set in fast. I ran around the unit to Phil’s door, he was conscious, I looked at Phil’s legs, and they were trapped in the twisted steel. I told Phil to hang on, help was coming and that I could not free him by hand. He was bleeding from a head wound, I think some airborne debris hit Phil and I. Phil’s air bag did deploy. I next checked on Scott, his legs were elevated above his head but still trapped in the steel. Scott was moaning but alive at that time. I ran around the unit to Shane’s door and helped him out to the roadway. I then climbed into the back sit where Bob sat. He was conscious and wanting to be gotten out quickly. He asked me to free his legs that were trapped by the seat in front. I freed one foot and tried to free the other. Bob yelled in pain and I decided it was a bad idea to move his legs further. Bob pleaded with me to get him out but I could not. I then got back into Scott’s seat and held his head up as his torso was sitting at an angle and unsupported. Scott continued to moan but had no bleeding that I could see.

Within a very short period of time our fellow team mates pulled onto the scene along with the fire departments. I can’t imagine the horror that our fellow team mates felt when they realized we had been hit so traumatically. I left Scott’s side when a fireman offered to take over his care. I then went to see Phil again and the fireman had already started setting up the Jaws of Life to free him. From that point on I just stumbled around the accident

Continued on p. 6

“It’s a kid out there, Dave, I gotta go”

The Bigger Picture

Sonny Lawrence, Cave Rescue Team




It is interesting to take pictures during search and rescue events. Sometimes the face of a SAR member fills the screen. At other times that person may be only a tiny orange dot amid the backdrop of a huge mountain. I am a complete novice with the digital camera. I just point and shoot, able to capture hundreds of moments of SAR life, the camera battery is the

limiting factor. Home I go to download the glimpses into that day's SAR events. I am always surprised at what I see; expressions, body language, treacherous terrain, huge packs. I have to guess at the emotion behind the picture. Perhaps the rescuer was being teased about a creative concoction to eat on the trail. Or maybe I am witnessing the stress and strain of hiking all night with heavy loads in horrible conditions. Each picture speaks different stories, some on a small scale, others possibly reveal the grand picture of that individual's reason for spending a significant portion of life as a volunteer on a search and rescue team.

As SAR members, the events of the last week have brought up questions of the bigger picture. What drives each person to carry heavy packs, miss work, jeopardize home life, channel money into gear that sits in the trunk of the car day in, day out? I don't know the answers. Certainly each SAR member has many such reasons. I

am barely aware of my own motivations. It is interesting to try to understand myself by watching those around me. Photos capture hints of that bigger picture.

Last October Phil Calvert participated in the trainer's training for the Winter Alpine Basic Mountaineering Course. The pictures accompanying this article are from that experience. I have no memory of the conversation we had while water was being filtered. Phil was a humorous fellow. However the expression on his face seems to be of a serious note. Was he giving clues as to his opinion of the grander scheme of the SAR world? Did he keep his red helmet on, knowing his friends might be chucking snowballs his way?

The scene of Phil dressed in yellow jacket, roped up on the snow, is quite telling. The picture shows him visibly connected to the other team members as we made our way up the mountain. Yet, for me, one of the things I remember most fondly about Phil were his continuing invisible connections to all of us. Whether ropes were tied or not, he was linked to each of us. He was a team player who shared his love of hiking, the mountains and camaraderie. I believe that truly was the bigger picture of Phil Calvert. 



scene. I remember going to look at the other vehicle, seeing the woman passenger scream in pain as she was trapped beneath the truck dash. I saw the driver of the truck laying on a back board in the road with a sheet over him, I thought he was dead. Later I saw the sheet pulled back and he was blinking and alive, I found out he was fine and they covered him to shield him from the sun.

I then turned my attention back to my team mates. I was probably in some shock but didn't realize it; was like a bad dream. I saw Doc Evans working with paramedics to bring Scott around as he lay on the road. It didn't look good for Scott. Doc later told me that Scott was not breathing but had pinked back up in response to rescue breathing. Doc also said that it appeared that Scott eyes indicated a

severe brain injury from the impact. Scott and Phil's deaths were attributed to multiple blunt

force traumas. As Scott laid there Julie and I looked on, we both wept knowing that Scott wasn't going to make it. I yelled at Scott over and over to fight, it didn't help and they proclaimed Scott dead and covered his body.

Phil had been removed from the Suburban and was laying on a backboard ready for transport to the hospital. He was conscious and very aware of his surroundings. I knelt down behind his head and held the oxygen mask to his face. He looked back at me wide eyed, flung his arm back, grabbed the back of my neck and said, "Dave it's not your fault!" This indicated to me that he saw what had happened and knew we were doomed to impact. These are the last words I heard from Phil. At some point while I was unaware Bob Blanck and the woman from the truck were being packaged to flight out via Mercy Air's helicopter. I saw Phil to his

ambulance and wished him luck. I was able to see Phil each day at the hospital, but he was pickled in drugs and was completely out. Carole, Phil's wife, called me at 0230 Tuesday morning and told me we lost Phil.

Shane was struggling to breathe as it was later noted he had cracked ribs and a broken collar bone. I got him to lie down at one point during all the hectic times and he could breathe better. Shane was in a lot of pain. We saw each other later at the hospital. Phil, Shane and I were taken to Desert Regional Hospital via ambulance. Bob was flown to Arrowhead.

As for me the nightmare became real as the sun rose and I saw the Suburban scattered all over the road. I became sick to my stomach realizing I was living through the worst day of my life. I was also taken to the hospital for a cat scan and x-rays. I have healed from all my cuts and bruises. I firmly believe the seat belt and air bag saved my life.

Today Shane is still under some doctor's supervision. The shoulder injury is slow to heal and his physical activity is limited. Bob Blanck is doing much better and returned home this week. He is receiving physical therapy at home each day. It did me good to visit him recently, he lifted my spirits. He's going to get back to his old self soon.

Lastly I want to thank all the teams for their prayers, kind thoughts and words. The preliminary hearing for the people verses Joseph Tidwell starts October 29th, I have received a subpoena. Time will heal us, let's remember Phil and Scott as they would have wanted us to, with a big old smile and a can do attitude and in their honor let's do the same.

"He looked back...Dave it's not your fault."

Calendar

For information or to submit an event, contact the editor at editor@thetracker.info. Appearance of items in this section does not necessarily imply endorsement by the SAR Council or the County of San Bernardino. Call if you have any questions about a particular listing. To save space, persons to contact and numbers for multiple listings of *Department-approved training providers* are consolidated in one place at the bottom of this page.

December

Dec 11-12—BMC Field Practical

Camp Laurel Pines. Visit www.thetracker.info/BMC for more information.

2005

January

Jan 19—IESARC Meeting

19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

Jan 22-23—BMC Field Practical

Camp Laurel Pines. Visit www.thetracker.info/BMC for more information

February

Feb 5-6—BMC Field Practical

Camp Laurel Pines. Visit www.thetracker.info/BMC for more information.

March

Mar 5-6 & 19-20—BSAR

Contact VFU for more information.

Mar 12-13—BMC Field Practical

Cancelled

Mar 16—IESARC Meeting

19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

April

May

May 18—IESARC Meeting

19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

June

July

Jul 20—IESARC Meeting

19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

August

September

Sep 21—IESARC Meeting

19:00 in the main conference room at SBSB HQ.

October

November

December

*Course / Provider

BSAR / Vol Forces
CMC Rescue School
On Rope1
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MRA/NASAR

Honor Guard

Jeff Lehman

A special thanks to the National Association for Search and Rescue/Mountain Rescue Association Honor Guard that performed usher duties for Scott and Phil's funerals. Our hats are off to the dedicated members of this organization. Immediately after word of the accident was released, I was contacted by Tim Kovacs of the Mountain Rescue Association with his offer of an honor guard. While the plans changed quickly, and often, in those harried days prior to the funerals, the honor guard rolled with the punches and continued their support. These folks came of their own accord from as far as Reno, NV and Phoenix, AZ. We are deeply moved by their dedication, professionalism, and caring in these troubled times.

As a token of our appreciation each member of the honor guard was presented with a plaque containing a patch from teams in the county. A photo is shown below.



L-R Tim Kovacs, Paul Burke, Kirk Cloyd, Dana Potts



Classifieds

Contact the Editor to place or remove any item.



SBSD Commuter cups with star and motto. \$16. Features generous 16 oz. capacity, stainless steel construction, double-walled insulation and fits virtually all auto cup or mug holders.



SBSD Search and Rescue decals. \$5. The decals are 3.5" X 3.5" and can be stuck on the outside of just about anything or on the inside of a window. The price is \$5.00 each and can be purchased by contacting SarDesertRun@aol.com or calling 760-369-9999.



Earrings (1/2") \$10 and **Lapel Pin/Tie Tacks (5/8")** \$8. Fund-raiser for Morongo Mounted SAR Team. For ordering info contact Kim Miller at millerkm@29palms.usmc.mil or call Kim at (760) 367-1148 or (760) 367-1148 evenings.

SBSD Coffee cups \$5. High-gloss ivory coffee cups with gold-colored SBSBD star on the side is microwavable. Available at Volunteer Forces.

SBSD SAR Pens \$10. High-quality, refillable ink pens with SBSBD star and "Search & Rescue" on side. Great gift idea! Available at Volunteer Forces.

Custom SAR/Expedition Topo maps. \$14.95. See the web site for full details!

Garmin Offers NASAR Members Discounts. NASAR has an agreement with Garmin to distribute its entire line of consumer GPS products and a handful of its aviation products to the SAR community. Join NASAR at www.nasar.org, and shop the store at www.nasar.org/garmin/default.php.

Air Rescue Team. The Air Rescue Team is selling T-shirts and baseball caps. To purchase them contact Diana at VFU (909-387-0641) or Helen at Aviation (909-356-3800). Go to www.thetracker.info/classifieds to view photos of each. They are \$12 each.

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