

'We tried to save each other'

Survivors talk about a tragic incident in July 2021

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East Oregonian

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part feature. Look for the conclusion in the Baker City Herald next week.

PILOT ROCK — One day last July, three longtime friends headed to the mountains to cool off in a swimming hole. They never imagined one of them wouldn't make it home.

The young men — Tyler Carter and Braydon Postma, both 23, and Cody Watson, 21 — had a close-knit friendship. They'd bonded as young boys in Pilot Rock, playing ball, tag and climbing on the jungle gym. In later years, they hunted and hiked in the mountains, tubed in McKay Reservoir, participated in sports and played competitive games of Call of Duty: Black Ops II.

Basically, Carter said, "We were brothers."

The tragic adventure began last July 1 on a sunny afternoon. The three waited until Watson got off work and then rode in Postma's pickup about 10 miles south of Pilot Rock into the mountains. The destination was a picturesque spot they'd visited dozens of times — a swimming hole on West Birch Creek above a cascading waterfall that spills into a steep rocky canyon. They parked and walked about two miles to a deep pool where they swam, talked and took photos and videos. The rocks near the edge of the waterfall were slippery with moss.

What happened next is both a blur and a succession of still frames in their minds.

"I fell first," Postma said. "Cody tried to save me. Then Tyler tried to save Cody."

Carter described the moment even more simply.

"We tried to save each other."

All the men survived the initial fall, but Cody Watson would die before help could arrive.



Sharon Gaines/Contributed Photo

Cody Watson, pictured here during a bowhunting trip, was injured in a fall July 1, 2022, near Pilot Rock, and died before rescuers could save him from a narrow canyon. Watson, a member of the Oregon Army National Guard, loved outdoor activities and planned to become a military pilot.

To honor Watson, Umatilla County's Search and Rescue Foundation received a \$5,000 donation last week in his name from the Blue Mountain Insurance Professionals presented at the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners meeting. Joined by Watson's mother and grandmother, Scott Sager, of BMIP, spoke to the commissioners about Watson.

"Cody was a sergeant with the National Guard," Sager said. "He was a very inquisitive, inspiring and motivated individual. He was on his way to a dream of being a military pilot. He died that night on that mountain."

Watson's mother, Holli Hill, presented the \$5,000 check to three SAR members in attendance who wrapped her in a hug. The money likely will go to the county's new SAR foundation to help purchase a lightweight rope system to help with extractions in steep terrain like the ravine on West Birch Creek.

Aftermath of the fall

After falling, Postma remembers landing in shallow water and a rocky creek bed, Watson hit nearby and Carter fell into deeper water on his stomach with his head submerged. He appeared unconscious. When Postma flipped him over, he felt relieved as Carter took a breath.

The trio attempted to make sense of what had just happened.

"We were dazed and confused," Postma said. "There was so much adrenaline."

They took stock. Carter had two collapsed lungs and his glasses were gone. Postma had a broken right leg and pelvis. A bone stuck out of his arm. Watson had the most injuries.

"His leg was completely shattered," Carter said.

Postma and Watson, both members of the Oregon Army National Guard, started thinking strategically. Watson needed a tourniquet



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Holli Hill, mother of Cody Watson, receives a hug March 16, 2022, after presenting a \$5,000 check to representatives of the Umatilla County Search and Rescue at a Umatilla County Board of Commissioners meeting in Pendleton.

on his leg. They decided that Carter should hike out.

Before leaving, Carter used his shoelaces and a stick to splint Watson's leg and fashion a tourniquet. He stared up at the sheer rock walls and decided to head down the creek to find a better way up and out of the ravine. He planned to hike back to the pickup, get his cellphone and call 911. As twilight faded into inky blackness, he realized that this wouldn't be easy. As he walked, carefully avoiding the edge, he remembers feeling lost. Finally he opted to wait until dawn to get his bearings. He worried about his friends down in that hole since they were likely cold with the mist of the waterfall constantly blowing over them. After dawn, he made it to the pickup.

He grabbed a rock and broke the window of the pickup, found his cellphone and called 911, telling the operator that he and his friends had fallen off a

waterfall and had serious injuries. The next call was to his mother, who spread the word to the families.

Search and rescue operation begins

A little after 9 a.m., SAR supervisor Sgt. Dwight Johnson got a call at home that three men had fallen about 50 feet into a deep, brushy canyon. One had hiked out and two lay injured at the bottom, one with a tourniquet on his leg.

Johnson began gathering resources.

"Our unit is all volunteer," he said. "Our key rope guy wasn't available so my next call was to Union County for mutual aid. They have more rope-trained people than we do."

Johnson activated Umatilla County's SAR unit, then requested a Black Hawk helicopter from the National Guard with the ability to hoist people from narrow, hard-to-reach places.

"We knew a litter pack out would be difficult (in that terrain)," Johnson said. "It's one of the hardest things to do. All the helicopters (crews) were off on a holiday."

It would probably take five hours. Johnson ordered the flight anyway. The helicopter soon would head to Pilot Rock from Salem.

The list of responders grew. LifeFlight, Pilot Rock Fire Protection District, Pendleton Fire's rope rescue and ambulance personnel, U.S. Forest Service fire crew from Ukiah, a Forest Service short haul helicopter, Union County's rope team and Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 Chief Scott Stanton who ran the operation along with Johnson.

In the canyon, sleep evaded Postma and Watson. They spent the night trying to stay warm, talking about family and friends and wondering if this would be their last conversation.



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