



AAC Publications

Stranded – Extreme Wind

California/Nevada, White Mountains

On November 23, I (male, age 34) began a proposed three-day traverse of the White Mountains from White Mountain Peak to Boundary Peak. The traverse, which consists of 20+ miles of ridgeline over 12,000 feet, is mostly easy walking on tundra, though there are short sections of scrambling up to 4th class. Snow conditions were perfect, with enough to melt for water but not so much as to impede travel. And the forecasts, which I religiously checked in the weeks leading up to the trip, were good, with a long block of stable weather before a well-forecasted storm beginning on the evening of November 26.

The trip began well, with an ascent of the 9,500-foot complete east ridge of White Mountain Peak and traverse across the hardest rock to a camp at about 13,200 feet between White Mountain Peak and Headley Peak. As I approached and made camp, the wind picked up considerably. That night, though well guyed-out, my tent began slapping me in the face. By daybreak on November 25, it felt unsafe to leave the tent. I checked the weather on my InReach, texted my fiancée to send me weather reports, and began to strategize. The wind, I figured, was too strong for me to recross the delicate 4th-class section earlier on the traverse. And staying in the tent, traditionally the safer move, was also unwise, as the impending snowstorm meant that getting off the ridge on the 26th was mandatory. So, I broke camp and continued north, staying below the ridgeline wherever possible. Not only did conditions continue to deteriorate, but terrain required that I cross cols and flats where the windspeeds were much more powerful.

Unbeknownst to me, a Wind Advisory had been issued by the National Weather Service, citing the strongest gusts to be between Benton and Chalfant Valley, very near my exact location but 8000 feet below me. Gusts as high as 101 mph were recorded in the valleys below. At Mammoth Lakes airport, gravel flung by 94 mph gusts damaged all of the parked cars. These same gusts repeatedly lifted me and tossed me toward Nevada. The ground blizzard conditions meant that I couldn't read my map. Even though I was underdressed, gusts were too strong for me to access my pack for additional layers. On a flat section, I hid behind a tiny rock and plotted a strategy. With the air temperature of 5°F, I knew that I needed to keep moving and get out of the wind. I was over a day from any other person, outside the reach of rescue, unable to bivouac or shelter, and unable to light a stove for water.

As remaining on the ridge was out of the question, I was faced with the choice of bailing west into California or east into Nevada. I chose California, though I knew that a descent of this segment of the rugged Whites would be both committing and dangerous.

As the ridge I chose to descend (between Willow and Cottonwood creeks) pointed directly into the wind, I resorted to short bursts of pushing into the maelstrom, not unlike the football sled-push drill. During gusts, I would drop to the ground, then pop up and repeat. Lower on the ridge, progress eased. I only had a quarter liter of water, but even on the lee side of some rocks at 11,000 feet, I still was unable to light my stove due to the wind.

I continued down the ridge until a series of towers at about 9,500 feet, where I traversed along the north face of the ridge. Upon bypassing a tower, I was confronted with a devastating impasse: a notch followed by a large ridge and face climb that I estimated to be several hundred feet of at least 5.8 on terrible rock. I analyzed the drainages on either side of the ridge, but both cliffed out.

I climbed a small summit and called the White Mountain Ranger District, which transferred me to Inyo SAR coordinator Victor Lawson. While outside of Inyo County, Lawson helped me plot a descent route and transferred me to Mono SAR coordinator John Pelichowski. While I knew that rescue was not possible due to the conditions, I was glad to have extra sets of eyes on the terrain and a plan: I would attempt to descend south into Cottonwood Canyon and Mono SAR would start up the canyon at dawn.

The 1,700-foot descent, which mostly took place at night on the 25th, was harrowing. The rock was of the poorest quality I have experienced. I broke handholds and dislodged a block as large as a kitchen table. Various sections were approximately 5.7. I systematically explored multiple drainages to the limits of my ability before finding a chute that made it to a ledge system just above the creek. The final descent took several hours of reconnaissance before descending a 170-foot dry waterfall that went well into 5th class. I was thrilled to reach running water, as severe dehydration had blurred my vision. I promptly bivouacked, and though the sharp rocks instantly popped my pad, I didn't care. I knew it would soon be light, and I needed to rest if I were to get out this drainage by the following night. Unfortunately, I did not have either cell or satellite service to communicate with rescuers.

The scariest moment of the entire ordeal came at 1 a.m. on November 26, when a massive rockfall event occurred down the chute I had downclimbed. Enormous blocks shot off the lip of the lowermost cliffs and exploded next to my tent. It was as loud as thunder.

I got a predawn start on the 26th. I was just 1.5 miles from the mouth of the canyon, so I figured I just needed to press a bit more. However, I stepped on a large talus block which pivoted, snapping my trekking pole, torquing me onto my hip, and producing a contusion. Then, my heart sank when I reached a choke point in the canyon over which there was a 100-foot waterfall. This waterfall, the first of about ten, had to be negotiated by going upstream and soloing terrible rock on the slot canyon walls in order to bypass. Some of these sections were quite technical, and all required great focus and patience.

I repeatedly checked my GPS to calculate the distance to the mouth of the canyon. The final, impossible-looking obstacle came just 680 feet from the end, where I ascended a four-inch sloping ledge up the right wall of the canyon, traversed a ledge system, and followed bighorn tracks to a talus slope and to safety. Almost as soon as I reached flat ground, I got satellite service again. I alerted SAR personnel of my safety. When I heard their shouts from a ridge above, I sat, chugged water, and waited. The fight was over.

ANALYSIS

Climbing in the shoulder seasons carries substantial risk. Even with good weather forecasts, conditions may be more volatile than during the summer months. In this case, the well-forecasted storm for the 27th arrived earlier and rapidly intensified, becoming a "bomb cyclone." Climbing in advance of a storm, however well-forecasted, exposes one to the risk that the storm may approach earlier or become more powerful than initially predicted. A committing route such as the White Mountain Traverse further exacerbates this risk.

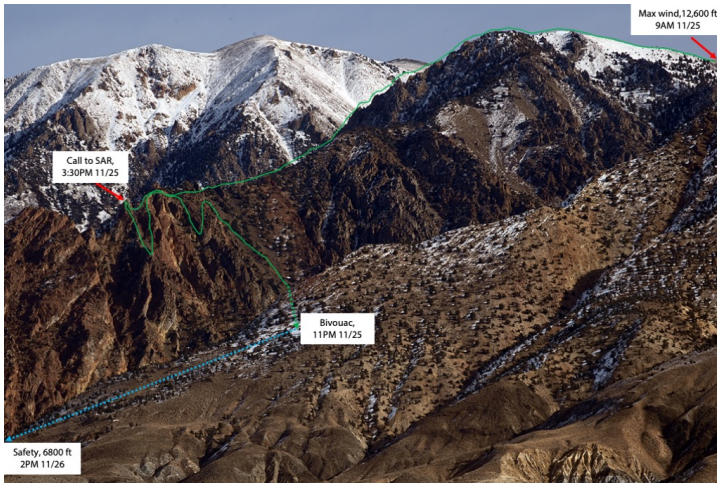
In terms of the management of the crisis, I am happy with my approach of continuing to move, practicing self-reliance, and using search and rescue as a resource to help me make good decisions when I felt like I was running out of options. I have considered two alternative choices. First, I could have active my inReach as soon as I decided to bail. Though nothing would have changed on my end, perhaps rescuers could have strategized, tracked my progress, and communicated with me. Second, I might have bailed into Nevada. The White Mountains are a fault block range, with the California side steeper than Nevada. The descent to the only nearby outpost of Dyer, Nevada, would have been very long, very remote, and without search and rescue resources like those in California, but it would have been less steep, less exposed to the wind, and I had plenty of water and gas for the two- to three-day descent.

Finally, I am deeply saddened, though not at all surprised, that one of the Mono SAR rescuers suffered a rockfall injury during this mission. Mono SAR has posted their mission report (which mentions this injury) [here](#). (Source: Hari Mix.)

Hari Mix discussed this incident in depth in Episode 51 of the Sharp End Podcast:

The Sharp End · Blown Away in California's White Mountains

Images



Annotated photo showing the long descent from the White Mountain Traverse on the border of California and Nevada.



Typical terrain in the Cottonwood Creek drainage, requiring 5th-class climbing on extremely poor rock.

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