

Survivors describe cold night in the canyon

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Editor's note: This is the second story in a two-part series about three young men who headed to the mountains south of Pilot Rock on July 1, 2021. Part 1 was published in the April 2 issue. Their destination was a swimming hole on West Birch Creek above a cascading waterfall. Braydon Postma, 23, was the first to slip on a mossy rock near the edge of the waterfall. Cody Watson, 21, tried to save him but also slipped, followed by Kyler Carter, 23. All three initially survived the fall into the rocky canyon. Carter, with two collapsed lungs and missing his glasses, hiked out for help.

PILOT ROCK — Braydon Postma and Cody Watson lay on their backs on a bed of cold river rock. Postma had a broken leg, pelvis and arm. Watson's leg was shattered.

The two men and their friend Kyler Carter had fallen about 50 feet from a swimming hole above a waterfall and landed in the shallow, rocky creek bed below. As dusk turned to dark, they talked. Their rescue, they realized, was not assured.

Carter, with injuries to his lungs and the loss of his eye-glasses, had gone for help.

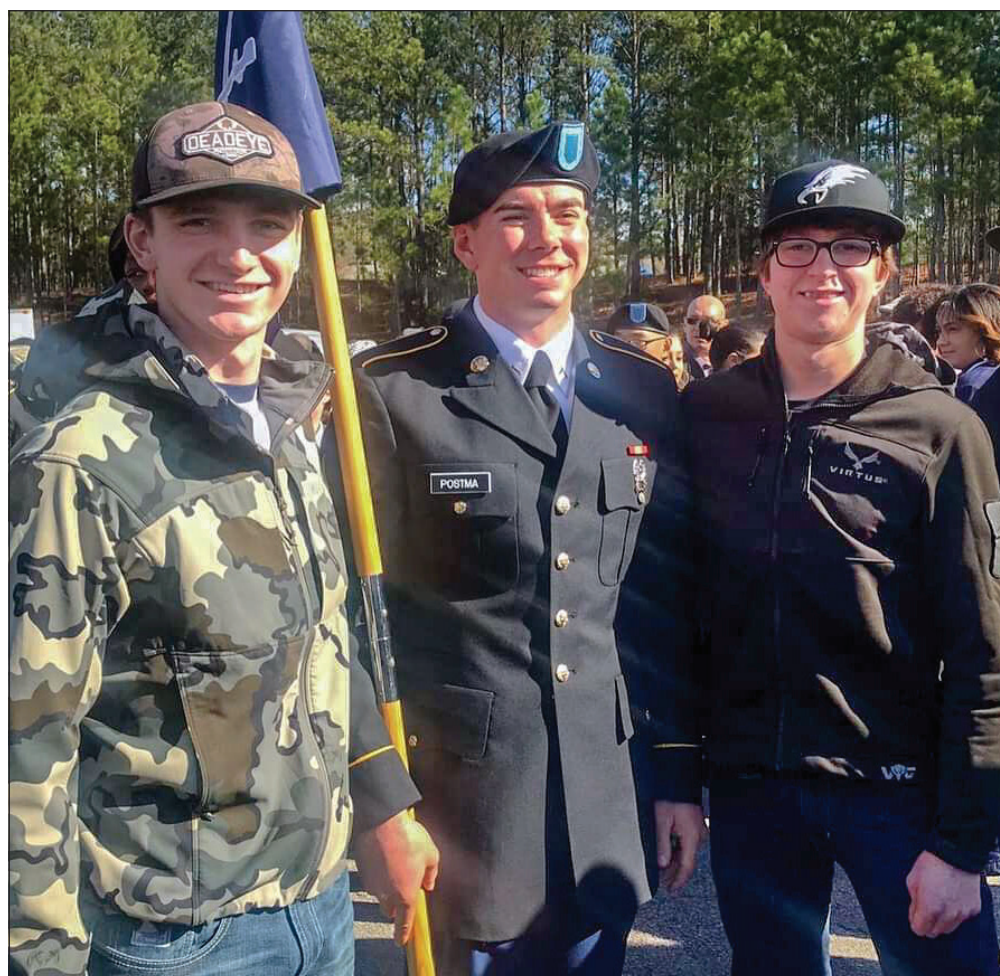
"Cody and I didn't know if Kyler had internal injuries or something," Postma said. "As much faith as we had in him to do it, we didn't know if he'd make it."

The men, not able to move and separated by the creek, realized their situation was dire. They concentrated about what was important.

"We talked about family," Postma said. "We said we loved each other. Cody talked a lot about how he loved his mom and his brothers and sister. He talked about how much he loved his friends, and Kaybob and me."

"Kaybob" was their nickname for Carter. At one point, Watson half-joked that it was so cold from waterfall mist that he wished he could come over and snuggle. Both men cracked up.

After the sun rose high enough to shine into the canyon and warm the air, they de-



Mary Otteson/Contributed Photo
Longtime friends Cody Watson, Braydon Postma and Kyler Carter pose for a photo after Watson and Carter surprised Postma at his bootcamp graduation in January 2019.

cidated to close their eyes. "Let's just get some sleep while we can," Postma remembered Watson saying. "I think that was the last thing he said."

Help arrives

Midmorning July 2, Postma heard voices above him. His voice was hoarse from yelling back and forth to Watson, but he grabbed a stick and banged it loudly on the ground to attract attention. About half an hour later, Postma's father Adam Otteson appeared along with Carter, who had decided to return despite his injuries because of worry about his friends. Otteson rushed to the site after learning about the fall. Postma couldn't see Watson from where he lay, but he and Carter soon learned their friend was gone.

"It was pretty terrible," Postma said.

Paramedics reached the spot and attended to Carter's and Postma's injuries. A U.S. Forest Service fire crew from Ukiah dug trail to the bottom and

created a helicopter landing zone. Another team devised a system of ropes in case a helicopter rescue wasn't possible. A National Guard Black Hawk hoisted the two men from the canyon bottom and flew them to St. Charles Medical Center in Bend.

Saying goodbye

Postma spent almost two weeks in the hospital while Carter was released to heal at home. Holli Hill postponed her son's memorial service several weeks until both friends could attend.

On that day, three busloads of soldiers from Watson's National Guard unit in the Willamette Valley arrived in their dress blues, bringing with them a Howitzer with the name Cody imprinted on the barrel. Postma, a helicopter mechanic with the aviation unit in Pendleton, said members of his unit also attended. Many had gotten to know Watson, who was planning on joining the unit after flight school.

Those who knew Watson can't quite believe he is gone.

"Cody was an exceptional young man," said Sharon Gaines, his grandmother. "Truly. He was our cornerstone."

It's been a rough year for the family. Holli's husband Kyle Hill died in September 2020. The day of Cody's accident was Holli and Kyle's first wedding anniversary since Kyle's death.

"It was a beautiful hot summer day," she said. "We were supposed to be camping in the mountains. All three of those boys were supposed to be going to my camp for the weekend."

Sharon's husband Gene died this fall. As a boy, Cody and his grandfather spent a lot of time tromping around in the woods together, Sharon said. "I'm sure they're in a duck blind somewhere in Heaven telling stories."

Gratitude to responders

Gaines, an insurance agent and member of the Blue



Sharon Gaines/Contributed Photo
Cody Watson sports a sharpshooter medal he won in March 2020, while deployed in Qatar.

Mountain Insurance Professionals, which recently donated \$5,000 to Umatilla County Search and Rescue, thanked the people who responded to the fall.

"What most people don't understand is that these people are volunteering their time to put themselves in harm's way to help our fellow citizens when they're in a bad situation," she said. "It's a huge county that goes from the desert to the mountains and everywhere in between."

Carter and Postma also expressed gratitude to first responders.

"Search and rescue did a really great job," Carter said. "They worked as a team. It took a while for them to get down there, but that's because of how hairy it was. They assisted us all the way through."

"It was very challenging," said SAR Supervisor Dwight

Johnson, who organized much of the rescue operation. "It was a narrow area, very hazardous."

Not being able to rescue Watson still bothers Johnson even though he knows responders did all they could.

"It wasn't the outcome I wanted," he said.

Carter still grapples with guilt about not getting to the pickup faster despite his injuries and lost glasses. Gaines rejected that notion.

"The first time he saw me (after the fall), he said, 'I'm sorry I failed,'" Gaines said. "He didn't fail in any way. He was heroic."

Postma has returned to work and recently started running again. But even as his body heals, his mind often strays to Watson.

"Nothing will ever replace him," he said. "Part of Kyler and I died up there with him. That's just how it'll always be."



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