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After bad fall, Spot comes to the rescue

DANGER: A caretaker at a remote lodge is saved by his mom's high-tech gift.

By CRAIG MEDRED
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When 72-year-old Mike Brady rose from the fog of unconsciousness Jan. 4, he was alone on the ground outside a sauna in one of the most remote sections of Alaska with the thermometer hovering dangerously near 30 degrees below zero.

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He couldn't move.

The nearest help was about 50 miles to the north and out of reach in the isolated community of McCarthy.

Eventually, he would come to be rescued by the latest in gee-whiz technology -- a personal satellite communicator given to him by his concerned 98-year-old mother.

But in those first moments there on the ground near Ultima Thule lodge in the heart of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, he wondered if he would live.

A 50-year Alaskan, a man who had previously wintered in a cabin along the remote West Fork Delta River in the state's frozen Interior, Brady knows the deadly nature of subzero cold. Even as he struggled to gather his senses, he realized that if he stayed on the ground the cold would start to pull the life out of his body.

In tens of minutes, he would be weakened by hypothermia. In hours, it would kill him.

All because of a stupid slip.

"I fell down off the steps," he said.

He doesn't know if this was an accident or if he'd inhaled enough gas from walking through the exhaust of a nearby generator to be partially disabled by carbon monoxide. He was, he said, feeling lightheaded before the slip.

Then he was on his back on the ground, shaking the stars out of his eyes.

"When I woke up, I was in a little depression," Brady said. "I couldn't move at all."

His back hurt. He thought he might have injured it seriously in the fall. But that really didn't matter.

He knew that if he didn't force himself to get up and get into the cabin, he was a goner.

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He got up. He stumbled inside.

Luckily, he said, when he went down to the sauna from a nearby cabin to start the little Honda generator to charge batteries for a satellite telephone, he had thought to bring a bucket of wood shavings spiked with diesel fuel.

Now, he stuffed those shavings into the firebox of the wood stove. His fingers, he said, weren't working well enough to hold any of the matches in his pocket, but he managed to get a fist around a whole handful.

He struck them and threw the fire into the stove. The wood shavings ignited. He threw in some wood on top of them.

SPOT SENDS HELP

Fire crackled to life.

"If I couldn't have got that fire going," Brady said, "that would have been it."

As the fire burned, he knew he would live, but he remained in significant pain. He pulled himself up on a bench in the sauna and rested there for an hour, he said. His back didn't feel any better. If anything, it felt worse.

He decided the smart thing to do would be to call help.

He stumbled out of the sauna, pointed his Spot Satellite Messenger at the southern horizon, and pushed the button marked "911."

High above the planet, a satellite picked up the signal, complete with the GPS coordinators for Brady's position, and relayed it to the GEOS International Emergency Call Center in Houston, Texas. Dispatchers there notified the Alaska National Guard in Anchorage.

Within tens of minutes, a rescue helicopter was airborne and on its way.

Torin Roher, a spokesman for Spot's manufacturer, said the subsequent rescue was a first documented for the new, pocket-size, \$200 device that was released two months ago.

Though the company warns that Spot might not work everywhere in Alaska -- the device needs a line-of-sight connection to satellites in orbit above Earth's mid-latitudes -- it proved invaluable for this one caretaker at a lodge in Alaska's largest and, arguably, wildest national park.

Not only did Brady use it to call 911, he had been using it regularly, he said, to send a message to his brother, Terry, back in Anchorage saying he was OK. Spot can send a preprogrammed "OK" message or a personal, non-911 "Help" message to friends, relatives or others.

Mike said his brother and his mother "wanted me to turn it on twice a week, Thursday and Sundays, to check in."

Terry had been getting regular OK messages from Mike on his computer since the latter settled into the lodge as caretaker back in November.

Mike, who is developing his own remote property along Big River near McGrath, said he took the caretaker's job there because lodge owner and pilot Paul Claus offered him a great deal. Claus flies a big load-hauling Turbo Otter aircraft and offered to haul Mike's freight to Big River in exchange for his overseeing the lodge for the winter.

MIRACLE IN AN HOUR

Mike thought he would spend what is for him a pretty normal winter all alone in the Bush.

He never thought he would have need to push the panic button on a new, high-tech satellite communicator, but he said it was pretty miraculous what happened when he did.

Within about an hour, he said, a helicopter from Kulis Air National Guard Base was settling onto the airstrip at Ultima Thule to pick him up.

"I was feeling pretty good by that point," he said. "I was able to walk. I felt a little guilty."

Pararescuemen on the helicopter checked him out, concluded his hypothermia wasn't life-threatening, then loaded him up for a flight back to the Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage.

Doctors there thought he was OK too, but Mike said when he got up, "the next day I couldn't get out of bed."

Subsequent X-rays revealed a fractured vertebrae in his back, but doctors can't tell exactly when

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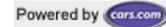


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he broke it. Mike was recovering at his brother's home in Anchorage last week.

"I'm still working off some problems," he said, but happy to be alive.

And mightily impressed with Spot.

"It's a pretty neat little deal," he said.

Find Craig Medred online at adn.com/contact/cmedred or call 257-4588.

WAY COOL: This hardly begins to touch how cool the Spot Satellite Messenger is, Craig Medred wrote in last week's column. To read that column, go to

www.adn.com/craig_medred

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