

Introduction

On a dark November morning in 1999, I awoke to the squelching emergency tones emanating from the pager next to my bed. Rolling over, I glanced at the clock: 6 A.M. The dispatcher's voice came across the pager next: "Attention all Peak Search and Rescue members. Report to the base for a search in the Mount Alpine area. Time now o-six-hundred."¹ *Mount Alpine?* I thought. Who in their right mind would be hiking a 14,000-foot mountain at this time of year? True, it had been a dry season so far. There was no snow yet in our Rocky Mountain resort town (a mere 7500 feet above sea level), and we'd had a warm, dry fall. But up in the high-alpine wilderness, there had been some snow, and the temperature was dropping well into the single digits at night. I hoped this lost person had brought the proper equipment.

I debated whether to get out of bed. I was finished collecting data for my research, I reasoned, so perhaps I should go back to sleep; after five and a half years, I had plenty of information on the rescuer experience. What's more, they'd probably call off the search once we all got rolling anyway. I'd most likely spend all day hiking up one of the two trails to Mount Alpine (again) only to find that the missing person miscommunicated his travel plans to his friends (again), who were now reporting him missing (again). Or, maybe someone really *was* lost. Cursing my conscience, I stumbled out of bed, got my gear together, and headed down to the base building to meet the team.

I walked into the rescue base just as Joel, the mission coordinator, was beginning to brief the eight other volunteer rescuers who were also able to get out of their commitments today. We'd be looking for Bill Brown, a white male in his late thirties from Springfield, a town in the foothills about 100 miles away. A sheriff's office dispatcher had called Joel at about five o'clock Friday afternoon, saying that she had received a 911 cell phone call from a man who was lost on Mount Alpine. She still had him on the

line, and patched him through to Joel, who was the “on duty” volunteer search and rescue coordinator. Joel talked to Bill for less than five minutes before the line went dead. In that time he tried to help Bill get his bearings by having him describe what he saw. Joel guessed at his likely location, described some prominent landmarks Bill should look for, and gave him directions back to the trail based on those landmarks. Joel was also able to learn that although Bill was unfamiliar with the area, he was in good health and was fairly well prepared to spend a night (albeit an uncomfortable one) in the wilderness. By Saturday afternoon, however, deputies confirmed that Bill’s car was still parked at the trailhead. Joel sent two rescuers up the first part of the Mount Alpine trail, hoping they would run into Bill, who might have been on his way back to his car. He wasn’t. Night fell, the two rescuers returned to the base, and Joel launched a full-scale search this morning. It had been 37 hours since Bill reported himself lost.

Joel divided the rescuers into four two-person teams. I went on a team with Matt, a new member who had never been on a search or rescue before. We were, as I had predicted, to ascend west along the first three miles of the main “Mount Alpine Trail” that Bill had taken. A second team would ascend southwest, up the seven-mile “Lower-Access Trail,” that began 10 miles away but led to the same general area. Two more teams would be lifted by helicopter and dropped off above tree line, in the giant boulder field that constituted the top 3000 feet of Mount Alpine. The helicopter would then search this wilderness area—over 50 square miles—by air.

As the two teams departed from the helicopter—one at 11,000 feet, the other at 12,500—they quickly realized that their searching would be slow. Two inches of snow were covering the giant boulders—not nearly enough to fill in the three-foot-deep gaps between them, but plenty to make travel across the rocks treacherously slippery. One wrong step could snap a rescuer’s leg or dislocate a shoulder.

After driving for about an hour, Matt and I set out on the main access trail by 8 A.M. It was slow going since we began at an elevation of 10,500 feet and, although there was not a cloud in the sky and it was a balmy 50 degrees in the sun, we were loaded down with winter survival gear. Furthermore, the trail was covered with patchy snow and became more consistently blanketed as we gained elevation. As we hiked along, we periodically called out Bill Brown’s name, a standard practice on searches, but one that still made me self-conscious anyway. “Bill!” we would shout every

minute or so, then stay silent, hoping to hear a response. In my five and a half years in Peak, I had never had anyone call back.

We climbed for an hour, surpassing the tree line, and finally reached an 11,500-foot saddle on top of a ridge. From here, with Mount Alpine to our left, we could see five miles straight ahead to the mountain ridge that rose up on the other side. The valley in between stretched for eight miles to our right and was flanked on one side by the trail we had just come up and, on the other, at the base of that ridge we were looking at, by the Lower Access Trail the second team was ascending (though it was too far away for us to see). The two trails almost converged in a “V” at the base of Mount Alpine, but the mountain was so massive that they arrived at different sides, still a couple of miles apart.

Matt turned to his left and tried to spot the two boulder field teams that had been dropped off on the mountain. I laughed. “The size is deceiving; they’re too small to see. If we’re still out here tonight, we’ll be able to see their headlamps, but you’ll never spot them in the daylight from here.” Matt was astounded at the sheer size of the search area and wondered aloud how these four small teams had any chance of ever finding Bill Brown. I reminded him that this was only the *likely* search area; Bill Brown could easily be on the other side of the mountain, an area we were not covering on foot today. I empathized with him, though. “It’s totally overwhelming, isn’t it? You don’t even know where to *start* looking for these people. But it’s amazing—we always find the people we’re looking for.” I radioed in to the base to let them know we were at the saddle and to ask which way Joel wanted us to proceed. From our location there was a spur trail that went off in another direction, and we had found lost people on it before; so Joel might want us to check that out instead of continuing on the main trail toward the mountain. Elena, another volunteer who was running the radio, told us to stand by while she relayed our position. Within moments, she came back on the radio and told us to continue down the main trail. At the bottom, we were to go off it and follow a creek for a while. “Sometimes lost people follow streams downhill. I think kids’ scouting groups teach that or something,” I explained to Matt as we began the descent down the other side of the ridge toward Mount Alpine.

By 10 A.M. both boulder field teams, although miles from each other, had reported seeing a single set of footprints in the snow; in each case, whoever had made them was alone. We listened as the teams compared them over the radio by describing the size of the foot (about a man’s 11) and the design of the sole pattern. The descriptions matched; they were

from the same shoes. Both teams then followed their set of tracks, which were curiously undirected; they went up, down, and wound around in circles. By noon, one team had followed their tracks down into the valley where they saw them descend the banks of an icy-cold, thigh-deep river and emerge on the other side—all within 20 feet of a bridge! What's more, the tracks continued on the other side of the river, crossed *over* the well-marked Lower Access Trail, and carried on up a steep clifflike hill, over rocks and fallen trees, toward the far ridge Matt and I had seen from our rest stop. Everyone who heard these reports over the radio was stymied. Even someone who was hypothermic and disoriented would surely use a bridge to cross a river and choose to take a trail instead of bushwhacking!

Around the same time, team 2—Nick, Patrick, and Nick's search-dog-in-training, Skip—were six miles up the seven-mile Lower Access Trail. Periodically they yelled Bill Brown's name, just as Matt and I had been doing. While we could not hear their voices from where we were, we did hear a faint horn echoing through the valley, which seemed oddly out of place in the pristine wilderness. Apparently the boulder field teams heard it too and got on the radio to ask what it was. Nick answered that his father, who owned a boat in another state, had given him an air horn recently, which Nick thought might be useful on a search, as he routinely went hoarse from yelling all day. Matt and I had a good laugh over that, feeling envious of his ingenuity.

Forty-five minutes later, around 1 P.M., Nick and his team reported hearing someone yell in response to his air horn. Apparently Skip, the search dog, heard the voice first, and became quite agitated. As Nick and Patrick followed the dog, they got close enough to hear the voice themselves. Matt and I became visibly excited upon hearing this news. We started hiking faster, talking about how this *had* to be Bill Brown, and speculating about where he was. We expressed our amazement at how unlikely it seemed that we could find someone in this vast expanse of wilderness. In the next 20 minutes, team 2 was able to get close enough to the sound of the voice to verify that it was indeed Bill Brown, but they could not find him. Through their shouting back and forth, they repeatedly asked him where he was, but he kept saying he didn't know. The terrain was playing tricks on the team, creating echoes and dead spots that prevented them from pinning down his location. One minute they thought he was right around the bend, and the next they seemed to lose him altogether. Even Skip was confused, running in circles and barking in different directions.

Joel redirected the helicopter to fly the area, and told Nick's team to stay put and maintain voice contact with Bill. Then Joel radioed Matt and me and had us return to the saddle to find a suitable "LZ." When I explained to Matt that an LZ was a landing zone for the helicopter, he almost burst with excitement. "We might be the most convenient team to pick up," I told him. "You ready to fly in a helicopter today?"

By 2:30 P.M. we were back on top of the saddle. The helicopter had been searching for Bill for almost an hour, and was still unable to locate him. I walked around looking for the best LZ possible, then radioed in. We were told to sit tight. From our location, we could periodically hear the *wump-wump-wump* of the helicopter passing up and down the ridge on the other side of the valley. Matt looked for it, but I reminded him that he was probably expecting to see something bigger than it was. I told him to look for a glint in the sky where the sun reflected off the metal. When he did spot it, he was amazed at how small it was.

We sat atop the ridge for the next 45 minutes, becoming just as frustrated as Nick's team, who could still hear Bill's voice but couldn't find him. Apparently, Bill could not see the helicopter, but he could hear it, and he said he was frantically waving his arms. As we discussed it, Matt and I agreed that something wasn't right. Why couldn't Bill see the helicopter? Was he in the trees? Why didn't he get out into the open? Nick and his team were not able to ask Bill these questions either, since the sound from the helicopter, for the most part, overpowered their voices. By 3:15 the helicopter pilot radioed in to Joel, saying that he had 10 more minutes of search time, and then he would have to return to his base to refuel. By that time, it would be too late to resume the search since it would be getting dark. The upshot: if they could not find Bill in the next 10 minutes, we would not have helicopter assistance until the next morning.

Five minutes later the pilots spotted him. He had climbed almost to the top of the 800-foot ridge but had encountered a 40-foot sheer cliff wall, blocking his ability to ascend farther. If he could have made it up that wall, he would have been able to hike the last 200 feet to where the helicopter could land because the ground was then more level. But he was stuck on a ledge at the base of this wall. The pilots radioed to Joel: because they were "bingo fuel" (quickly running out of gas), they needed to pick up a rescue team immediately to help them reach Bill. Matt and I jumped up and began throwing our gear into our packs. Our adrenaline was rushing as Joel radioed to ask us if we were ready for pick up. We were. Then Joel began radioing other teams to see if they were in suitable LZs. Although

Nick and his team were closest to Bill, they were in the trees on the Lower Access Trail, which made them inaccessible to the helicopter. Gary and Cody, however, were in a good LZ and, furthermore, were in the boulder field, which was much closer to the helicopter than our location. They got to go.

Matt and I, slightly disappointed, unpacked and made ourselves comfortable again. We listened intently to the blow-by-blow radio transmissions of the rescue. Within 15 minutes, team 3 had Bill in the helicopter (which was now seriously pushing its fuel supply), and they were headed for the waiting ambulance in town. Matt and I packed up our gear and headed out. When we reached the car I radioed in: “Team 1 is out of the field.”

“Copy that, team 1,” said Elena, who was still working the radio. “We’ll do the debrief at the Mineshaft, so meet us there instead of coming back to base. Time now, 16:47.”

Matt and I arrived at the restaurant just as the rest of the team was coming across the street from the base building. Everyone was ecstatic, grinning ear-to-ear, laughing, and high-fiving one another. The eleven of us pushed some tables together, sat down, and ordered several pitchers of beer. The whole team was abuzz with excitement. We were talking about Nick’s air horn, and the footprints, and the stream Bill Brown had crossed. Why couldn’t he see the helicopter? Why couldn’t he describe where he was? What kind of shape was he in when Gary and Cody reached him? Finally, after many disorganized side conversations, everyone settled down enough to let Gary and Cody tell the following story.

On Friday night when Bill Brown called to report himself lost, his cell phone battery died, which cut his conversation with Joel short. As he tried to follow Joel’s directions, he slipped on a snowy boulder, fell, and hit his head. The fall caused him to lose his glasses, without which he was legally blind. To make matters worse, he was disoriented from hitting his head. By the time he regained his senses, he found himself without his pack, which contained his food, water, survival gear (like matches and a compass), cell phone, and extra clothes. All he had left was what he was wearing: a long underwear shirt covered by a long-sleeved, cotton tee-shirt, socks, hiking boots, and running tights. Night had fallen, and he was cold.

He began descending the mountain in the dark, sliding from boulder to boulder on his backside. In the middle of the night he tried to curl up under the branches of a pine tree, but he got too cold, so he kept moving.

He warmed up on Saturday, but still had no idea where he was or where he was going since he could not see anything without his glasses. He was petrified of blindly stepping off a cliff, so found it more comfortable to go up than down. This explained why his footprints were so undirected. Sometime Saturday night, he made it down to the valley. After another almost unbearably cold night, he came upon the river and knew he had crossed one on his way in (he thought it was the creek that Matt and I had followed for a time). Bill hoped he'd found the right creek—he hadn't—and that he was going the right direction—he wasn't. His blindness explained why he crossed the creek within 20 feet of a bridge and why he crossed the obvious trail and began bushwhacking up the steep hillside: he didn't see any of it! He headed uphill because, if he had crossed the right creek, he knew he had to ascend up to the saddle where Matt and I had been. Unfortunately, he was getting farther and farther away from where he had started.

By Sunday morning, crawling around in the rocks near the top of the ridge, he heard the helicopter. A couple of times he thought it was close, but couldn't see without his glasses, so he waved his arms and yelled, but wasn't able to attract any attention. Finally, he heard Nick's air horn blasts, and he shouted in response to them. When Nick established voice contact with him and asked him where he was, he could not answer because he had no idea; he couldn't see.

When Gary and Cody jumped from the helicopter and made their way down the ridge to the edge of the cliff just above Bill, they noticed a gully to their right, which skirted around the sheer face, down to Bill's ledge. It was steep and rocky, but they thought they could scramble down it safely. When they reached Bill, he clung to them and began to sob. "Are you the guys with the air horn?" he choked. "I didn't think you were going to find me!" He began to collapse in relief. Gary and Cody looked at each other, knowing this was a problematic response. They worried about how they would get this 200-pound guy, who, in Gary's words, "had turned into a big pile of goo," up the gully and to the helicopter.

"So what'd you do?" someone around the table asked.

"We yelled at him," Cody quipped.

Everyone laughed. "Oh, that's nice!" commented Elena sarcastically.

"We weren't trying to be nice, we were trying to save his life," Gary sternly explained. "He couldn't even stand. We had to get him fired up enough to climb up that gully."

“So what’d you say?” I asked.

“We said, ‘We *cannot* carry you out of here. You’ve gotta climb. Bill! Get off your ass, *now!*’” Gary led the way up the gully so that Bill, with his severely restricted sight, could follow him, placing his hands in Gary’s footholds. Cody climbed up behind Bill, steadying him and making sure he didn’t fall backward. If he did, he’d kill them both.

At the top of the gully, Bill collapsed again. The adrenaline push had been all he could handle. Cody picked him up, fire-fighter style, and carried him, as fast as he could, halfway to the awaiting helicopter. He traded off with Gary, who brought him the rest of the way. As I sat there, riveted to the story, I thanked my lucky stars that the helicopter had picked up Gary and Cody instead of Matt and me. There was no way Matt and I could have accomplished that task with even a fraction of the efficiency. The helicopter, short on fuel, would not have been able to wait for us.

When they got him into the ship, Gary, who was an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), began his medical assessment of Bill but had a hard time getting him to answer any questions since he couldn’t stop “blubbering.” He was intermittently sobbing, thanking them profusely, and telling them what happened.

“So what kind of shape was he in?” someone asked.

“Bad,” said Gary. “He wasn’t shivering, which means he was so hypothermic that his body had lost the ability to warm itself. We cranked the chopper’s heat, stuck heat packs in his armpits and crotch, and wrapped him in blankets. We got him shivering again by the time we dropped him at the ambi, so that was good. But he was bumped and bruised and scraped and disoriented. He was really dehydrated and had frostbite on his fingers and toes. His clothes were pretty much falling apart. His tights had big holes in the butt from sliding on the rocks. He took off his socks after he crossed the river ’cause they were wet, but his boots were still drenched, so his feet were like ice. He did *not* have another night in him, I’ll tell you that. If we hadn’t found him, he would’ve died tonight for sure. I can’t believe he survived the two nights he did. They’re gonna keep him in the hospital for a couple of days—check his kidney function and treat the frostbite.”

Someone ribbed Nick: “He sure is lucky you brought that air horn!”

No one could believe this set of circumstances. What a terrible run of bad luck Bill had, and what good luck the team had! Everyone felt absolutely euphoric. We toasted a job well done, finished the pitchers, ordered another round, and continued to toast throughout the night: “To

the air horn!” “To the fumes the helicopter was flying on!” “To Bill Brown!” “To the spare set of glasses I’m going to put in my pack!”

I looked over at Matt, who was beaming. “Are all the searches like this?” he asked.

“Nope!” I replied. “Enjoy this while you can!”

This is a study of heroism. The members of Peak Search and Rescue voluntarily interrupt their lives when they are spontaneously called upon to help strangers. They awake in the middle of the night to cover miles of terrain in search of overdue hunters or lost hikers, like Bill Brown. They regularly relinquish their leisure time to recover the bodies of victims killed in planes that crash in the wilderness. They frequently sacrifice income, leaving work to search potential avalanche zones for missing skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers in blizzard conditions. And they are repeatedly pulled away from family obligations, putting their own lives in danger to rescue stranded, hypothermic kayakers and rafters from rivers. They help others by donating their time, forfeiting their income, risking their lives, and receiving no material rewards for doing so. They are heroes.

The Sociology of Heroism

Several fields of sociology have theoretically examined how and why people help others. Altruism, those acts that benefit others while providing no benefits to the self, has been the most widely investigated phenomenon.² Although acts of altruism do not benefit the actor, they may not have any substantial costs to the actor, either. For example, stopping to help someone who has dropped a large stack of books may not substantially impinge on helpers’ time or effort, especially if they are not involved in something important at the moment. Many altruistic acts, though, more clearly carry costs to the actor. People must sacrifice their time and comfort to donate blood or to help a stranger change a flat tire. Helping may even cause helpers to become embarrassed in the event that they misinterpret a situation and try to help someone who does not need it. People may also help others even when the costs seem to be exceedingly high—perhaps a threat to the helper’s own life and limb, which makes this phenomenon seem almost illogical. Some researchers have labeled this subset of altruism—action that carries with it potentially huge (and seemingly irrational) costs to the helper—as heroic.³

Risky intervention on the behalf of others is a significant feature in the theoretical literature on heroism, yet this body of work remains fairly distinct from the theory and research on altruism.⁴ In theorizing about heroism, these works share three assumptions. First, heroism differs from altruism because it must be socially recognized. Altruism can exist in the absence of others' recognition of the act; heroism, theoretically, cannot. Heroes only exist when they are labeled as such by others, as Edelstein has explained: "Generally, to be regarded as a hero . . . one must have done something daring and gallant and, critically, one must be recognized . . . as having done something daring and gallant. . . . That is, having performed a heroic act does not automatically confer the status of 'hero' on the actor. . . . [T]here must also be recognition of the actor as a hero" (1996: 35–36). Other heroism scholars concur with this basic assumption and have used it to build theory. Goode (1978), for example, suggested that heroism operates as a potent form of social control precisely because the great public recognition granted to heroes is highly prestigious and desired.

The second similarity in most definitions of heroism is that heroes are a celebrated class of citizens in any society because they embody a culture's most highly prized values. Klapp (1962) has analyzed the hero as a distinct "social type," or cultural model, whose meaning epitomizes a culture's values. Klapp claims that cultural definitions of heroism serve as models for individuals to draw on in interpreting their own and others' actions. By representing a culture's most valued traits, heroes promote social stability as community members band together to celebrate heroes and aspire to live up to the culture's revered values.⁵

Third, although cultures may have different values that represent heroism, one value seems to be common to most cultural definitions of heroism: heroes serve the group at the expense of the individual; they sacrifice themselves for others, in part or in full, symbolically or literally. Most societies label such self-sacrifice as heroic, granting the utmost prestige and status to its heroes; in this way, they entice all community members to conform to this important societal value—to behave in ways that benefit the group.

Although this set of theories on heroism exists, there has been virtually no empirical research that incorporates and extends this body of knowledge.⁶ In this study, I use the empirical evidence from my six years in a participant-observation role with Peak Volunteer Search and Rescue to examine the meaning of heroism as it relates to the heroes themselves, as well as to those who label them heroes.

The Self, Emotions, and Gender

As I studied the lives of Peak's rescuers, several sociological phenomena emerged as integral to the heroic experience. First, rescuers' understandings of heroism and the acts that they performed through their work in Peak influenced their selves and their identities. Sociologists generally think of a "self" as an idea that we develop about who we are because of others' reactions to us. We can only see ourselves as we think others see us—by interpreting their words and actions toward us. Thus, the idea of a self is distinctly social. We understand who we are only through our interactions with others in social life. Conversely, who we believe we are influences our behavior. We structure our interactions with others based on these ideas, which, of course, affects the interactions we have, and particularly, how we see ourselves.⁷ Peak's rescuers developed ideas about themselves and others through their participation in the search and rescue subculture. These ideas then affected how they approached subsequent rescue work. For example, within the context of the group, rescuers were socialized to downplay any kind of self-aggrandizing or selfish behavior. So when Matt and I were passed over for the helicopter pick-up in favor of Gary and Cody, we had to display acceptably humble selves rather than be disappointed or angry that we were not given the chance to rescue Bill Brown. Throughout this book, I deal with such situations and show how rescuers' selves were both driven by and a result of their idea of heroism.

Rescuers' emotional experiences is a second theme that runs throughout this study. Sociologists view emotions much like they view the self: as interpretive and socially derived. Our feelings are not purely innate or instinctual but depend largely on how we interpret other situational information as well as on cultural and historical beliefs about particular emotions.⁸ Interaction among people in different cultures and historical periods has resulted in culture-specific meanings for many emotions. People of those cultures and time periods, in turn, have drawn on these emotional meanings to structure their interactions with others. Gordon has discussed the shared and symbolic nature of emotions, calling it an "emotional culture," which he defined as "the patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, by which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward emotions" (1989: 115). These meanings are not always shared within one large culture or one vast historical time frame; meanings may vary from group to group. Thus, small

groups, like Peak for example, may construct emotional cultures by developing norms and vocabularies to express and reinforce their beliefs about particular emotions. Just like members of a larger culture, these group members interact with one another and their environment based, in part, on their shared emotional belief system, such as their beliefs about what emotions they will feel in particular situations and how they should interpret, act on, and express these feelings. These beliefs, by definition, vary from one emotional culture to the next. In Peak, for example, rescuers quickly learned what emotions were appropriate for certain situations, such as becoming emotionally detached when dealing with death or controlling a victim's panic during a dangerous or difficult rescue (like Cody and Gary did by yelling at Bill Brown). These ways of understanding emotions influenced rescuers' ideas of who they were. In the pages that follow, I show how Peak's emotional culture was intricately tied to the heroic work rescuers performed as well as to their understanding of their selves.

Gender was an important part of Peak's emotional culture, as it is in many others as well. Pervasive gender stereotypes yield distinct beliefs about women's and men's capacities for experiencing various feelings. Gender stereotypes also produce cultural rules about what feelings are appropriate for whom and how those feelings should be handled. For example, the stereotype of the emotionless male suggests that men do not cry; the stereotype of the irrational, overreacting female suggests that women are emotionally weak.⁹ These gendered ideas often reinforce stereotypical beliefs about the nature of women and men, which affect how people view themselves and how they think about their emotions. Rescuers' beliefs about gender shaped their experiences, especially when it came to dealing with emotions and performing acts of heroism. This book uncovers many aspects of heroism by illuminating how ideas about the self, emotions, and gender affect heroes' lives.

Research on Risky Occupations and Leisure

There have been several fictionalized media portrayals of search and rescue teams, including the ones in Sylvester Stallone's blockbuster film *Cliffhanger*, in Robert Conrad's made-for-TV-movie *Search and Rescue*, and in the short-lived dramatic television series in the mid-1990s, *Extreme*. There have also been some nonfiction accounts of mountain-environment rescue groups, like one in Colorado profiled by a journalist, and

those that are part of the television show *Rescue 911* and other shows of that genre.¹⁰ But there has yet to be any in-depth scholarly examination of search and rescue groups or their volunteers.

There have been several studies, however, on environments in which workers incur considerable risk, experience intense excitement, and help others as part of their occupational duties. For example, some studies have examined how EMTs, paramedics, military personnel, and police officers seek thrilling experiences and, as such, are drawn to the sometimes dangerous and always unpredictable nature of their work.¹¹ Other research has examined nonoccupational settings in which individuals undertake risk as part of their leisure activity, such as mountaineering, whitewater rafting, and high-ropes courses.¹² These thrill seekers carefully calculate the dangers and rewards of pursuing high-risk activity, as Lyng (1990) comprehensively discussed in his theory of “edgework.”¹³ Using his own ethnographic data on skydiving as well as other data on fire fighting, race-car driving, and other high-risk pursuits (both occupational and leisure oriented), Lyng detailed how risk takers negotiate the boundary, or “edge,” between safety and danger. He defined “the archetypical edgework experience [as] one in which the individual’s failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury” (1990:857).

Lyng contended that edgework is alluring because it gives individuals a feeling of control over their lives and environment while they push themselves to their physical and mental limits. On a psychological level, surviving the edge leads them to experience intense highs.¹⁴ This sensory experience on the edge compels the edgeworkers to pursue it repeatedly, each time pushing their physical and mental limits farther to control the seemingly uncontrollable.¹⁵

Some studies of high-risk activity have noted that risk is a highly masculinized domain, largely because of the physicality involved in many risky activities as well as the powerful socialization toward risk and aggression for men. Some research has focused on the difficulty women commonly have in breaking into high-risk professions, such as police work, fire fighting, and the military, which are overwhelmingly male dominated.¹⁶ These women are often marginalized, which may make it difficult for them to build solidarity with other high-risk workers, most of whom are male. One ramification of this weak solidarity is that women may be trusted less often than their male colleagues. Furthermore, in these risky environments that require a great deal of physical strength, women may have a

hard time gaining the respect they feel they deserve because some of their coworkers may view them as inferior.

Research on Heroic Activities

This study is about heroes: rescuers who volunteer to risk their lives to help others.¹⁷ Volunteer search and rescue shares some features with risky occupations and risky leisure, yet is distinct from each as well. Like professional ambulance workers, police officers, military personnel, and fire fighters, Peak's rescuers risked their lives to serve others; like recreational mountain climbers, skydivers, and whitewater rafters, Peak's rescuers were not paid for undertaking risk. By most definitions, "true" heroes perform acts that are independent of material rewards; thus, people who undertake risk as part of their everyday occupational duties would not theoretically be considered heroes.¹⁸ Indeed, candidates for the Carnegie Hero Fund are eligible for the award only if they do not work in a "heroic" vocation or if their heroic acts clearly surpass their occupational duties; likewise, the Congressional Medal of Honor also requires that its recipients have risked their lives "beyond the call of duty."¹⁹

Of course, professional fire fighters, military personnel, police officers, and ambulance workers often perform above and beyond the call of duty, which would indeed qualify them as heroes in those instances. But sociologists have yet to study this type of incident, and thus this type of heroism. Moreover, since heroism is defined, in part, by voluntarily putting one's own life at risk to help others, recreational risk takers would not theoretically be considered heroes, either, since their activity is primarily self-gratifying. Thus, aside from a few studies of volunteer fire fighters, one survey on volunteer search and rescue workers in Australia, a content analysis of the dedications awarded with the Congressional Medal of Honor, and an in-depth examination of rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, very few studies have examined true heroes.²⁰

The Setting

In 1994, I joined Peak Search and Rescue and began a six-year ethnographic study of the group. I was completely unskilled and inexperienced in all backcountry knowledge, but in those six years I learned a great deal

about the group and forged lasting relationships with several of its members. The next chapter explains my role in the group and in the research, as well as my methodological trials and tribulations in negotiating a foothold in this world. For now, however, I set the stage by describing the setting.

Peak Search and Rescue (also frequently called “mountain rescue” by its members) was located in a small mountain resort town in the western United States. The group was under the direction of the Peak County Sheriff’s Department and served as a volunteer-based extension of that division. Peak County consisted of 1700 square miles, 1300 of which were undeveloped national forest or wilderness-area lands. Local residents and tourists alike used this “backcountry” land year-round for various recreational purposes such as hiking, camping, hunting, rock and ice climbing, mountain biking, whitewater rafting and kayaking, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and skiing outside of the ski area boundaries. Occasionally these recreational enthusiasts became lost or injured in this remote area. Because the sheriff’s deputies and ambulance workers lacked the means to reach injured parties as well as the specialized skills to aid them in these wilderness areas, the county sheriff commissioned Peak to oversee all backcountry emergencies.

Peak’s members had many specialized rescue skills to reach and help victims who were incapacitated while engaged in this wide variety of recreational activities. For example, some members were adept at riding snowmobiles and were frequently sent to search for lost snowmobilers and snowshoers. Others possessed honed whitewater skills, and as such, their expertise was utilized for rafting and kayaking accidents. Many members, however, had only basic skill levels in several areas, for example, operating the rope and pulley systems used to maneuver victims and rescuers over cliffs, surviving for several days in the wilderness while searching for a missing person, and using radio signal receiving devices to locate skiers buried in avalanches. Some members held emergency medical certification as well. There were approximately five emergency medical technicians, one paramedic, and one doctor in the group.²¹ All members, however, were required to have at least basic first aid and CPR certification.

Since Peak was the community organization charged with handling all backcountry emergencies, the group was involved in a wider variety of searches and rescues (collectively termed “missions”) than just tending to wayward recreationalists. For example, members occasionally searched for suicidal individuals. The family would phone 911 and report that their

loved one was missing, suicidal, and likely to have gone up a favorite hiking trail. Peak would be dispatched to the trail while sheriff's deputies would search likely spots in town. Another of Peak's duties was searching for planes (and their passengers) that crashed in the wilderness. It was clearly stated in the county's disaster contingency plans that Peak was in total control of such search, rescue, and recovery efforts. Members also occasionally took their backcountry technical expertise to accidents that happened in more urban environments, for example, extracting victims from the cars that they had driven over cliffs or into rivers, or searching public establishments and town streets for missing children. Finally, in my six years, Peak was called twice to search for evidence at crime scenes: one time to search a riverbed after a drug bust, and another time to scour an arson scene.

At any one time, the group consisted of approximately 30 active members who had from zero to 25 years of experience in search and rescue. Of the 75 or so members who were active at any time during the course of this study, all were white, most were middle- to upper-middle-class, and most were permanent, year-round residents of the resort area that constituted much of Peak County. Furthermore, of these 75 members, only one had been born and raised in Peak County; all other members had migrated to Peak County in their adult lives, drawn largely by the resort industry, which dominated the local economy. The group's ratio of men to women was about two to one, although this low ratio was a relatively recent development as many of the newer members were women. Members ranged in age from the early twenties to mid-fifties; their educational levels ranged from high school through the M.D. degree.

Peak had an official hierarchy that delineated members' abilities. The most highly skilled and experienced were "lead" members, whose job it was to lead teams and direct the rescue effort on missions. They were in charge of choosing the most suitable mission procedures; for instance, which members to send into an avalanche zone to dig for a buried skier, or the safest way to reach a rafter stranded in the middle of a river. This category contained approximately 11 members: nine men and two women.

The "mission coordinator" position was an offshoot of the lead category and was equal in the status hierarchy. For the most part, mission coordinators were longtime lead-status members who rotated through the duty of receiving the group's emergency calls. When a call came in, the mission coordinator collected information about the victim's condition and likely whereabouts and then called out members for assistance. Dur-

ing the missions, the coordinators organized many different resources: they communicated with field teams via two-way radios and charted their progress on maps laid out in the group's base building; they mobilized outside support such as rescue helicopters, search dogs, or volunteers from other counties; they continued to probe the reporting parties or family members for new clues; and on long missions, they prepared statements for the press.

Those at the next level were "support" members. Their main function was to aid the lead members in any way they could. For instance, they made up the team that a lead-status member led into the field, or they set up a system of ropes and pulleys to lower a rescuer down the side of a cliff. Often they carried heavy rescue gear and did what they were told. Support members had to possess a basic level of skill, and were advanced to this category only after they had proved themselves. Most of Peak's active members, myself included, occupied this status.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were the "new members," who were the most inexperienced or yet unproven members. They occasionally served the same function as the support members. Their skills were unknown or undeveloped, however, so they were given roles in the missions less frequently and more cautiously.

As an official nonprofit organization, Peak had to have a board of directors, which comprised five rescuers elected by the membership. Board members were in charge of the organizational functioning of the group, and each held a standard board-of-directors-type position such as treasurer or president. The board did not hold scheduled meetings but only met when it had to vote on an issue facing the group, such as what equipment to buy or how to discipline a problematic member.

In addition to participating in missions, Peak's members had several other responsibilities. First, the group held biweekly business meetings, run by the board of directors. Some meetings were more highly attended than others, but at least half (about 15) of the members were usually there. The group also held training sessions for the members, especially for the newer, inexperienced members, which were run by one of the board members, the "training officer." "Trainings," as members called them, consisted of practicing a variety of skills and rescue scenarios. Rescuers might work out some map and compass puzzles, set up a series of rope and pulley systems to lower a team down a steep hill, learn how to operate the snowmobiles, or get acquainted with where all the different supplies were located in the base and in the rescue truck. These trainings

were held sporadically, depending greatly on members' interest, time, and availability to attend.

Some rescuers also saw each other socially, although this varied a great deal throughout my time in the setting. When I first joined the group, many members attended trainings and went out for drinks immediately afterward. Later on in my career, this happened less often. Some members were friends outside of the group setting, making dates to ski, rock climb, or just go out to dinner. I became close friends with several members, and acquaintances with all.

Member Portraits

This section features portraits of some rescuers I knew well.

Jim

Jim, a founding member of the group, was a robust, balding man in his late forties, with a scraggly beard, a booming voice, and a commanding demeanor. A former marine, he was a veteran of the Vietnam War, where he had been a medic and a crew chief on a medical evacuation helicopter. His duties had included operating the helicopter's machine gun to lay down cover-fire when the ship entered enemy territory to rescue wounded soldiers, as well as medically tending to them during the evacuation. At one point, his helicopter was shot down by enemy fire, and of all the people on the ship, he was the lone survivor (it was rumored that he had lost some of his hearing in the accident, which was the reason he talked so loudly).

After the war, Jim moved to Peak County, arriving in the mid-1970s. He got a job working the front desk at one of the few hotels in the newly established mountain resort town. One day, the local radio station put out a call for anyone to help with a river accident. Five people had been thrown from a raft and were missing. Jim felt he could help, given his military search and rescue experience, so he drove down to the scene and spent the next three days riding the search raft down portions of the river, getting tossed around by the whitewater, and even capsizing on several occasions. He thought his wild rides in the raft were "great fun," although his fellow searchers disagreed, getting others to replace them after only one swim through the rapids.

After that search, Jim was invited to the fledgling, unorganized monthly meetings of the group that would later become Peak. Jim and one other member, Richie, took charge of the group and between them, responded to every backcountry emergency call for the next 10 years. Meanwhile they actively recruited members, but in those days, Peak County had only a fraction of the population it did when I lived there, so it was hard to find willing volunteers. But Jim never gave up trying to recruit people. Approximately a third of the members in this study (20–25 years later) said they joined the group because Jim recruited them.

By the mid-1980s, Jim was balancing the demands of work, his wife and two young daughters, and Peak. He had been able to recruit some highly skilled mountaineers and pushed for the group to become accredited in one of two national-level search and rescue organizations, which it did. The group became bigger and more organized, and Jim stepped up his commitment by serving on several regional and national search and rescue boards. In 1987, Jim's past caught up with him and collided with his intense commitment to rescue work. He realized that he was experiencing some "deep psychological ramifications" from his role in the war, which took the form of overwhelming survivor's guilt: "[What] stuck in my mind the most was all those guys that didn't make it in Vietnam. I carried that around for 20 years. That it was *my* fault that the squad got wiped out. That it was *my* fault that our helicopter got shot down. Why was I the only one that lived? I have no idea."

Jim dropped out of the group and sought therapy, where he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. After attending counseling sessions twice a week for 18 months, he returned to Peak, healthier and ready to begin rebuilding his search and rescue career. This time he maintained his high levels of commitment to his wife and (now three) daughters, to Peak, and to his job (seemingly in that order), continuing to leave work whenever he could to run missions.

Jim's reputation as an extraordinary mission coordinator grew and reached the national level. He successfully resolved some high-profile missions, which garnered him the respect of many search and rescue teams, and in the mid-1990s, he was elected president of one of the national search and rescue organizations. Once he took over the helm of the national office, his involvement in Peak dwindled somewhat, but he was still able to make himself available for big missions. After three years as national president, he stepped down and sharply curtailed his search and rescue participation. By the end of this research, he was still a dominant

force in Peak, serving on the board as well as attending meetings and other scheduled events, but he had rearranged his priorities. He had taken a management job that gave him more work responsibility, which precluded him from leaving work to run missions.

Meg and Kevin

Meg and Kevin were a married couple in their early forties when I joined the group in 1994. He was tall and slender, with thinning hair and a weathered complexion, the result of working outside year-round. He was also congenial and diplomatic—everyone loved Kevin, and he was often asked to serve on the board of directors (including Peak's) for community-based organizations. Meg was softer. Physically, her 5'7" frame was fuller than Kevin's, and socially, she was more outgoing and talkative. Her vivacious but down-to-earth manner made it easy for people to talk to her, and she held close friendships with many people in Peak County.

Meg and Kevin moved to Peak County in 1989, leaving behind their white-collar corporate jobs in the Midwest to be seasonal workers at the resort. They had always planned to move to the mountains once they had saved enough money; but when Meg survived a sudden, life-threatening complication from routine surgery, they immediately packed their bags, sold most of their belongings, and moved to Peak County. Their child-free lifestyle left them open for volunteering in the community, so within a month they attended their first search and rescue meeting.

Not knowing many people, nor knowing anything about the mountains, Kevin and Meg learned a great deal from participating in Peak. They attended trainings and missions regularly and forged some lasting relationships with members in the group. Many of the missions produced rewarding experiences for them, and they persisted in their involvement. Kevin, after a few years, advanced to lead status, and although Meg could have achieved it too, she never desired that position; she preferred to remain a support member. While both were often sent into the field on searches and rescues, Meg migrated toward fulfilling one particular (but only occasionally needed) role: staying behind with the family members during long searches. Here she found that she had a unique ability to connect with people, as she provided them with the emotional support they needed while others searched for their loved one.

Kevin and Meg also weathered several difficult group transitions, maintaining their dedication to the group by disengaging from “political issues,” or intragroup conflicts and personality clashes. One example of this disengagement was their tacit refusal to go out for drinks after trainings or meetings. They felt that these informal, cliquish events were the breeding ground for the group’s political struggles, and they disapproved. In this way, they were able to remain neutral parties and put their energy toward helping the group survive some tumultuous times.

Nick

Nick, who found Bill Brown with his air horn, was a 29-year-old support member when I joined the group in 1994. He stood six feet two inches, although his thick, spiked brown hair added an inch or two. Despite his long, skinny legs, his shoulders were broad, and he was quite strong. Temperamentally, he was moody and inexpressive, often appearing sullen and reserved, yet he was usually friendly once approached. He was also a risk taker. As a teenager growing up on the East Coast, Nick had raced motorcycles and driven fast cars. When he was 16, he lost control of the car he was driving and ended up in a two-week coma. Later he resumed his thrill-seeking activities, taking up with a wild crowd of boys in the neighborhood. When he was 17, his mother and stepfather sent him away to military school, where he became involved in some highly profitable but illicit activity. Upon graduation, he ended that career and got a job in a retail sports store. There he had an affair with the owner’s wife, and together they left the East Coast and moved to Peak County in 1989. They lived together for three years before breaking up in 1992.

Nick was attracted to Peak in 1990, when Shorty, a member he worked with, convinced him that he could learn to ride snowmobiles if he joined the group. The idea of zooming around in the backcountry appealed to Nick, so he began attending meetings, trainings, and missions. Over the next seven years, he accumulated a great deal of experience on missions, as well as one of the thickest files in the local emergency room. He had more accidents than anyone else in the group, and according to the nurses in the ER, more accidents than most people in Peak County. For example, on several occasions he fell from construction scaffolding (he had become a drywall hanger); one time he broke his leg, cracked some ribs, and got a concussion in a dirtbike crash; and once he accidentally nailed his foot to

the floor when he misfired a nailgun. Despite his propensity for injury, Nick was always willing to perform any job on missions, particularly if it was challenging or dangerous. In 1997 other members began to tell him that he was close to being advanced to lead status. The main obstacle to this was that Nick, ironically, hated the sight of blood and had been unable to sit through the graphic (although fake) films shown in the CPR certification classes. Eventually, though, he got his medical certification and was promoted to lead.

Within the group, Nick was one of what I called the “Ironmen.” This was a group of young, experienced men who practically salivated at the thought of undertaking a dangerous or difficult task during missions, especially if it involved flying in a helicopter. They were extremely physically strong, most of them were of lead status, and they comprised the core of the subgroup who went drinking together after meetings, trainings, and missions. Although others were welcome to tag along, the members of this clique dominated the interaction at the bars.

Elena

Elena, who worked the radio during the Bill Brown mission, was a first-generation American of German descent. She was 28 years old when I joined the group in 1994. A transplant from the East Coast like myself, she moved to Peak County in 1990, two years after graduating from college. Elena was five feet two inches tall, had shoulder-length blond hair, a stocky build, and a muscular disorder in her calves that caused them to become easily overworked and to cramp severely under strain. After two years in Peak County, Elena was looking for volunteer opportunities when a friend told her about search and rescue, suggesting she call Jim to find out more about it. Jim was receptive and encouraged her to come to a meeting. There she felt out of place, noticing the large number of men in the room and feeling like there were “absolutely no girls,” even though three women were present (including Meg). But Elena persevered. She tried attending some trainings but felt even more out of place there, so she quickly limited her participation to meetings only.

In addition to having very little backcountry experience, one reason Elena felt like she did not belong was because of the physically demanding nature of the missions and trainings. With her calf-disorder, she could not reliably hike miles through the woods, and with her short stature, she did

not have much upper body strength for carrying injured victims or hauling rope systems. Thus, in her first year of membership, Elena's participation waxed and waned as she tried to find her niche. Because she attended meetings sporadically and did not attend trainings or missions at all, the other members only vaguely recognized her.

One event transformed Elena's experience: the group's annual fundraiser. She got involved in the project with several other members and put an enormous amount of time into it. The effort netted \$12,000 that year—doubling the old record—and Elena felt proud and important to have played such an integral role. Others started to recognize her and eventually she felt more accepted. She began attending trainings and missions that spring, just as a new crop of inexperienced recruits (including myself) entered. The new recruitment cohort helped her keep up her momentum and solidify her commitment as we all studied and practiced rescue techniques together. Furthermore, now that there was a group of new recruits, we were able to tag along to the bar and socialize with some more established members, easing our adjustment and, we hoped, raising our status.

Throughout the next six years, Elena carved out several different roles for herself: she volunteered to do some administrative work, like typing and copying; she organized future fundraisers; and she served on the board of directors. One of her biggest accomplishments, however, was becoming a mission coordinator. Although the group had never had a mission coordinator who was not of lead status, Elena pushed for it so that she could contribute more to missions. This situation also allowed the group more leeway in utilizing its most skilled rescuers in the field instead of having them run the base operations.

In the chapters that follow, I tell the stories of Jim, Meg, Kevin, Nick, and Elena, as well as those of many other rescuers. I begin in chapter 1 by describing in more detail how I entered the setting, how I negotiated a role in Peak, the methods I used in gathering and analyzing my data, and several methodological problems and issues I encountered during the course of this study. In the next two chapters, I detail and analyze members' early experiences in Peak, including their motivations for joining as well as their confrontation with and eventual socialization to the group's strict heroic norms. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on members' emotional experiences during missions and how they managed both their own and others' intense

feelings during crises. In the next section, chapters 6 and 7, I discuss how the outcomes of the missions and members' sustained participation in Peak influenced their heroic and emotional selves. Finally, in chapter 8, I examine the theoretical confluence of heroism, the self, emotions, and gender.