

Technical ropes training helps in remote rescue

Priest Lake Search and Rescue, BCSO, Sandpoint Search and Rescue, and Clark Ambulance combine efforts to rescue bowhunter

By BRENT CLARK
News Editor

CLARK FORK — The call came in late to Priest Lake Search and Rescue (PLSR) team leaders Bill Olmo and Fritz Mehlert requesting assistance to help a bowhunter that had broken his ankle in the remote mountains north of Clark Fork, near Becker Draw, in late September.

Olmo and the team gathered up the ropes, carabiners, webbing, ascenders and

other technical equipment and headed out not knowing what to expect. Medics had arrived on the scene at about 7 p.m., the night before and stabilized

the victim, Donald McDonald, a 62-year-old retired sheriff, and spent the night with him.

Two of McDonald's neighbors and his son were also on hand and spent the night with McDonald.

Olmo said medic Tony Shope, also a Priest Lake Search and Rescue, member had just recently

completed the Ropes One Training the weekend before.

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The PLSR Technical Team

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— PLSR Team Leader
Bill Olmo

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arrived at the trailhead the next morning and met up with Bonner County Sheriff's Office Captain Jim Drake and other members of the Sheriffs Search and Rescue Team.

Olmo contacted Shope via radio and he informed Olmo that they needed to bring all the equipment they could to the location. That meant loading up the Sandpoint Search and Rescue ATVs for a five-mile ride in and then it was another 1.5 miles hike in to the where the victim was.

Olmo said they had to hike in on about a 60-percent slope, in a rain, without game trails, across wet, slick beargrass.

"I was falling all over the place," said Olmo, who had a 60-pound pack on his back.

After arriving on scene, Olmo put in a request to the on-scene commander for a helicopter from Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane so they could airlift the victim out.

After finding an adequate extraction site, the rescue team transported the vic-

tim uphill about 100 yards in a stretcher.

Things got more complicated after the rescue medic from Fairchild AFB dropped in. He said they couldn't use their equipment or stretcher because of their Standard Operating Procedures, so they switched the victim into the Air Force rescue personnel's equipment. But at this point, the helicopter was running out of fuel, so the helicopter had to return to Coeur d'Alene to refuel. And then the weather socked in and limited visibility for the helicopter pilot once he returned. After two attempts of trying to reach us and the declining weather conditions, said Olmo. He added that the team and medic decided to take the patient lower on the mountain to get out of the cloud layer.

"We lowered our patient on ropes to a new extraction point 1000-feet down the mountain," said Olmo.

He said the rotor wash was making the rain feel like rocks were being thrown at the team when the helicopter came in the fourth time.

After getting the victim up into the helicopter, the tether line got snagged in the

tree, said Olmo, but the helicopter rescue personnel were able to cut it loose.

After 22 hours on the mountain, victim Don McDonald, was finally transported to Bonner County General Hospital for medical treatment.

"You could tell the team was highly trained and very competent," said McDonald, who had dealt with these types of situations as a sheriff before.

He wanted to thank all of those that were involved in the extraction on Monday. McDonald put some extra effort into getting an award for Shope that was presented to him on Tuesday by the Bonner County Commissioners. McDonald owns Bonner Awards and Engraving in Ponderay, Idaho.

"I'm very proud of the team. They did very well," said PLSR team leader Mike Nielsen.

Members of the PLSR technical team assisting were Ted and Rebecca Tisdell, Tom Pell, Jim Miller, Debbie Butler, and Margy Hall.