

## ANATOMY OF A NEEDLESS DEATH

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The Toronto Star I.D. Section

Tuesday May 15, 2007

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Dave Buschow's last hours were pure hell. Without a doubt, this man experienced an agony unknown and totally alien to the modern, urbanized North American: Dave died of thirst. As a medical examiner stated, "Buschow's death was caused by dehydration and electrolyte imbalance." A description of his final moments reads like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*: "Pale, wracked by cramps, his speech slurred ... desperate for water ... and hallucinating ...". But what events lead to the untimely death of this 29 year old, physically fit, and experienced outdoorsperson from New Jersey?

In a nutshell, accompanied by eleven other hikers and three "expert guides" from the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS), Dave was a willing participant in a "wilderness survival" outing in Utah's hot, harsh, canyon environment. Although all three leaders witnessed Dave's plight hours before his collapse and knew he was in "deep trouble", none offered him water, even when he begged for it. Furthermore, not one person in his group demanded or forced these "expert" leaders to give life-sustaining liquids to a dying man. Writes one group member, "Every time (Buschow) would fall or lie down, it took a huge amount of effort to pick him back up. His speech was thick and his mouth swollen." In addition, "he'd rush ahead ... in the wrong direction ...". Near the end, Dave hallucinated, mistaking a tree for a person.

And what was the impetus for participating in this "wilderness survival" outing? The twelve individuals took the course in order to pit themselves against Mother Nature, and develop "personal growth through adversity, and using your wits to survive". Apparently, these experiences are designed to push a person "past those false limits your mind has set for your body."

But at what price?

When should a seasoned, rational instructor terminate a survival course, especially when (s)he knows that a participant has reached his breaking point? In my opinion, and this is experience talking, the course must end when someone's life is at risk. To continue, and push people past their endurance levels, while knowing full well that an individual could sustain irreparable mental or physical damage is willful neglect and sheer folly. As "Wop" May, a famed bush pilot stated, "There are old pilots, and there are bold pilots, but there ain't no old bold pilots". A good outdoor instructor always errs on the side of safety.

Yes, we too offer realistic wilderness survival courses. And sometimes, competent clients ask to be "tested" under realistic, brutally harsh conditions. This we have done, only after (s)he has completed a series of intense, on-going, and skill-developing activities which may last up to two years. Only then is the individual permitted to undergo one of our rigorous, intense, and challenging survival experiences.

During a grueling nine-day wilderness survival course, one participant was showing signs of extreme stress. He refused to leave early, since completing the programme was of vital importance to him. This person was offered some emergency food we always carry with us. At first, all assistance was refused. Only after some thought-provoking dialogue did he eventually consume the jerky. Days later, during our debriefing session, he chastised us for "forcing" him to cooperate. Group members gently reminded him that he was alive largely due to the staff's efforts in "forcing" him to listen to sound advice. The cost of losing someone's life simply to complete any survival course is much too expensive and not worth the price!

Sending a client to pit himself against Mother Nature is a fool's errand, since the bush is entirely neutral; it won't help you, but neither will it harm you. True survival courses teach individuals to work with nature, not against her. In the wilds, sustaining life is indeed a difficult task; materials needed for food, shelter, and firestarting could be hard to find. However, once the student is taught to "read" nature's signs, (s)he'll learn how to predict the weather, where animals may be congregating, how to forage for wild edibles, and which materials are required to build an effective shelter or start a fire.

And what of the other eleven participants? Why did they not intervene, demanding water for Dave? Nothing was forthcoming, even when someone stated "... I became concerned knowing that delirium happens when dehydration becomes severe."

Were they so wrapped up in their quest that nothing else mattered? If so, they were not participating in a wilderness survival course; they were simply completing a tragic endurance test.

Realistic survival courses teach people to work together, to assist each other, to share work loads, to look after each other, to act in a communal fashion, and to distribute physically demanding tasks. The individual becomes a focused team member, since surviving is a difficult, onerous task. Only when working in a cooperative model do unending and ongoing tasks get done. This is how we teach wilderness survival skills.

Matches, sleeping bags, knapsacks, tents, portable stoves, cups, and flashlights are not permitted in our standard survival courses. In the advanced wilderness survival sessions, even knives and ponchos are taken away, since we encourage participants to conceptualize and use what the environment has to offer. We teach our clients to work with Mother Nature, as well as with each other. This is the essence of survival training.

In this type of learning environment, the group would not have permitted Dave to dehydrate; they would have intervened.

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