

# A RESCUE OF MOUNTAINOUS PROPORTIONS

By Kristin Witt

It was May 31st, and the first warm Saturday the mountains had seen in a while. The snow had finally melted, the trails were dry for the most part, and Evergreen was emerging into the spring day in droves, anxious to experience the winter gone. Shortly after the noon hour, a 911 call came in to Evergreen Fire and Rescue, several calls actually. A woman was hurt on the Bergen Peak Trail above Elk Meadow and their services were needed.

Evergreen Fire and Rescue Paramedic, Quintin "Quin" Galt and Deputy Chief of Fire Operations, Wayne Shephard, along with Wayne Hazeldine and Will Gomez, hurried to the trail head off of Stagecoach where they started the search for the injured biker. As the engine pulled out of the station, a call went out to Paul "Woody" Woodward of Alpine Rescue Team, who was in a training exercise with several of the Alpine personnel. "Whenever there is someone stranded on the mountain it is an automatic call to the Alpine Rescue Team. They know how to move injured people out to safety no matter how treacherous the terrain," Shephard explains. When Woody arrived at the trailhead, Quin and his crew were already on their way to the crash site, with Wayne Shephard acting as Incident Commander, developing the strategy to extricate the victim in the most streamlined way possible.

The goal is always to get medical personnel to the victim quickly, so the Paramedic team was sent in first. It was a two-mile hike up Bergen Peak Trail before Quin and his crew came upon a woman, immobile, pale, shaking and lying 15 feet down an embankment off the side of the trail. It was Jen Carlton, an experienced mountain biker, who had left home that morning for a quick ride with her husband David. They were coming down the trail, David at least two turns ahead of her, when she veered to the side to avoid some hikers, hit a rock buried in the trail ridge, and found herself falling head over heels down the mountain. She crashed into a boulder on the way down, crushing her helmet, finally landing amongst the trees, finding it hard to breath and gripped with pain.

"If you're going to get hurt," Jen says now, "do it in Evergreen." Immediately there was a man at her side and another running down the trail to get David. The first man stayed with her, washing the blood from her face and coaxing her to stay awake. Jen found herself getting sleepy and overcome with cold, despite the hot day. People came from everywhere equipped with antiseptic, bandages, and water, offering assistance as they waited for help to come. Her husband, recognizing signs of shock, covered Jen's body with his own, trying to keep her warm and calm.

By the time Quin Galt was kneeling at Jen Carlton's side, she was already slipping dangerously into shock, her blood pressure was dropping, her heart rate was rapid, and she was fighting sleep. He made the decision to call in Flight for Life, knowing that every second would count once they were able to get her off the mountain. Quin started Jen on IV fluids and talked to her calmly, assessing her injuries.

"You have some broken ribs, and you're bleeding internally, probably from a lacerated liver, and looking at your helmet I'm sure you have a concussion," Quin explained. Jen was astounded at his ability to identify her injuries, right there suspended on a mountain side. She had been worried about how they would help her, and if they would have any idea what to do. "They were so professional," Jen remembers, "and Quin acted like he crouched on the side of a mountain and saved lives everyday." Truth be told Quintin Galt has been a paramedic for nine years and with Evergreen Fire and Rescue for five years, and he says that the paramedics on his team have up to 20 years of experience. So they don't do it everyday—but close enough.

When Quin explained to Jen and David that they were going to helicopter Jen out to St. Anthony's Hospital they tried to talk him out of it. Jen hates flying and she didn't want to believe that her injuries were that serious, but she says that the rescue team was so reassuring, and she could see the helicopter circling overhead, so she decided to go with the experts.

In fact, the Flight for Life pilot was looking for a place high up on Bergen Peak where they could set the helicopter down to avoid a long

trek out, but there was nothing. They landed in an open space right next to the Stagecoach entrance in Elk Meadow and preparation began to transport Jen to her waiting chariot.

Paul Woodward of Alpine Rescue Team explains that his people are trained for just such an incident. They are athletes and mountaineers, who spend months practicing precision drills to streamline the transport of the injured out of the mountains to the medical help they need, and their services are always completely free of charge. Alpine Rescue is proud to work with the Fire Department so closely. "Working with Evergreen Fire and Rescue is like coming home for us. We function as a team, all focused on the welfare of the victim without the conflict of ego or protocol," Woody explains. "We rely on the Fire Department and they on us, making it a cohesive operation from start to finish."


Jen was "taped" to a backboard, a precaution used whenever there is question of a spinal injury, then lifted into a Stokes litter, a gurney shaped metal basket. The rescue teams have attached a large dune buggy wheel right in the middle of the litter to help absorb the jolt of the trail as they descend the mountain and to help carry the weight of the patient. It requires a team of six to balance the Stokes litter as they move along the trail, and they do it at an unbelievably rapid pace. Jen felt they were literally running her down the mountain.

Keeping up the pace without incident at that speed and terrain is a challenge, and can be exhausting, so one team of six takes a position down the hill as another team of six starts moving the patient. As the carrying team passes, the forward team steps in, replacing the carriers one at a time, without ever missing a beat. It is like a relay race with 12 runners, but instead of passing a baton they pass a large, wheeled basket complete with injured person. Instead of winning a race, they are saving a life. Jen said the whole thing was so slick and fast, it left her amazed.

It was approximately an hour and 40 minutes from the time Jen took her spill until she was loaded onto the Flight for Life helicopter, and that included

three stops on the way down for Quin to check her vitals. Not very long, considering she was two miles up Bergen Peak Trail and 15 feet down an embankment. Jen spent four days in intensive care at St. Anthony's. "I couldn't believe it," Jen says, "when the doctor told me that the diagnosis the guys had made out on the mountain had been exactly right." Her liver was lacerated but healed on its own without surgery, her ribs hurt for about a month, and though her concussion was severe, she now feels back to herself.

Jen's story is one of more than survival; it is one of true victory on many levels. The Carltons were astounded and will be forever grateful to the rescuers who knew their jobs and did them with such skill and precision on that day in May. Evergreen Fire and Rescue, Alpine Rescue Team, Flight for Life, and St. Anthony Hospital, as well as the many hikers and bikers who came prepared and took the time, all contributed to a happy ending that could have easily gone the other way.

When asked what she was thinking when she was finally down the mountain and loaded into the helicopter on her way to recovery, Jen Carlton says she was thinking of her two kids, but then has to laugh. "My last words to the guys who brought me down," she explains, "were to please remind my husband to cancel the dinner party we had planned for that night." When you live in the mountains, focus is everything! 

*Evergreen Fire and Rescue would like readers to know that they are recruiting now for their 2011 training class. Interviews will begin in November and the class will be filled by the end of December with training starting in January. Go to [evergreenfireandrescue.com](http://evergreenfireandrescue.com) for details.*

*The Alpine Rescue Team wants to thank The Little Bear Saloon and the 1,300 plus runners who recently participated in the Evergreen Town Race. The Little Bear Benefit and the Race are the fundraisers that keep this organization operational.*

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The Alpine Rescue Team on another past mission transporting someone via the wheeled Stokes litter.

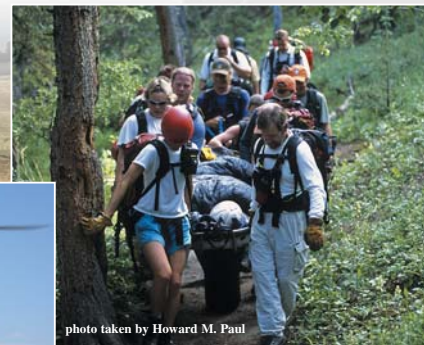


photo taken by Howard M. Paul