This One time...

FROM MITIGATION AVALANCHE CONDITIONS AND SPUMING FRACUTURED BONES TO CHASING APEXILE DREILINGENTS AND CLOSING WAYWARD MOOSE, SKI PATROLLERS HAVE SEEN IT ALL. WE COLLECTED SOME OF OUR FAVORITE STORIES, FROM HILARIOUS TO HorRIBLE, THAT OFFER A GLIMPSE INTO WHAT IT'S LIKE TO WORK PATROL AT NORTH AMERICAN RESORTS. LUCKY FOR YOU, THEY'RE HIRING...

"If you want someone who can split a furer in the dark during a blood-moon eclipse while running a race on a 50-degree slope and backhanding the front into a trench to be helped and slid out, you're going to need someone with more than two years of experience," says Becca Hartell, a former ski patroller at Stevens Pass, Wash.

It turns out that while some smart gurus may see patrolling as a relaxed job that pays ski bills and returns to carry around a pole of orange while getting fresh tracks after every storm, patrollers are highly trained, severely underpaid workers who deal with unimaginable circumstances and bizarre incidents nearly every day when they show up to work. From insufficient and fatal injuries in Switzerland to drug smuggling activity, our stories are a dime a dozen on ski patrol.

"We once found a snowshoer in the woods, steeped in and hanging completely upside down with the tip of his board wedged between two trees," says Joe Vamoski, who worked on Park City Resort's ski patrol for 13 years. "I still have no idea how he ended up in that position."

Adding a ski patroller to tell their favorite story is like asking a librarian to pick their favorite book. It's overwhelming for them to even consider. The stories, like the years, tend to blend together and flood around in a bucket of pre-ski party memories, like when that veteran jumped the patrol shack in a rescue sled while naked except for a helmet made of beer cans at a time and location we are not at liberty to disclose. But for every hit tale there's usually a dark one, along with an event so ecldominous it's hard to believe it ever happened.

So next time you're thinking about ducking a rope or sliding down the slopes on a calendar day, consider what other adventures ski patrol might have already dealt with before lunch. These true preposterous stories will give you a pretty good idea.
All That Remains

AS TOLD BY: BRIANNA HARTZELL
LOCATION: STEVEN PASS SKI PATROL, WA
YEAR: 2018

IN THE SPRING OF 2018, after a couple of days resting across
the hill in a dark, discolored patch of snow, it was time to go check
it out. The gray spot was visible from the patrol shack at the top
of the 7th Heaven lift, and although it looked like norther from
avalanche control explosions, the area of the mountain called
Shattuck’s Window was double-black-diamond terrain off the beaten
path, and with no recent snowfall, we hadn’t touched the slopes
in a week. That stuff is water soluble, so it would have dissolved
by then.

There was a telemark race going on right below it, so another
patroller, Peter, and I planned to take a lap through the course after
checking out the mysterious spot that had caught our attention.
The patch was about the size of a living room rug, four to five
feet in each direction. The gray, dusty stuff was mixed in with the
snow, leaving matted surface faster by absorbing more heat
from the sun. Peter slid into the pit, the slushy snow covering
his ski and boot, and scooped up a handful to examine. I stood
just next to it while we both tried to figure out what the hell it
was. Spring snow gets dirty, but not in one place like that. Peter
was messing it and one of us made a joke that he should taste
it.

Then he picked out a small, jagged white chunk. “What is
that?” he asked, holding it up. “That’s a tooth!” I said
with wide eyes. It was definitely a human molar.

There was no screaming. We just froze. It was one of
down moments of realization where we trade
eye contact and it all sets in for both of us that
Peter was standing there holding a handful of hu-
man remains from what appeared to be a burned
cremation. We only seen cremated remains a cou-
ple of times but I’ve never seen any teeth in it.

We were horrified, but still did a lap through the tele-
mark course while Peter kept looking at the wet ash stuck
to his gloves. I had some bits clinging to the cuffs of our pants.

Peter and our patrol director went back and respectfully showed
most of the remains to the curious teams no dozens of other peo-
ple wouldn’t ski through it. We never found out whose remains
they were. Although we didn’t like the thought of digging up and
moving someone’s final resting place, it was an understandably
beautiful place to have one’s ashes spread.
Lift Line Confrontation

AS TOLD BY: CONOR ROLAND-CHICHARA
LOCATION: ALCYSSA RESORT, AK
YEAR: 2017

MY FIRST YEAR ON SKI PATROL WAS 2017, and I saw a lot of wild, gassy stuff, including some traumatic injuries to humans. We didn’t have to deal with too many confrontations, except for a week in March that saw slowly accumulating tensions with a young male moose. For a few days, there was some radio chatter about him coming onto the resort in the middle of the day and getting close to the lift line at Chair 6, which made guests pretty uneasy. We tried to push him out of the area with snowplows, which worked for a little while, but he’d come back outside of operational hours. He soon got accustomed to us trying to scare him off and wasn’t having it anymore.

One day, at about a p.m., the moose came back out of the woods and cruised into the base with the skiers as if it was living up to get on the lift. When people started to avoid and clear the area, the moose picked up on the tension and started to charge and stamp his feet. One other rookie and I tried to calm the moose, but he continued to charge, knocking over the corns and whacking guests. We tried using bear spray to get him to leave. Amidst the calamity and confusion, they managed to hit the moose with some of the bear spray, but a sight became how much of it had worked. The moose was still charging, but the BTs had brought in to take him off the mountains and drive him back for the day.

By this time, videos of the moose charging the lift line were going viral on social media and it was lucky someone hadn’t been trampled or hurt, so management decided that if he came back the next day, they would take mitigative action for the safety of the guests.

The next day, the moose returned to Chair 6, getting confrontational, charging the line and spitting for a fight. We encouraged him down the groomed run with a snowcat and into the woods near the base. That’s when Eric Telleman, the assistant director of mountain operations, followed the moose into the woods with a snowboard. Two other rangers followed a short distance behind in the woods, and the moose was down, some 30 feet away from the trail. Then they had to get in the tree, so they roped him up to the cat’s winch cable and dragged him onto the run, scooping the body into the bucket and loading it off, leaving a large patch of blood on an intermediate slope and a trail of red-clay marking the snow all the way out to the road.

The moose ended up going on the state news in Alaska, leading a family was able to eat the meat and nothing went to waste. Afterwards, because of the viral video attention, guests expressed a lot of concern about moose for weeks. We instantly had to assure the guests that we had a mitigation plan in place should another animal attempt to endanger both the guests and.
I was a second-year patroller in 1995 at Highlands. Living the dream in Aspen’s backyard. One evening, a bunch of us were in the iconic Cherry’s bar at the base for several hours of apres when a solo skier was reported missing just outside of the resort boundary. He was clifed out on the Maroon Creek side of the mountain below Olympic bowl, unable to get down. There are only one or two routes through these cliff bands and you need to know your way, which he did not. As it was around 7 p.m., snow safety director Kevin Henschel came in and pulled a handful of patrollers straight out of the bar so we could bag the last of our beers and went out to mount a rescue. It was the ‘90s. We’ve improved operational procedures since then.

Biking outside of the resort boundary was still pretty new at the time and not many people were familiar with the terrain, including the volunteer mountain rescue team. They showed up with big heavy packs and needed us to shuttle them up with snowmobiles alongside patrollers running snow safety control in the avalanche terrain. Having different entities there created some confusion.

I was one of the ski patrol operators. Since we didn’t have incident command systems at the time, let alone designated mountain rescue smoke,Randy Haggerty and his passenger on a white airplane out of Prospect. I had to throw the skis onto its slide to rescue them and the machine slid down to Poppy Point. Meanwhile, Pat “Duffy” Trail was one of the other复苏ers and he was known for being a terrible ski operator at the time. He was riding up Avoncreek with probably a lap when the front side came off the snow, so he had to turn the skis back downhill but fell off as he made a 40-yard drop into a viewing platform where a bunch of new real estate was under construction. He cleared the tail and got back on, only to ride it off a 13-foot retaining wall where he got stuck in the snow and had to be dug out the next day. It was a blizzard.

Three patrollers went down into the gully with a handful of mountain rescue guys. They were on skis inside skins in waist-deep blizzard, which was a recipe for disaster and made snow training quiteish. Once they located the victim, who had been stuck on the cliff for eight hours waiting for someone to show him how to side-slope down it, the avalanche control team began blasting the slope below them with explosives to manage the committing terrain on their way out. No one made it home until after 3 a.m.

As this was all happening, I was spotting the whole thing from Maroon Creek Road. It was in that cowboy era and I was in my early 20s, half-roaded, standing there watching an out-of-bounds rescue in gory ski terrain with bounces going off in the dark and I remember thinking, “This is bullshit. I’m finding my calling.”
The Jumper

AS TOLD BY: BILL DOWELL
LOCATION: CRESTED BUTTE MOUNTAIN RESORT, CO
YEAR: AROUND 2007

TEN OR FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, a teenage kid was caught prack-
ching fresh tracks beyond a roped boundary in the avalanche prone
area. We followed his tracks, brought him back to the base,
and I rode up the Teewinot lift with the kid to escort him back to the base
area. He said he was sorry, but didn’t sound sincere. We sat on
the old center pole double lift as I explained to him what was go-
ing to happen, how we were going to call the police who would
take his statement and give him a misdemeanor ticket as someone
from management read him the Colorado Ski Safety Act. Once
we were about halfway up, crossing over a bump that was 40 to 50
feet below the lift, he looked at me and said, “it gets greener!” and
jumped off the chair, landing on soft snow below and slid stepping
into the woods. It certainly surprised me and I didn’t really con-
side jumping after him, but I remember looking down and saying,
“We’re going to get you.”

I put the call-out on the radio, thinking he’d try to ski through
the woods towards the base area and disappear into the crowd. A
policeman and an off-duty lift mechanic followed his tracks, which
involved a lot more misstepping than he probably thought. He
made his way into a new subdivision under construction on the
side of the mountain just below Gori’s Way and kid in an unfinished
basement. Our guys were closing in on his tracks, but once he got
into the neighborhood, we didn’t know where he went.

He might have gotten away with it, but at this same time, we
were dealing with a serious injury on the hill that required an
ambulance to drive directly up to the Gold Link Lift area for a
direct patient transfer. When he heard the ambulance siren, the
kid thought it was the cops coming to bust him and got him into
even more trouble for fleeing, so he finished out and ran out of
the basement hiding spot, surrendering to the patrollers and turning
himself in. I bet he’s sorry now.
Mammoth Meth Foot

AS TOLD BY: JOSH FEINBERG
LOCATION: MAMMOTH MOUNTAIN, CA
YEAR: 2004

I was a third-year patroller in February 2004, and hadn’t been on snowmobiles or snowboards that much. The day we got a call about a missing snowboarder. One of his friends thought he might have been there a day or two and his staff was still on his hands. We split into two teams of two or three patrollers and began looking off the backside of the mountain. We never found a trace of him, just beyond a well-marked boundary. You’d definitely know if you were coming in, but once you get going, it’s a lot of work to get back onboard. The terrain was rough and we were towards Red’s Meadow, where there’s a trail that occasionally gets overgrown, but if you enjoy the mountains and go between it and Mammoth Lakes Base, you likely won’t find anything for a mile until Provo.

We followed the snowboard tracks further down in this direction for a few hours and even found intact gloves, but we didn’t have skins so further out we went, the leader it would be to get back. This was mid-winter and the temperatures were down to 40˚F below that night. At one point, around 10am, Pila, the board master, became frustrated that we were not in a forest and up the embankment on the other side. It was an odd choice considering that we could see the top of the gold mine trail from there is the opposite direction. I opened the back door of the snow coach and got out, thinking I could find another way out by continuing down. We wanted to keep following the tracks to find the guy, dead or alive, but at that point we were even more lost trying to get somewhere.

As I climbed into the snowcat, I remember thinking, “Why the hell did he go down the river?”

Later, we learned that he was a former Olympic hockey player who had been on medications for several days. Hearing stories about the snow, I made more sense. He’d been mentally ill, while getting in more and more last, ultimately walking two miles in the wrong direction. He hid in a cabin on a rock and was stuck for energy. When he picked the rocks off of the rock, it was the cold that finally pushed him off of the rock. Days later, after foot on day three, strips of flesh were discovered to them. In the end, he used the last of his rope and by the time the National Guard spotted him from a helicopter on his eighth day missing, his body temperature was down to 60 degrees, his leg was amputated, and his face was so badly beat he had to be identified.

I think they made a movie about him and heard he wrote “The Open Water Show” telling his story. We saw dozens of people each year getting off the back side, but most of the time we could find him and help them get back to base, especially now that we carry body-camera survival equipment that allows us to go further. To have someone stay out there for multiple days and survive is rare. Years ago we found a pair of ski boots that still found someone’s feet and leg bones in them. The rest of their body was eaten away by critters.