

Charlottesville, Virginia, Sunday, February 17, 1980



GROUP MEMBERS WITH STRETCHER NEGOTIATE MOUNTAIN DESCENT
Rescue Simulations Are Held Each Month

'We Don't Take a Lot of Chances'

Rescue Group Is Always on Call

By NELLE LEE
of The Progress Staff

The rains came in torrents. The winds blustered at high speeds. Hurricane David was hundreds of miles away, but its presence was felt here. An elderly woman in White Hall, suffering from severe abdominal pains, called the local rescue squad. An overflowing creek flooded the road to her house, and rescue workers couldn't reach her. They summoned the Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group, which drove as far as they could through the flooded terrain, then maneuvered through virtual waves over a bridge to reach the woman and bring her back to a waiting ambulance.

The Blue Ridge Mountain Rescue Group, a volunteer land and search organization, has assisted in lost person hunts, plane crash rescues and medical emergencies such as the one in White Hall since 1975. Affiliated with the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference, the group is made up of skilled mountain climbers, cavers, canoeists and other outdoorsmen trained to provide medical assistance in emergencies.

The Blue Ridge Rescue Group is on call 24 hours a day; at least two members carry carry electronic paging devices at all times. The group is signaled through the University of Virginia Police Department, and can be mobilized within 30 minutes. Members respond to calls within a two-hour drive of Charlottesville, but also assist in rescue operations in other parts of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland.

"We're not out to take the place of rescue squads or other rescue groups," said Chris Stubbs, the local group's chairman. "We use our outdoor skills in emergency situations. People call us when they think we can do a better job."

The idea for a search and rescue organization came about after an incident in 1972. A Boy Scout troop was camping on the Appalachian Trail when a blizzard began. The troop was separated, and two Scoutmasters went to look for two missing boys. The boys eventually returned to the group, however, the leaders failed to report back. The Forest Service sent

out rangers, but the terrain was so rugged they called in members of a Washington, D.C. hiking club. Club members later found the two bodies on the trail.

It was then several outdoorsmen decided to use their hiking and survival skills to assist rescue units by forming a search organization.

There are three levels of membership in the Blue Ridge Group. "Basic" members have extensive outdoor experience as campers, hikers or climbers. They can maneuver through jagged terrain quickly. Most spend about a year as trainees, receiving more training in survival techniques as well as certification as Emergency Medical Technicians. Once a month they participate in an emergency simulation. According to Stubbs and Keith Conover, mission coordinator, about half the trainees (both men and women) make it to basic membership.

"Some drop out because it's too time consuming," Conover,

26, said. For others, the work is too rigorous. Many choose to become associate members. These members use their abilities as ham radio operators, physicians or nurses — their experience in the wilderness may be limited. Associate members participate in rescue missions when the search takes place on fairly "easy" terrain.

"Or sometimes we have hot-shot rock climbers. They don't go with us always, but we know we can tag them if we need them," Stubbs said.

Auxiliary members are semi-trained. Many help with the administrative details, financial affairs and paperwork.

Currently the Blue Ridge Rescue Group numbers eight, but "we can always find work for more volunteers," says Stubbs.

The group answers about 10 calls a year. "It's hard to say when we have more calls . . . I guess maybe in the fall. Sometimes we'll go for months without anything, then we'll have three calls in one week." Con-

over said.

The group frequently searches for lost campers, hikers or hunters. Their track record in finding missing persons is excellent, although sometimes even they are too late. Conover recalls searching for a missing hunter near Greenwood last Christmas. They covered miles of dense woods before finding his body.

Members have made their way up many a mountain top to the scene of grisly plane crashes. By then, their jobs primarily consist of recovering the bodies.

Does the strain and pressure ever get to be too much?

"We have a very professional attitude about what we do," said 21-year-old Stubbs. "I think you have to develop a mental barrier to a lot of things you see when you work." He's been with the group since 1975.

Members are an extremely dedicated lot. They leave home in the middle of the night to answer a call. They forego studying for a crucial exam.

"No one is required to go out on a call," Conover said. "They can refuse. But we usually have good turnout."

He added that employers and professors were extremely cooperative about releasing people from work or rescheduling tests.

One key objective of the Blue Ridge Rescue Group is teaching outdoor safety education to organizations such as the Boy Scouts, civil air patrols and rescue squads. Members share knowledge of survival techniques, equipment selection and wilderness first aid. Members frequently speak at gatherings of outdoor groups, such as the Sierra Club, on selecting proper clothing and how to recognize health hazards like hypothermia.

Stubbs said the group occasionally confronts resentment from rescue squads or fire departments who feel they are being upstaged by the group of mostly young outdoorsmen.

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MEMBER OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN RESCUE GROUP PRACTICES ROPE SKILLS
'Basic' Members Have Extensive Experience in Rescue Skills

★ Rescue

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"But once they find out we're not trying to do their jobs, there usually aren't problems," Stubbs said. "We are a complimentary service and we don't want a lot of glory."

As a UVA-affiliated organization, the group receives school activity funds. It also receives money from private donations, federal grants and the umbrella Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference. But members must supply their own essential equipment, such as packbacks, sleeping bags, boots and clothing.

Needless to say, the members are a close-knit bunch.

"There's something about being in a crisis, literally being under the gun, that brings peo-

ple close together," remarked Stubbs.

The members, who bring various outdoor skills into the group, tend to cross-train each other. "The backpackers help the white water people, and so on," Stubbs said.

During all rescue missions, there is a pervading emphasis on safety within the group.

"We're not going to compromise safety for expediency," Stubbs said. "We don't take a lot of chances."

"We have a saying, a dead rescuer never did anyone any good," added Conover.

And to date, no member of the Blue Ridge group has suffered an injury while on a mission.

"And we haven't injured anyone we were carrying. You worry about that. Here this vic-

tim is already hurt, and there's a chance he's going to be hurt again while you're moving him down a mountain," Conover said.

All of the members possess such extensive outdoor experience that physical pressures are minimal.

"The physical demands don't bother me, I can handle that.

But there are a lot of critical decisions you make when you're on a mission. You just have to use your intuition," Stubbs said.

"It can be frustrating. Sometimes you're out there for hours and you wonder if you're doing any good," said Conover. "Then something breaks, and you know it's been worthwhile."