

Perspectives

Tragedy Unveiled

by Laurell Toeppen

Last Sunday I woke not to my alarm, but to the sound of excited voices outside my door. A group of six skydivers and their staff had arrived to make a jump over the South Pole. Through my window, I could see them removing excess weight from their plane and doing a photo shoot.

My heart raced with excitement as I put on all my extreme weather gear, I knew at -25F it could be a long, cold wait. I jogged out to the plane just as the final hero shots were being taken. I almost called out for them to wait, but assumed I would take photos of them later, after the jump. In the shadow of it's wing, I could just barely see their smiling faces.

A crowd of 30 people had formed by now and we made our way across the runway to a bright orange tarp they had laid out as a target. We were given some brief instructions, and then we watched.

The plane climbed in a wide circle above us, through the clear sky. As it climbed I thought back to my own experiences of jumping from a perfectly good plane.

As I was waiting to jump, I thumbed through a skydivers magazine and with shock, studied the largest obituary section I had ever seen. Later, I followed my friend out of the plane, for her first jump.

Not until I was safe on the ground did I learn that her primary chute did not open properly. She had to pull her backup chute. She had sprained her ankle, and we felt no need to pursue that sport again.

These thoughts filled my head as the plane climbed higher into the sky. I was not very attentive to the planes progress. It still seemed too far south and downwind from the target. I was waiting for what I thought would be the right position, but then someone called out that they saw a chute.

Slowly, a billowing blue chute came towards us. As it approached we could see two people - it was the tandem jumpers. They landed about 400 ft. south of the target and about 50 ft. from our housing. I watched with concern because there was no movement. Slowly they righted themselves. We saw no other chutes and assumed they had not jumped yet.

It was then that the radio calls began. A voice from the communications center asked, "Where are the chutes? There should be five." Someone answered, "There is only one." Now frantic, the voice exclaimed, "But there should be five!" After a number of these exchanges, a stern voice said, "If there are any other chutes, me and about 50 other people are blind!"

A third jumper was found. His backup chute had self-deployed at 800 ft., but the others were still missing. A search began and the trauma team was summoned, so I went to the appointed meeting place in the dome.

While waiting for instructions, communications made the announcement, "We have confirmed three dead."

I decided to return to the staging site, to offer my assistance. I assumed the jumpers would have heard the news via the radio by now. I was wrong.

Arriving back at the site was surreal and time took on new dimensions. The three jumpers were standing, looking outward at a scene in the distance. Their twin otter had landed about a mile away with a spryde, and snowmobiles beside it.

The silence was broken by occasional conversation. Deciding to let the scene unfold by itself I said nothing. I was integrated into the scene and found myself involved in small talk.

How odd. In time, the question I dreaded came from the American, "Do you have any information?" Slowly, considering how to word the news, I regretfully said, "Yes, I do." The Norwegians turned and the three formed a semi-circle facing me. "Comms has confirmed three dead".

The American quickly responded, "We expected that". What more can be said at times like this? They turned from the scene out in the snow field and broke off into their own worlds. None of their eyes were skyward now.

The moment was broken when the jumpers were invited into the dome for warmth and food. Solemnly, as they walked, they drew one another close, until they were walking arm over shoulder, in a hug. Their lives now having a tie that was quite unwelcome.

Less than five hours after their plane arrived, it left our home.

Our home. Most people who have heard of this station don't think of it as someone's home. It's a station, or a research facility, or a work camp, or just a tourist attraction, but we were home, and our home had been hit by tragedy.

We spent the rest of the day working through what had happened. We talked about the emotions, we asked those who responded for details, we theorized why the chutes didn't open, and we cried.

Another valid emotion

arose, anger. A plane had come to our home, let six passengers out at an altitude of 18,000 ft. and three fell to their death. Friends responded, dug broken bodies out of four-foot graves of snow and then placed the remains into body bags. These friends lives are now altered, and our community is in pain.

A small group of friends decide to purge our tears by watching the movie, "Into Thin Air, Death on Everest". Following the movie we discussed the value of adventure. Although adventure is a big part of our lives, I couldn't help thinking of how thoughtless it can be. Not only to loved ones, but to bystanders, as well.

A quote of Tom Robbins fit my mood at the moment: "You risked your life, but what else have you ever risked? Have you ever risked disapproval? Have you ever risked a belief? I see nothing particularly courageous in risking one's life. So you lose it, you go to your hero's heaven and every thing is milk and honey 'til the end of time, right? You get your reward and suffer no earthly consequences. That's not courage. Real courage is risking something that you have to keep on living with, real courage is risking something that might force you to rethink your thoughts and suffer change and stretch consciousness."

In time this will be another memory of my home at the Pole. In time we will pass through all the stages of grieving. In time I will be doing grand adventures. But for now I am pausing and considering my values, responsibilities and mortality. *



photo by David Martin

Just moments before their fateful flight above the South Pole, members of the Adventure Network South Pole skydiving expedition pose for a hero shot. Ray Miller, top left, Hans Rusack, second from left, and Steve Mulholland, front row center, did not survive.