

# EMR:

## Local unit comes to the rescue saves snowbound mountaineers

Jim Blanchard, Dale Moon and Pat Stearns struggled to walk in the 80 mph winds on the North Sister, carrying their 40-pound packs across the snow and loose rocks.

Stearns cried out briefly and his friends looked to see him blown 15 feet from where he was a second earlier. He picked himself up and the slow pace continued.

The next day, Steve Pitts and Moon climbed into a National Guard Huey helicopter piloted by Colonel Bill Gottlieb. They had spent another frustrating day without locating the small aircraft that had crashed somewhere near the North Sister or Tenas Lakes.

As the helicopter flew back to a base camp at McKenzie Pass, a rare emergency radio transmission came through. A storm was heading straight up the McKenzie Valley.

Gottlieb looked up from his controls and saw the blanket of clouds heading toward the craft. He veered the helicopter around to fly instead to Redmond, going back over the North and Middle Sister. He was already tired from negotiating the winds, gusting up to 100 mph, over the mountains.

Quiet prevailed. Gottlieb began to pound his fist on the instrument panel. Pitts stared at the experienced pilot's unusual action.

The gas gauge was not working.

The aircraft climbed to a higher elevation so they could autorotate to a landing if the gas ran out.

They never needed to, but the incident made worse days of frustration for Eugene Mountain Rescue members as they searched in fierce September weather for the light plane, its pilot and three passengers.

The plane was reported missing on Thursday, Sept. 6, by the Seattle FAA control center which had lost radio contact with the plane's pilot. The center notified Lt. Howard Kershner of the Lane County Sheriff's office and the National Guard Salem headquarters.

The guard dispatched a Mohawk aircraft to fly over the area and attempt to pick up transmissions from

an Emergency Locator Transmitter (ELT) located on all aircraft.

The plane's specialized equipment picked up the signal, but it echoed off the steep rock walls in the area and no exact fix could be made on the location of the downed plane.

Notified that the plane was in Lane County, Kershner dispatched Sheriff's Deputy Lonnie Henderson to coordinate a search by a posse and EMR was asked to provide volunteers to the search.

EMR was founded in 1968, as an offshoot of the Obsidians climbing club, as a specialized mountain rescue team.

Fifty volunteers make themselves available and the team has been vital in searches, rescues and body recoveries since its existence. This year, besides the North Sister rescue, they have rescued a woman who dislocated her hip during a cross country ski trip and a sheep which fell down into a steep gully.

On Friday following the crash the first of two teams of EMR members set out to search. Jim Blanchard, Dale Moon and Pat Stearns set out up the North Sister. The second group climbed on Saturday.

In the meantime, forest rangers and others set out on horseback and four-wheel drives while the National Guard provided helicopter support to the climbers.

Continuous fog hampered all efforts to sight the aircraft.

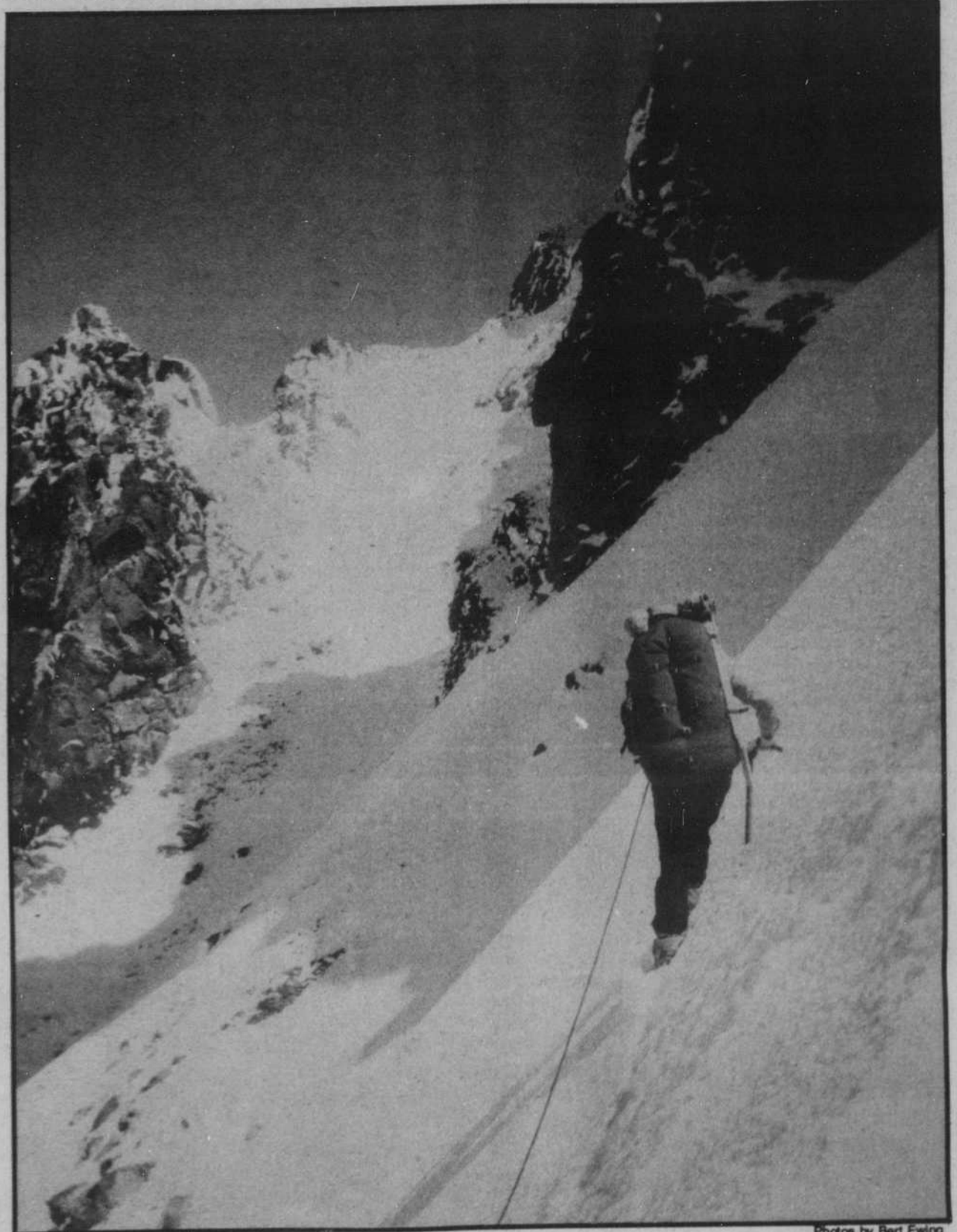
Each search team was equipped with a receiver to pick up the ELT signals. Like the Mohawk, they did pick up the transmissions, but the signals came from all directions after the mountainous terrain was finished playing its havoc.

The winds strained the searchers' and pilots' physical abilities.

Finally, Henderson called off further searches that Saturday because of the hopeless weather. All returned to the base at Frog Camp for food and sleep.

Sunday, the searchers spent a tense day at the camp. No expeditions were possible because of the continuing bad weather.

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Photos by Bert Ewing

Struggling against the ice and wind of the North Sister, three members of the Eugene Mountain Rescue squad make their way toward the crash site of the small aircraft. After several fruitless attempts, Jim Blanchard, Dale Moon and John Rich found the wrecked plane,

which was lodged between two rugged peaks. The pilot and three others aboard were killed in the crash, so the trio did the only thing they could, and secured the plane to the mountain's slope in hopes of later retrieving some of the parts.

