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Rescue in a Hawaiian Blizzard

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Editor's Note:

It's February, the time of year when Mauna Kea, the White Mountain, is most likely to sport the gleaming snowcap that gave it its name. After a Kona storm coats the mountaintop with drifts, it's common to see pickup trucks and SUVs making their way up the mountain's steep summit road, carrying sledders, skiers or snowboarders up to the gleaming summit, or just driving up for a load of snow to delight the children at home. But this is also the time of year when the mountain is at its most dangerous, and those making the summit pilgrimage need to be prepared for those dangers, as the following cautionary tale illustrates.

People don't usually associate the Hawaiian Islands with snow and ice, but when a sudden February storm blasted the summit of Hawai'i's highest mountain, six surprised sightseers got stranded in their blizzard-bound trucks. I was one of the people who went up to find them.

Mauna Kea rises so high above the island of Hawai'i - nearly 14,000 feet - that it gathers snow every winter, sometimes in fierce blizzards. Even without snow, the dormant volcano is strange and alluring, studded with colossal cones of red, brown and black cinder, each a towering summit itself.

To Native Hawaiians, the mountaintop is a temple for prayer and inspiration, a place recalling the ancient oracles who made the breathless climb so they could consult with the gods. In recent times, the dark sky above the volcano - free of glaring urban lights - draws international astronomers seeking answers to long held mysteries - "How did the Universe come to be?" and "Who else is out there?" Twenty domes and radio telescope dishes now crowd the cinder peaks.

Mauna Kea's might and mystery seem all the greater when Pacific winter storms blow across the archipelago, generating strong wet winds that blast the mountain. Dark banks of fog swirl about the summit cones. Temperatures plummet. Rain congeals into snow and freezing fog coats the observatories, guardrails and signs. This whipped-up icy mix obscures every familiar reference - sky, ground and all manmade things. You wonder if you've been swept through a time warp into an earlier epoch, when thick glaciers encased the mountain's upper slopes

The February 1994 Blizzard: Snow Play Turns Dangerous

One of the worst blizzards in memory struck in February 1994. In those days, the observatories were neither expected nor equipped to help mountain visitors in weather emergencies. Instead, the remote access road was posted with signs warning the intrepid to drive up at their own risk. Although observatory staff often jump-started stalled cars or pushed them out of snowdrifts, we were also busy with our own work and counted on visitors' common sense to keep themselves out of harm's way. None of us had mountain rescue in our job descriptions, nor the training to do it.

As one of the observatory guides, I had been called in to man a roadblock 2,000 feet below the summit. The decision to cone off the road had been made around noon, when we received the first word of an approaching storm. A short while later, the Mountain Superintendent (my boss) declared an official summit evacuation, and observatory staff began securing the domes to head down. Smaller snowfalls earlier in the week continued to draw scores of islanders up the volcano - to marvel at wintry landscapes, roll in drifts, and ski or snowboard down the beautiful white slopes.

New snow began falling as I stood at my post watching people play. Observatory technicians and visitors returning from the summit all reported worsening summit conditions. By late afternoon the islanders playing near the roadblock had gone home, and I considered leaving for supper at the astronomy base camp, 3,000 feet below me. Around 4:30 p.m. I asked another returning visitor if he had seen anyone else up top. He said he had earlier noticed two vehicles but had no idea if they were still there.

"It's getting pretty nasty," he added.

I waited in the thickening snowfall, but no one came. An hour and a half before sunset, the clouds darkened and the intensifying wind carried an ominous chill. Using the cell phone in my Ford Explorer, I called the Mountain Superintendent, Ron Koehler, who was coordinating the observatory evacuation from the base camp. I told him I dared not return for dinner until I was certain everyone had come down. He agreed to a check of the upper summit roads before we lost all daylight, but he felt strongly that I ought not go by myself. Departing observatory crews had already reported snow depths of three feet, and a long tradition held that on stormy ascents to the summit, no mountain staff would go alone. Ron said he'd drive up immediately.

Searching for Phantoms?

While I had previously worked as a ranger and fire fighter on Kilauea Volcano's active lava flows, the extreme conditions of blizzard and high altitude gave me pause. Hypoxia (mountain sickness) was a common ailment among visitors who rushed up from sea level too quickly. Occasionally they got woozy or even fainted during our summit tours, and I revived them with a whiff from an observatory oxygen bottle. The severe cold caused hypothermia in some people, including one young hiker pulled from deep drifts after rescuers punched through with our vintage 1958 Navy surplus Snowcat. Dehydration and extreme sun exposure were other hazards in this alpine desert far above tropical shores. Outbreaks of snow blindness had occurred from time to time after islanders came up for winter play without sunglasses.

Ron arrived twenty minutes after our phone conversation, carrying two extra shovels in his Chevy Blazer. He threw these into the back of my Explorer - already equipped with a blanket, first aid gear and a shovel - and hopped in. I put the truck into four-wheel drive, low range, and we headed up the slush-covered asphalt, our rear tire chains jangling. Foggy snowfall obliterated our view of the road and the only way to proceed was to follow the guardrails.

A mile above our barricade-still a thousand feet below the summit-the slush had turned to solid ice. Our chains grabbed well, and I continued up in second gear. But the steepest inclines-and the likelihood of snow drifts-lay just ahead.

When we hit the first of two fifteen percent grades, I had to drop the tranny into first, leaving us no lower gears should the vehicle start sliding on the ice. "If people are still on the mountain," I thought - certain in my gut that they were - "I hope they're not all the way up top." Though we didn't discuss it, we both knew how vast the summit area was, with miles of road to check.

The going got a little easier as we passed between two giant cinder peaks, including the thousand foot summit cone, Kukahau'ula. But once out of this protected passage, there was more ice and the first drifts. Hidden inside the flurries and fog lay yet another colossal cone, Poli'ahu, named for the Hawaiian goddess of ice and snow, whose presence that evening was quite apparent. One of the steel observatory domes came into view, then vanished like an apparition.

"There's a sharp curve ahead," Ron cautioned as we approached the main fork in the road, "but then we'll need our momentum to go up to the summit." I eased the Explorer around the corner, committing our search to that side of the mountaintop. The chains ground into the ice layer beneath a foot and a half of wind-whipped snow. A set of half-filled tire marks stretched out in front of us, then disappeared in the shifting white veil ahead: the trail left by our quarry or someone else lost up there?

"Stay in the tracks," Ron coached, his resolute face close to the windshield. "Keep it revved...don't lose your momentum...watch those RPMs, Tom...there's a ditch on the inside lane, be careful." His directions kept the two of us in sync, forming a bond of mutual confidence that would soon prove essential.

The higher we climbed, the deeper the drifted snow. When it reached over two feet - well above our axle - the Explorer started slipping sideways. With a half-mile of road and 700 feet left to climb, the ascent by vehicle was over. Still not certain anyone else was on the volcano, we considered our options - and the risk we now took with our own lives. At that moment, a hole in the fog passed swiftly before us, revealing for a split-second two vehicles far up the road.

On Foot into the Storm

We buttoned our jackets, pulled on our gloves, and stepped out into the blinding snow. I glanced at the drifts filling in around our tires and knew that we would have to search quickly to avoid getting stranded ourselves. We grabbed the shovels from the back and began to trudge up, not knowing what we might find. We could only hope the people were still with their vehicles.

Fortunately, Ron and I were both intimately familiar with Mauna Kea; I'd been a guide for five years and he'd worked on the mountain since 1976. We were strong men, both over six feet, and in pretty good condition. The slow trek up the fifteen percent grade was tough, not only because three foot drifts blocked the road, and snow and fog blew all around us, but because the thin air strained our lungs. I had foolishly smoked a cigarette down at the road block and already felt lightheaded.

Wind chills on the exposed slope dropped well below freezing. Biting cold froze our faces and leaked in through jacket zippers and cuffs; only our exertions kept us from hypothermia. Now and again, breaches

in the fog whipped by and we began to see additional detail in the distant scene ahead. In front was an old Toyota pickup with a camper top, and behind it, a brand-new Jeep Wagoneer. Dark shapes of people shadowed the inside of the pickup. We could only guess what condition they were in - we hoped conscious. Not until we trudged right up to the truck and the driver rolled down his icy window did we fully grasp the situation. Six people huddled inside, including the passengers from the stranded Jeep.

Any ambivalence we might have had about conducting the search dissolved. We knew we were the only thing standing between these people and their deaths, and that our own lives were now also at risk. No one at the base camp knew our exact location or that we were now alone on the mountain with six other souls.

"We got caught in this drift," the middle-aged driver mumbled, his reddish eyeballs floating freely under half-closed lids. He and his girlfriend sat on either side of a half-empty bottle of brandy jammed between their bucket seats. Their faces were already blue-gray from an unhealthy mix of alcohol, thin air and cold, and the girlfriend was dazed and incoherent. Both sat immobile, either oblivious to the danger of their predicament or frozen in helpless indecision.

Behind them, crammed into the covered truck bed, were the four people from the Jeep, including two children, all islanders from Honolulu unfamiliar with the mountain's moods. The youngest child, an eight year-old girl, had already vomited (a common symptom of advanced hypoxia), and the rest were "praying to the Lord" for help to arrive. Three wore tropical clothes, including shorts and rubber slippers!

The vehicles had gotten stuck in four-foot drifts at a hairpin turn 300 yards from the top - almost the exact spot where several years earlier a University of Hawai'i SUV carrying four Japanese astronomers and a telescope operator had spun out on black ice during an evacuation. "Jump!" the operator had cried, and they all leaped out just as the vehicle plummeted 700 feet off the summit cone.

How do we get all these people down?

A young man in his twenties emerged from the bed of the stranded pickup. "We got stuck in a drift near the top," he explained as Ron and I thrust our shovels into the snow that had trapped the truck. Wearing only a sweatshirt and jeans, and gesturing with naked, trembling hands, he explained how the other couple had come along and agreed to pull them out. They had cut away the safety belts of the rental Jeep to fashion a makeshift towline, but coming around the sharp turn, the pickup's back wheels had slid into the drift.

Ron and I decided that if we could clear the truck's tires, the group might be able to drive out on their own

steam. That would be easier than fighting the blizzard on foot and crowding them all into the Explorer - especially since the two apparently intoxicated people seemed already incapacitated. The young man helped us, first with the shoveling, and later at the wheel of the pickup while Ron and I pushed. Each attempt to free it failed. Although we knew that given enough time, we could liberate the pickup, I got an urgent message in my gut - get these people out of here before the couple passed out. I flashed on my all-too-recent memory of attempting CPR on a dead man at Kilauea's lava flows; I didn't want to go through that kind of calamity again, especially up there.

"Ron," I said, pulling my shoveling partner aside. "I think we better abandon the truck and get these people out of here - now!" It was a tough call. At least a hundred yards of blinding snow and fog separated us from our vehicle and the two who had been drinking looked like they could barely stand. The woman was in the worst shape; her face now purple.

Although disappointed, Ron went along with my feeling. We told the young man of our decision, and he and Ron began organizing the family from Honolulu. I dashed to the passenger side of the pickup to see if the dazed woman could get out on her own. When I opened the door, she came alive.

"Who're you!" she asked belligerently.

"We're observatory staff here to walk you off the mountain."

She forced her lids open and glared at me, her blue eyes strangely unfocused. "I don't want to leave! Go away!"

Her boyfriend had not yet lost all his senses, and he urged her to cooperate. "These people are trying to help us," he said obligingly, with surprising tenderness. "Do what they say." She sat back in the seat and fell silent.

Her boyfriend got out and wandered over to where Ron and the young man had begun the family's evacuation. Fortunately, all in that group were still alert and despite their tropical clothing, Ron was able to escort them back to the Explorer, their little rubber flip-flops crunching through the snow.

Meanwhile, I moved quickly to get the woman out of the truck, my heart full of fear that at any moment she would fall unconscious. I unsnapped her safety belt. Suddenly aware of her boyfriend's absence from the truck, she blurted out his name.

"Where's my man?" she cried.

Like her boyfriend, she wore a jacket and jeans, and her head was topped with a wool watch cap. But for some inexplicable reason, she had earlier removed her black motorcycle boots. Putting them back on seemed beyond her capability, and I inquired as to the whereabouts of her socks.

"I'm gonna marry that man," she said, still asking where he was.

Keenly aware of the passing time, I decided to put her boots on without stockings, a task easier thought than accomplished. As I struggled to squeeze each boot over her cold blue heels, she again grew agitated.

"I'm not leaving my truck!" she insisted, calling out to her boyfriend.

Ignoring her delirium, and by pure force of will, I coerced her bare feet into the boots, but this only added to her distress.

"Get away from me! They're trying to kill us!" she screamed.

"They're trying to save our lives," her boyfriend said. I was grateful for his relative coherence but I wondered how long it would last in the cold, high altitude.

Later, a veteran law enforcement ranger said he would have "cold-cocked the woman, then carried her off the mountain." But that option never occurred to me (even if I could have pulled it off) and I used the only tools I had-my size and strength, and a warm, reassuring voice to assuage her panic.

Somehow I managed to get her halfway out the door, but again she protested. It was not until Ron returned from transferring the family that together - and not without difficulty - we were able to remove her.

Now the snow-packed road!

To this day I don't know how we were able to sardine all six of them into the Explorer, but we did. Ron asked me to take the wheel so that he, familiar with every nuance of the summit road, could direct us. There was no way to safely turn around, so I'd have to drive down the snow-packed road backwards - assuming the Explorer wasn't already stuck.

Standing in front of us, veiled in blowing snow, Ron waited to motion directions to me. Still in low range, I popped the vehicle into reverse and eased the gas pedal toward the floor. The chains, already frozen to the ice, broke free and the Explorer moved downward. It was impossible to see anything but white in my

side mirrors, and six heads blocked the rear view through the cab. In the gray evening light with the storm in full force, I could see nothing but Ron's erect figure standing up the road.

White-blinded, but confident in my partner, I followed his motions, knowing that on one side of the summit road lay a steep drop-off and on the other an inside ditch that would surely strand us if we went there. Little was said by the victims during these tense moments; even the talkative woman, pressed up against her big-eyed boyfriend, did little more than mumble.

As we approached the road's junction, I turned too sharply and despite Ron's madly waving arms, came dangerously close to the ditch! I took a deep breath, and with his guidance, successfully used the widening of the junction to turn the Explorer around, pointing it downhill. Somehow Ron squeezed his tall frame into the cramped back compartment with the shovels, and we proceeded in low range, first gear, through the pass between the big cones.

Although the snow there had deepened during the forty-five minutes of the rescue, the heavily loaded Explorer was doing just fine. But one of the mountain's steepest grades lay just ahead. Years later this portion of the road would be speckled with a coarse finish to keep vehicles from sliding on its frequent pack of ice, but that day we could only count on our chains. Slipping and sliding, and in the lowest gears, we made it back to the deep slush now covering the area at the roadblock.

Allowed to Survive

A half-hour later, with Ron following in his Blazer, we arrived at the base camp. Already looking healthier at the lower altitude, the group filed out of the Explorer and into the astronomers' heated commons building. They helped themselves to food and hot drinks, and made phone calls to arrange transportation down the remaining 9,300 feet of volcano. The problem woman started grumbling about having to wait until after the storm to retrieve her truck. In all the tumult, no one had thought to grab her keys from the ignition, and she fretted that someone might go up through the blizzard to steal it. But at least the purple in her face was gone, replaced with an agitated red, so we didn't have to call a rescue helicopter to meet us somewhere down the road. Meanwhile, the Honolulu family remained almost mute as they sipped their hot drinks, trying to absorb what had happened to them.

I'm not sure any of those people ever realized that they were likely only hours away from freezing to death on Mauna Kea. As for Ron and me, I think we were just glad that it was over, and happy that we had been able to do what was required.

Later that night, we learned that two observatory construction workers had remained stranded, having

taken refuge inside the dome of the NASA Infrared Telescope. The next day a break in the weather allowed the road crew to open the way to the summit to free those men and retrieve the stranded vehicles. But the pause was short-lived. The blizzard resumed for two more days, sealing the summit under a thick cap of snow.

My love for Mauna Kea was not diminished by the life-threatening ordeal. Not only had I been allowed to survive, but I had also been given a chance to step through that time warp and experience the mountain in its primordial majesty, as it must have been before humans, ancient and modern, came to ponder their various notions of creation from atop those ruddy giant cones.

Tom Peek was a tour guide on Mauna Kea from 1988 to 1996. He now lives and writes near the summit of Kilauea volcano.

