



THE LAST SEASON

Randy Morgenson was legendary
for finding people missing in
the High Sierra....

Then one day he
went missing
himself.

ERIC
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THE LAST SEASON

ERIC BLEHM

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and
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Map



PROLOGUE

In the vast Sierra wilderness, far to the southward of the famous Yosemite Valley, there is yet a grander valley of the same kind. It is situated on the South Fork of the Kings River, above the most extensive groves and forests of the giant sequoia, and beneath the shadows of the highest mountains in the range, where canyons are the deepest and the snow-laden peaks are crowded most closely together.

—John Muir, 1891

The 1996 season...could be written in the chronicles of Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Parks as the one season we hope never to have to repeat. The most significant element in this history was the search for a fellow park ranger and friend, Randy Morgenson.

—Cindy Purcell, Kings Canyon subdistrict ranger, 1996

IF CHINA HAD BEEN ENDOWED with a well-placed mountain range like that of the southern Sierra Nevada, its Great Wall would not have been necessary.

The Sierra's formidable granite spires, snowy white most of the year, parallel the Pacific Ocean north to south for more than 400 inland miles. In the southern part of the range, the ramparts are highest and steepest, and a double crest—like a castle's inner and outer walls—is at once daunting and seemingly impassable. Between these walls of jagged peaks runs the mighty Kern River, an icy torrent twisting and cascading southward through a maze of lesser peaks and forbidding canyons to eventually irrigate the crops and orchards of California's San Joaquin Valley.

Though a few hardy souls cross these mountains in winter, most wait until the snow melts, when access to the high country can be attained via a network of routes that evolved over the centuries from threadlike, barely perceptible game trails. These ancient animal paths were widened slightly by the native populations, who used them as trade routes between the coast and inland valleys and deserts. They were later trampled by herds of domesticated sheep, and eventually blasted by dynamite, graded and manicured with pick and shovel for recreational purposes by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

There are few blacktop passageways running east to west in the entire Sierra range, and none running north to south for any distance. South of Yosemite National Park is a conspicuous absence of blacktop for over 200 miles. This wilderness area is concentrated within the boundaries of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks—two adjacent parks managed as one 860,000-acre unit. According to government records, Sequoia was founded on September 25, 1890, and is the second-oldest national park, after Yellowstone. Kings Canyon was originally founded on October 1, 1890, as General Grant

National Park—the country's third national park. It was renamed Kings Canyon on March 4, 1940. Some 70 percent of Sequoia's 402,510 acres is designated wilderness and nearly 98 percent of Kings Canyon's 461,901 acres is wilderness. The combined wilderness areas—essentially road-less backcountry—covers roughly 1,350 square miles.

Here the most traveled human thoroughfare is the John Muir Trail. Jokingly referred to as a freeway, it is rarely wide enough for two backpackers to walk shoulder to shoulder. The trail was conceived of by Theodore Solomons, who in 1884 dreamed of a remote trail atop the crest of the High Sierra. Construction began in 1892, and in 1938 the completed trail started at an elevation of 4,000 feet in Yosemite Valley and traveled 211 miles south over ten mountain passes before ending at the 14,495-foot-high summit of Mount Whitney. Overlapping the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail, which runs between the Canadian border and Mexico, the John Muir Trail is the highest, remotest, and most grueling segment of the Pacific Crest Trail.

More than 800 miles of trails wind their way up into the high country and are accessed by more than thirty trailheads on the east and west sides of the range. The western approaches, in contrast to the eastern ones, are gentler in slope—escalators versus elevators. Almost all trails lead eventually to the John Muir Trail. It is estimated that 99 percent of the visitors to the parks' backcountry stay on these designated tracks, which represent less than 1 percent of the parks' wilderness acreage. True to the idea of wilderness, 99 percent of the parks' backcountry is raw and wild. A craggy, high-altitude desert of granite and metamorphic rock dominates the country. But dotting the arid landscape of serrated ridgelines and glacial sculpted domes are remnants of the last Ice Age, or at least the last winter: striking sapphire blue lakes, ribboned inlets and outlets become creeks snaking across arctic-like tundra, giving drink to vibrant brushstrokes of meadows and forests, while swatches of green erupt like oases from the volcanic and glacially formed grayness. The contrast softens the hard, rocky vistas and coaxes ecosystems to take up residence amid the harshness of it all.

There are no year-round residents, at least of the two-legged variety. The only structures are summer ranger stations, many of which double as snow survey cabins in winter, and a handful of historical trapper cabins and mines that are slowly being reclaimed by the wilderness. The stations are located every 20 miles or so along the major trails and are inhabited from June to October by seasonal backcountry rangers, men and women who have served for decades as quiet guardians of this national treasure and the travelers who pass through it. They are a special breed, these elite few—dedicated, fearless, and determined—and their reasons for seeking the splendor and isolation of wilderness are as varied as the geography they protect.

In the wilderness, life is reduced to its essentials: food, shelter, water. A person can lose himself here, both figuratively and literally. With very little effort, one can escape almost everything and everyone associated with civilization.

But the reflection in a clear mountain lake of one highly trained ranger serves as a reminder: What one cannot escape is one's self.

CHAPTER ONE

MISSING

I shall go on some last wilderness trip, to a place I have known and loved. I shall not return.

—Everett Ruess, 1931

The least I owe these mountains is a body.

—Randy Morgenson, McClure Meadow, 1994

THE BENCH LAKE RANGER STATION in Kings Canyon National Park was still in shadow when Randy Morgenson awoke on July 21, 1996. As the sun painted the craggy granite ridgelines surrounding this High Sierra basin, a hermit thrush broke the alpine silence, bringing to life the nearby creek that had muted into white noise over the course of the night.

A glance at his makeshift thermometer, a galvanized steel bucket filled with spring water, told him it hadn't dropped below freezing overnight. But it was still cold enough at 10,800 feet to warrant hovering close to the two-burner Coleman stove that was slow to boil a morning cup of coffee. If he had followed his normal routine, Randy had slept in the open, having spread out his sleeping bag on a gravelly flat spot speckled with black obsidian flakes a few steps from the outpost. Hardly the log cabin vision that the words "ranger station" evoke, the primitive residence was little more than a 12-by-15-foot canvas tent set up on a plywood platform. A few steel bear-proof storage lockers and a picnic table completed what was really a base camp from which to strike out into the roughly 50 square miles of wilderness that was Randy's patrol area.

Before, or more likely after, the hermit thrush's performance—assuming he followed his custom before a long hike—Randy ate a hearty "gut bomb" breakfast of thick buckwheat pancakes with slabs of butter and maple syrup. Then began the ritual of loading his Dana Design backpack for an extended patrol. Methodically, he stuffed his sleeping bag into the bottom, followed by a small dented pot—blackened on the bottom—that held a lightweight backpacker stove wedged in place by a sponge so it wouldn't rattle. A "bivy" sack was emergency shelter. A single 22-ounce fuel bottle, a beefed-up first aid kit, a headlamp, food—each item was a necessity with a preordained spot in his pack.

He locked his treasured camera equipment, six books, and a diary inside a heavy-duty "rat-proof" steel footlocker that was "pretty good at keeping rodents out too," he'd been known to say. His only source for contacting the outside world—a new Motorola HT1000 radio, along with freshly charged

batteries—was zipped into the easily accessible uppermost compartment of his pack. This was the second radio he'd been issued that season; the first one had lasted only eight days before it stopped working on July 8. On July 10 he'd hiked over Pinchot Pass to the trail-crew camp at the White Fork of the Kings River, the location he'd arranged in advance with his supervisor if his radio conked out. A backcountry ranger named Rick Sanger had met him there with the replacement Motorola he now carried.

The least-used item in his pack was a Sequoia and Kings Canyon topographic map. He reportedly referenced it only while trying to orient lost or confused backpackers, or during a search-and-rescue operation. As longtime friend and former supervisor, retired Sierra Crest Subdistrict Ranger Alden Nash, says, "Randy knew the country better than the map did."

For nearly three decades, when someone went missing in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, standard operating procedure had included at least a radio call to Randy, the parks' most dependable source of high-country knowledge.

"Randy was so in sync with the mountains," says Nash, "that he could look at a missing person's last known whereabouts on a topographic map, consider the terrain and 'how it pulls at a person,' and make a judgment call with astounding results.

"One time, a Boy Scout hiking in the park got separated from his troop and couldn't be found before nightfall. Randy looked at a map for a few minutes, traced his thumb over a few lines, and then tapped his finger on a meadow. 'Go land a helicopter in that meadow tomorrow morning,' he said. 'That's where he'll be.'

"Sure enough, the Boy Scout came running out of the woods after the helicopter landed in that meadow. He'd taken a wrong turn at a confusing trail intersection and hadn't realized his mistake until it was almost dark and too late to retrace his footprints. The Scout was scared after a night alone, but he was fine.

"Randy," says Nash, "had figured that out by looking at a map. He told me where to go over the radio. John Muir himself couldn't have done that. But then, Muir didn't spend as much time in the Sierra as Randy."

A bold statement, but true. At 54, Randy had spent most of his life in the Sierra. This included twenty-eight full summers as a backcountry ranger and the better part of a dozen winters in the high country as a Nordic ski ranger, snow surveyor, and backcountry winter ranger. Add to that an enviable childhood spent growing up in Yosemite Valley—where his father worked for that park's benchmark concessionaire, Yosemite Park and Curry Company—and Randy had literally been bred for the storied life he would lead as a ranger.

His backpack loaded, one of the last things he would have done was tuck into his chest pocket a notepad, a pencil, and a hand lens that had been his father's.

At some point, Randy tore a page from a spiral notebook and wrote: "June 21: Ranger on patrol for 3–4 days. There is no radio inside the tent—I carry it with me. Please don't disturb my camp. This is all I have for the summer. I don't get resupplied. Thanks!"

He fastened the note to the canvas flap that served as his station's door, tightened the laces on his size 9 Merrell hiking boots, and pinned a National Park Service Ranger badge and name tag to his uniform gray button-down shirt. With an old ski pole for a hiking stick, he walked away from the station.

That afternoon, thunder rumbled across the mountains and raindrops pelted the gravelly soil surrounding his outpost, washing away his footprints and any clue as to the direction he had traveled.

IN SUMMERS PAST, Randy had anticipated boarding the parks' helicopter and flying into the backcountry with the giddy excitement of a child the night before Christmas. But this season had been different. The weather had grounded the parks' A-Star chopper for more than a week, which kept Randy and the other rangers on standby in what he called "purgatory."

Purgatory looked more like a UPS loading dock than it did an airbase at a national park. Dozens upon dozens of cardboard boxes were stacked haphazardly in waist-high piles waiting to be airlifted into the farthest reaches of the parks' backcountry. Each pile represented a ranger who had bought and boxed up three and a half months' worth of food and equipment that would last through the summer and into fall. Each box's weight was written in black marker adjacent to the ranger's name and the outpost that was its destination. Many of the veterans reused boxes year after year, so station names and weights had been crossed out numerous times, telling the story of their travels like tattered airline tags on the suitcases of frequent fliers.

Leaning against each pile of boxes was a backpack, maybe a duffel bag or two, and a crate of fresh produce—oranges, apples, a head of lettuce, a few avocados—the foodstuff that would be eaten first and missed the most on the rangers' tours of duty in the high country.

The men and women who loitered about wore hiking boots, running shoes, or the odd pair of Teva sandals, usually with socks. They were dressed in Patagonia fleece jackets, tie-dyed T-shirts, waterproof windbreakers, shorts—usually green, but sometimes khaki—worn over long underwear. The ensembles showed the duct-taped or sewn scars of prolonged use and were topped off by beanies, floppy hats, and perhaps one or two forest-green baseball caps with the embroidered NPS patch that betrayed their identities.

The average tourist might have pegged the group as a mingling of Whitney-bound mountaineers, dirt-bag climbers, and aging hippies. But make no mistake. These were America's finest backcountry rangers—Special Forces, if you will—disguised as an army of misfits. And most all of them were just fine with that description.

Not one of them wore the nostalgic cavalry-inspired hat so often associated with American park rangers. They weren't there to appear officious in head-to-toe gray-and-green uniforms; in fact, many of them were uncomfortable wearing a badge and carrying a gun. They weren't there to be wilderness cops, they were there to live and work in the wilderness, far from the roads their counterpart "frontcountry" rangers patrolled in jeeps and squad cars.

Some held master's degrees in forestry, geology, computer science, philosophy, or art history. They were teachers, photographers, writers, ski instructors, winter guides, documentary filmmakers,

academics, pacifists, military veterans, and adventure seekers who, for whatever reason, were drawn to the wilderness.

In the backcountry, they were on call 24 hours a day as wilderness medics, law enforcement officers, search-and-rescue specialists, and wilderness hosts; interpreters who wore the hats of geologists, naturalists, botanists, wildlife observers, and historians. On good days they were “heroes” called upon to find a lost backpacker, warm a hypothermic hiker, chase away a bear, or save a life. On bad days they picked up trash, tore down illegal campfires, wrote citations, and were called “fucking assholes” simply for doing their job. On the worst days they recovered bodies.

The administrators in the park service often refer to them as “the backbone of the NPS.” Still, they were hired and fired every season with zero job security. Their families had no medical benefits. No pension plans. And there was no room to complain because each one of them knew what they got into when they took the job. They paid for their own law enforcement training and emergency medical technician schooling. They were seasonal help. Temporary. In the 1930s, they were called “ninety-day wonders” who worked the crowded summer seasons.

Stereotypically, seasonal rangers were college students or recent grads taking some time off before starting “real” jobs. They would hang out in the woods for a few years and then move on, or start jumping through the hoops required to secure a permanent position in the National Park Service or Department of Interior. Sequoia and Kings Canyon, however, sucked in seasonal rangers like a vortex. More than half of the backcountry rangers who reported for duty in 1996 had been coming back each summer for more than a decade, many for two decades. Randy was the veteran, with almost three decades under his belt at these parks.

He was one of fourteen paid rangers budgeted to watch over an area of backcountry roughly the size of Rhode Island. Two of the rangers patrolled on horseback, the other twelve on foot.

These parks were two of the only national parks that still sent rangers into the wilds for entire seasons, and two of the few parks where these “temps” were more permanent than the “permanent” employees. Some of the park administrators called the SEKI (government-speak for Sequoia and Kings Canyon) backcountry crew “fanatics.” Most of them were okay with that also. They were okay with just about anything as long as the weather would hurry the hell up and clear so the helicopters could transport their gear into the backcountry before their fruit began to rot.

As Randy milled about, waiting for the weather to clear, he sent mixed messages to his colleagues. By most accounts, he was “in a funk,” “out of sorts,” and conveyed little excitement for the season to come. The parks’ senior science adviser, David Graber, considered Randy the parks’ most enthusiastic and dedicated expert for “all things back-country.” He felt something was amiss when he saw Randy briefly at park headquarters at Ash Mountain. “I saw his big bushy beard coming from a mile away,” says Graber, who had utilized Randy’s expertise for virtually every backcountry-related scientific study he had supervised as the parks’ ecologist for fifteen years.

They shook hands, and Graber—who had always counted on Randy for his passionate, curmudgeonly opinion on how the NPS wasn’t doing enough to preserve his beloved backcountry—brought up the ongoing wildlife study they had been compiling for years and the current study on blister rust, a fungus that was spreading through the park, infecting and killing white pines. Randy didn’t even entertain the topic. “Why bother?” he said with shrugged shoulders.

Graber at first assumed this blasé response had something to do with Randy's discontent with the park service, which was no secret. In the past, he'd conveyed that he felt backcountry rangers' duties weren't appreciated by the higher-ups in the park service—that they, like the backcountry itself, were being increasingly overlooked. “Out of sight, out of mind” was a popular cliché among the more veteran backcountry rangers, who said they put up with their second-class-citizen status in the National Park Service because of the excellent pay, a joke that would invoke a chuckle at any ranger gathering. It is an accepted truism that rangers are “paid in sunsets.” After covering bills, gear, food, and the gas it takes to get their luxury automobiles—rusting Volkswagen vans, old Toyota trucks, and the like—to park headquarters, where they'd sit and leak oil till October, maybe a few dollars would trickle into a savings account. They certainly weren't there for the money.

In truth, there was one financial benefit backcountry rangers could count on. Randy, and all rangers with federal law enforcement commissions, was eligible for the Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program, enacted by Congress in 1976 to “offer peace of mind to men and women seeking careers in public safety and to make a strong statement about the value American society places on the contributions of those who serve their communities in potentially dangerous circumstances.” In effect, the law offered a “one-time financial benefit paid to the eligible survivors of a public safety officer whose death is the direct and proximate result of a traumatic injury sustained in the line of duty.” In 1976, the amount was \$50,000; in 1988, that amount was increased to \$100,000.

After twenty-eight years of summer service for the NPS, this was the only employment benefit Randy was eligible for. Of course, he would have to die first. So, here he was approaching his thirtieth year as a seasonal ranger at Sequoia and Kings Canyon and there was nothing about his uniform to distinguish him from a first-year rookie. There wasn't even a pin to commemorate the achievement: such medals were awarded only to permanent employees.

Graber, who had made it a point over the years to at least write letters of appreciation to the backcountry rangers for their invaluable contributions to his studies, had routinely told them that their job satisfaction “would have to come from within themselves—that they likely wouldn't get any from the NPS.”

As Graber's conversation with Randy progressed, he interpreted the ranger's apathy and uncharacteristic lack of passion as depression. “His eyes were blank,” says Graber, “but I knew how to push Randy's buttons—he'd lobbied for meadow closures his entire career. I never knew anybody who took a trampled patch of grass more personally than Randy. And wildflowers—he was a walking encyclopedia. You could always get him going about flowers, so I brought that up, along the lines of ‘Nice and wet up high, good year for flowers.’”

“His response was ‘I don't find much pleasure in the flowers anymore.’”

That statement went beyond any contempt Randy held for the NPS. There was something else going on, but Graber didn't push the subject. “Randy wasn't the type to air his dirty laundry,” says Graber, who patted Randy on the back when they parted ways. “I hope you have a good season, Randy,” he said.

“You know, Dave,” said Randy, “after all these years of being a ranger, I wonder if it's been worth it.”

“That,” says Graber, “chilled me to the core.”

RICK SANGER WAS the tanned picture of a ranger in his prime—36 years old, 5-foot-11, with boyish good looks, dimples, and a quick smile. He’d quit a computer engineering job in 1992 and headed to the mountains for some healing perspective after the end of a stormy relationship. He was hired as a backcountry ranger on Mount San Jacinto in Southern California, where he stayed for three years before being hired in 1995 at Sequoia and Kings Canyon, parks he had been drawn to since his Boy Scout days.

This was Sanger’s second season as a backcountry ranger in Kings Canyon. At dusk on July 23, 1996, he donned a headlamp, shouldered his backpack, and struck out into the cold outside his duty station at Rae Lakes. Randy Morgenson—stationed twenty miles north on the John Muir Trail—had been out of radio contact for three days, and it was Sanger’s job to check on him. After a mile on the trail, Sanger’s legs settled into a slow, steady, piston-like rhythm. With the cascading roar of Woods Creek on his right and towering granite peaks framing the starry-night sky, he couldn’t believe he was getting paid to do this. God, he loved his job.

Sanger and Randy were a study in contrasts. Sanger was the young, gung-ho, clean-shaven newbie with a taste for adrenaline; Randy was the wise, weathered, and bearded sage of the high country who had pulled too many bodies out of the mountains to find any thrill in the prospect of a search-and-rescue operation. Sanger considered Randy a mentor for his uncompromising idealism in wilderness ethics. It had taken some time, however, to earn Randy’s respect. The year before, the old ranger had studiously ignored him during training. Even when Sanger exhibited his expert mountaineering skills—self-arresting a fall with an ice ax on a snowy practice slope with the added difficulty of going headfirst while on his back—Randy had remained, at least outwardly, unimpressed.

The two were teamed up months later on a search-and-rescue operation and were forced to bivouac overnight in a steep gorge. Until dusk, Randy hadn’t responded to Sanger with anything more than yes or no as they searched for a missing backpacker. The silence was undoubtedly enjoyable for Randy, but offensive to Sanger, who interpreted it as rudeness. As darkness settled, Sanger gathered some wood for a small fire. After an entire day together, Randy uttered his first complete sentence: “You’d do well to learn a little respect.”

Sanger was at once offended, confused, and angry. He had been trying to engage in conversation all day, and this was Randy’s reciprocation?

“And in what way have I not been showing you respect?” asked Sanger. “I’ve been wanting to work with you all day, to learn from you. I don’t think you realize the regard I have for you and your experience in these mountains.”

“No, Rick,” said Randy. “I’m referring to the fire.”

Randy moved his tiny backpacker stove closer to where Sanger sat, squatted beside him, and explained why Sanger should not build a fire—even though the wood he’d intended to burn was already dead; even though they were at a legal elevation for campfires; even though the blackened residue from the fire on the rocks and sand would be washed clean the next rain cycle. What gave

human beings—not to mention rangers—the right to alter the natural processes at work here?

Sanger respectfully scattered the wood he had gathered, and in doing so earned the regard he was seeking and kindled a friendship. A mentorship in wilderness ethics was born. Over the course of the night, Randy opened up and offered Sanger a rare glimpse inside the backcountry rangers' most notorious recluse.

On subsequent contacts, the bond had continued to grow. Sanger knew Randy was working his way through some issues—unfinished business with his father as well as a marriage that was on the rocks—but he also knew that the backcountry had amazing healing properties. Randy had even told the younger ranger, “There’s nothing a season in the backcountry can’t cure.”

Now, as Sanger hiked through the night toward Randy’s station, he looked forward to the ritual of boiling a kettle of water and catching up over cups of tea. When he had delivered a new radio to Randy at the White Fork trail-crew camp a couple of weeks earlier, Randy had seemed excited about the future and hadn’t exhibited any signs of the depression reported by other rangers.

At the White Fork camp, Randy had been reading *Blue Highways* by William Least Heat-Moon, an account of the author’s 11,000-mile road trip instigated by some setbacks in his life, including marital problems. The introduction to *Blue Highways* reads:

On the old highway maps of America, the main routes were red and the back roads blue. Now even the colors are changing. But in those brevities just before dawn and a little after dusk—times neither day nor night—the old roads return to the sky some of its color. Then, in truth, they carry a mysterious cast of blue, and it’s that time when the pull of the blue highway is strongest, when the open road is a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself.

Sanger was curious about whether Randy had maintained the level of optimism he’d expressed in the frontcountry when he’d half-seriously, half-jokingly told Sanger that he had been thinking about trying something new: “Maybe I’ll try my hand as a river guide or a racecar driver.” Sanger and another backcountry ranger subsequently dubbed him “Maserati Morgenson.” But Sanger couldn’t imagine Randy as anything but a backcountry ranger—and, selfishly perhaps, wanted him to stick around for a while.

True to his private nature, Randy hadn’t shared with Sanger, or any of his fellow rangers, the unwanted burden he had brought upon himself: the divorce papers his wife sent with him into the backcountry. He was a signature away from ending his marriage of twenty years.

Perhaps that was what Randy was thinking about when he’d told Sanger at the White Fork, “Few men my age have the freedom I’ve been afforded,” following with “The sky’s the limit.” But he never brought up the divorce papers. “He seemed,” says Sanger, “to be exploring the options for his future—and using me as a sounding board.”

When Heat-Moon got the idea to skip town, he wrote: “A man who couldn’t make things go right could at least go.... He could quit trying to get out of the way of life. Chuck routine. Live the real

jeopardy of circumstance. It was a question of dignity.” It certainly sounded romantic on paper, but it hadn’t been easy for Heat-Moon. He wrote of lying awake at night, tossing, turning, and “doubting the madness of just walking out on things, doubting the whole plan that would begin at daybreak.”

Was it purely coincidental that Randy had been reading this book, and seemingly dropping hints about starting a new life, just two weeks before he disappeared?

ON THE MORNING OF JULY 24, Sanger was head down and pounding the switchbacks up 12,100-foot Pinchot Pass—hoofing it “big time” to make the summit by 11:30 for the morning roundup, when park headquarters checked in via radio on all the backcountry rangers. The Pinchot Pass ridgeline was the border between his patrol area to the south and Randy’s to the north, but this morning its lofty perch would serve as a craggy granite radio tower from which Sanger would send a signal—unimpaired—to the Bench Lake station 4 miles north and 2,000 vertical feet below in the mountain-rimmed Marjorie Lake Basin. Randy, he reasoned, might be having problems reaching park headquarters far to the southwest, but would nonetheless be monitoring during roundup. From the pass, Sanger’s transmission would be loud and clear for anybody in the area.

Barely making it in time, Sanger transmitted, using Randy’s radio call number, 114.

“One-one-four, this is 115...114, this is 115.... Hey, Randy, you out there?”

He persisted, trying all the channels used by the parks. When he was certain nobody was there, he contacted the parks’ dispatcher, who confirmed that Randy was still unaccounted for.

The last time Randy checked in had been four days earlier, on Saturday, July 20, from Mather Pass, six and a half miles north of his station on the John Muir Trail. Eric Morey, the Grant Grove subdistrict ranger, had performed morning roundup that day and later recalled that Randy’s “radio communications were poor” and that he “might have said something about his radio batteries working poorly.”

But why, considering the parks’ backcountry-ranger safety policy, had it taken four days to get a ranger into Randy’s patrol area? In this case it would prove to be a breakdown in communications of a different kind. The protocol clearly stated:

Due to the remote locations that backcountry rangers are assigned...in order to provide for their safety...radio communication will be made daily...at 1130 hours. If communications cannot be made...it will be noted in the status book. If communications still have not been made within the next 24-hour period...the employee’s supervisor will be notified and further efforts to locate that ranger will be initiated.

But what if the employee’s supervisor—in this case Sierra Crest Subdistrict Ranger Cindy Purcell—was on vacation? There was no written policy for that scenario. And so “N/C” (no contact) was written next to Randy’s name on the backcountry radio log for three days in a row. Purcell’s supervisor, District Ranger Randy Coffman (the man who had written the protocol), was finally

informed of the situation by the district secretary, Chris Pearson. Pearson, who sporadically performed morning roundup, noticed that Randy had not been in contact for three days. Since Purcell was out of the park, Pearson felt “somebody should know.”

Coffman acted immediately and contacted Sanger late in the afternoon of July 23, during a prearranged time when rangers were expected to monitor their radios. It was then that Sanger’s patrol officially noted as a “welfare check” to Bench Lake, was initiated.

None of those details mattered to Sanger. As far as he was concerned, it was just another beautiful day to patrol in the high country. Checking on another ranger, Randy in particular, was the icing on the cake. The likelihood that anything had gone wrong was practically nil in his mind. And besides, Coffman, the parks’ preeminent search-and-rescue expert, couldn’t have been overly concerned; otherwise, he wouldn’t have sent Sanger nearly 20 trail miles on foot, knowing that he wouldn’t arrive at Randy’s duty station until the following day. The parks’ helicopter could have transported a ranger to Bench Lake in less than 30 minutes.

“I was no more concerned about [Randy] than I was when my ex-girlfriend’s cat stayed out all night,” wrote Sanger about his mindset that day. “Not in the sense that I don’t give a hoot about cats, but that I believe implicitly that cats can take care of themselves.”

Further illustrating Sanger’s lack of concern, he took advantage of the altitude to call his father on his modified ham radio, which was also a radio telephone, and wish him a happy birthday before he descended from the pass.

But before taking the first step into Randy’s patrol area, Sanger’s recent law enforcement training switched on. Despite his optimism that everything was okay, something heinous could have happened. If some threatening, potentially violent individual was in the area, Sanger reasoned it best not to approach the station in uniform. He changed into plain clothes and headed toward Randy’s station, hopeful that his precautions wouldn’t be justified.

As the trail passed the deep blue waters of Marjorie Lake, Sanger’s strides lengthened. Except for the cheerful banter of Clark’s nutcrackers darting back and forth from the tops of altitude-stunted lodgepole pines, everything was quiet. It was a spectacular day in the high country.

The trail leveled out in an alpine meadow and paralleled a creek for a couple hundred yards before intersecting with the Taboose Pass Trail, which was a rock-hop over the creek. A few yards later, a metal sign planted in the gravelly soil read ranger station. Along a barely perceptible footpath through some scattered lodgepoles, Sanger approached the tent casually.

“Hello, anybody home?” he called out from a distance.

Silence.

At the station’s door he read the note Randy had left four days earlier and did the math. If all went well, Randy should be walking into camp at any time. He relayed this to Coffman and suggested waiting until evening before starting a search. He was certain Randy would show up; in fact, he felt uncomfortable entering Randy’s private living quarters. But he did enter, per Coffman, to look for any clues—perhaps a patrol itinerary—that might shed light on the unaccounted-for ranger’s whereabouts.

Sanger reported back to Coffman that everything was in order inside the tent, and that no itinerary was present or mentioned in the station logbook.

An alarm went off in Coffman's brain. He consulted briefly with Dave Ashe, the acting Sierra Crest subdistrict ranger and Randy's supervisor the season before. Ashe knew Randy attracted bad radios like a magnet.

"I didn't want to rush into anything," says Ashe. "I just figured he'd show up on a trail if we started a search right then. I thought we should let the full four days play out first."

Coffman ignored Ashe's and Sanger's instincts to wait and checked the availability of the park's helicopter, known by its radio call number, 552. Within minutes, he had coordinated a flight plan for himself and a handful of rangers to rendezvous with Sanger at the Bench Lake ranger station.

While Coffman prepared his gear and made his way to the heli base, the park dispatcher attempted to contact three backcountry rangers: George Durkee, Lo Lyness, and Sandy Graban. The choices weren't random; Coffman knew that all of them were longtime friends of Randy and each was familiar with the Bench Lake patrol area. A handful of other rangers were subsequently alerted to the situation and placed on standby.

The radio communication was concise: Pack a backpack for three days and head to the nearest landing zone—a search-and-rescue operation was in progress for 114.

BACKCOUNTRY RANGER GEORGE DURKEE was removing a fallen tree from the trail switchbacks high above his LeConte Canyon ranger station when he got the call. The 6-foot-2 ranger with a distance runner's physique had become known as "The Commander" both for the high-water jumpsuit he wore during training and for his ability to bite his tongue and be the smiling, red-bearded diplomatic voice of the backcountry rangers. He describes himself as an "aging hippie who moved with the speed and grace of a creaky cheetah."

Genetically incapable of not inserting humor into almost any situation, Durkee had recently made himself "Sequoia Kings Canyon, National Park Service" business cards. The cards prominently displayed a flashy gold NPS badge with his name and the words "Park Ranger" centered above the slogan "Manly deeds, manfully done."

Despite his class clown tendencies, Durkee was a hardened veteran of the ranger ranks. In the early 1970s, he'd been known to "stalk the SAR cache" in Yosemite, where his career with the NPS began. The SAR (rhymes with car) cache was the quick-access search-and-rescue storage facility for emergency medical supplies such as backboards, ropes, litters...and body bags. Between 1972 and 1977, Durkee assisted in the recovery of more than twenty-five bodies. It was during this SAR junkie phase of Durkee's life that he'd met Randy, ten years older and at the time a Nordic ski ranger stationed out of Badger Pass, Yosemite's ski area. Their friendship was born of a mutual love of wilderness and a sardonic sense of humor.

Now 44, Durkee hadn't lost his taste for adrenaline, but it had begun to ebb and flow, depending on the level of the catastrophe. Same with his friendship with Randy, which only recently had become

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