

# Hard fall at waterfall has lessons

## Skill and dedication of rescuers, GPS credited in saving life

ADAM WALLWORTH ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

As Ed Cooley lay pinned below a waterfall in the Ozarks wilderness, he concentrated his thoughts on his 2-year-old grandchildren.

Photographs of Chloe Cooley and Jackson Khol “Jack-Jack” Williams now are taped just above his bed at St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa.

“I kept repeating their names,” said Cooley, a nature photographer. “And I prayed a lot.”

Surrounded by family and sleepy from medication, Ed Cooley, 49, recounted his 20-hour ordeal that began when he fell 30 feet from the top of a waterfall in the Richland Creek area of the Ozark National Forest. He shared his story Wednesday after his first round of physical therapy, which he joked “was one too many.”

He’ll need months of such therapy.

Cooley already has undergone several surgeries for bones he broke in the Oct. 15 fall. He’d hiked into the Newton County backcountry to photograph the falls, partly in preparation of the kickoff of a gallery he is opening with his wife, Faith Cooley, in downtown Rogers.

It was the kind of trip Cooley had made hundreds of times. He planned to hike into the falls, then hike back out and camp in his car. His supplies were limited: camera gear, rain jacket, waders, beef jerky and the Spot personal GPS beacon his wife gave him for Christmas.

Cooley carried the beacon for peace of mind, never thinking he would ever have to actually use it.

### THE FALL

About 2 p.m. on that Thursday, Cooley stood atop the rain-swollen Twin Falls, scouting for a place to take photographs and a way to get there. He was about a foot from the edge when soggy ground beneath him gave way.

Instinctively turning to his right, Cooley reached, trying to grab hold of something, anything, to keep his balance. But there was nothing, he said, demonstrating, as he grasped at the empty air above his hospital bed.

Cooley said the fall was instantaneous, making an effort to snap his fingers. He tumbled head over heels.

Cooley landed on his back with his backpack still on, wedged between a tree and a log. His right leg was badly broken and resting on top of his left leg, his foot pointing unnaturally inward. Cooley would learn later he’d also broken his pelvis and collarbone.

Blood poured from a gash over his right eye, down his face, so he couldn’t see. Still, it didn’t take long for him to pull the Spot beacon from his pants pocket, and he began pushing buttons, not knowing which would connect to 911. After pushing all the buttons several times, he said, he stuck the orange plastic box as high above him as he could and started trying to get to his backpack.

Cooley struggled to get into his pack, growing colder in the spray from the falls. He said it wasn't until he got his pack out from underneath him that he realized he was lying partially in water and the temperature was dropping.

The temperature in the nearby Deer community would drop to 41 degrees overnight.

Cooley had no way of knowing whether his signal had gotten through or if anyone was looking for him. He watched hours tick by on his wristwatch. As the night came without any sign of help, he said, he thought there would be no search until morning. By then it would be too late.

Expecting the worst but not willing to give up, Cooley did his best to keep warm. He ate beef jerky from his pack and used his rain jacket as a blanket, putting it on backwards, with the hood covering his face in an attempt to capture his own breath for heat.

When a rescuer's flashlight washed over his face, Cooley started yelling. Until then he didn't think he would survive the night.

"I was 94 degrees when they got me. How much colder do you have to be to call it a miracle?" Cooley said.

#### **'NEW BEST FRIEND'**

Members of a U.S. Forest Service crew were the first to reach Cooley. They arrived just before 9 p.m., moved him a short distance to the creek bank and covered him with their jackets. They built a fire to start warming him.

Cooley said Glenn Wheeler was the first emergency medical technician to arrive.

Wheeler "is my new best friend," Cooley said.

A volunteer with the Krooked Kreek Volunteer Fire Department, Wheeler is also a photographer. He said he and another photographer were returning to their vehicles after taking photos of Twin Falls when they ran into rescuers responding to Cooley's beacon about 4 p.m. Momentarily, members of the group thought Wheeler might have mistakenly activated his own Spot beacon, but they quickly realized that wasn't the case.

After swapping out his camera bag for rescue equipment, Wheeler said he went with one of three groups in search of Cooley.

By the time Wheeler reached Cooley, about 10 p.m., Cooley was in shock and had hypothermia, where his internal temperature was dangerously low.

Wheeler splinted Cooley's leg and bandaged his head. He could give him nothing for the pain. Wheeler said he removed Cooley's wet clothing and covered him with a Mylar space blanket, coats and other fabric.

Then it was time to wait again, Wheeler said. Not knowing the extent of Cooley's internal injuries, the rescuers couldn't move him until they had a backboard. It was another hour before the crew with the backboard arrived.

Once the rescuers loaded Cooley onto the backboard, they began the trek out of the woods. The closest place to land a helicopter was miles away, Wheeler said, so they started hiking, with six people carrying the board at a time.

Wheeler said there were about 14 people with them when they started moving. Those not on the board would work ahead clearing brush and marking the way. There was no trail, he said, and the woods were more treacherous because of the debris left from the January ice storm.

The crews took turns carrying Cooley and stopped occasionally to rest and regrip the board, or to light a fire, Wheeler said. In some places, the terrain was so rough they would have to pass Cooley hand-over-hand, Wheeler said.

When the going was relatively smooth, Wheeler said the group would try to press on for about an hour before stopping to light a fire to warm Cooley. In rougher patches, where they were afraid of dropping Cooley, Wheeler said they would stop about every 10 minutes and regroup.

Cooley said the trek out wasn't so bad, unless they had to tip him to his right side to navigate the terrain, which caused him great pain. Every time Cooley complained of pain, he followed with an apology.

### **RELIEF FROM PAIN**

The group kept trudging toward the command post in the dark, finally meeting up with a crew that included a friend of Wheeler's, paramedic David Eastep, about 4 a.m. Oct. 16, Wheeler said.

Eastep and his team brought bags of saline solution they kept inside their shirts to keep warm, Wheeler said. The men injected Cooley with the warm saline to help raise his body temperature.

Eastep also had morphine, Wheeler said, so they could finally give Cooley some pain relief.

The possibility remained that Cooley's injuries could be life-threatening, so another Forest Service team was working its way in on all-terrain vehicles, clearing old ice storm debris with chain saws, Wheeler said. Some time after the sun came up, he said, someone brought a Stokes basket, a litter that immobilizes the injured person and is easier to carry.

The four-mile hike ended around 9:30 a.m., when the group emerged from the wilderness and placed Cooley in a sport utility vehicle driven by a Newton County sheriff's deputy. The deputy drove to the closest place a helicopter could land, from which Cooley was flown to Washington Regional Medical Center in Fayetteville. It had been some 20 hours since that patch of ground he was standing on gave way.

Cooley remains grateful for his rescuers. But he offered one point of clarification.

"I weigh 175 pounds," Cooley said. "Somebody said I weighed 200."

Doctors expect Cooley to make a full recovery, but there were many things that went right after the rocks broke loose, his wife said.

Doctors have told her that Cooley is fortunate that his leg, which had bone sticking through the skin, was out of the water. That kept debris from contaminating the wound, Faith Cooley said.

The Cooleys' son-in-law Travis Williams said the family also has been told it's lucky Ed Cooley was pinned by a log.

Had Cooley been able to move, it's possible his pelvic fracture could have severed an artery, and he could have bled to death, Williams said.

Cooley said he has no doubt he will be taking pictures again as soon as he is able. But he'll think hard about whether he'll be going back into the woods alone again.

"That's a tough question," he said. "When it's in your blood you don't have much of a choice."

#### **ANOTHER RESCUE**

In little more than the time it took to rescue Cooley, many of the same people were responding to another call for help at Indian Creek in the Buffalo National River area.

Ricky Remington fell about 15 feet down a waterfall, stopping shy of a 60- to 80-foot bluff, said U.S. park ranger Karl Sommerhauser.

Sommerhauser said Remington wasn't as severely injured as Cooley, but because of where he fell, he had to be lowered down the bluff where a crew could carry him out. Sommerhauser said it took about 11 hours to complete the rescue.

Rangers with the upper district of the Buffalo River respond to three to five rescue calls a year, Sommerhauser said, though usually they aren't technical rescues like Remington's.

Wheeler was among the rescuers who responded to both calls. He said that the dedication of the people made the difference for both men, but especially Cooley. Cooley's was the most challenging rescue he's ever been on, Wheeler said.

More than a dozen emergency services agencies came to help Cooley, as did several volunteers, Wheeler said. They brought Cooley out of one of the most rugged and remote parts of Arkansas, he said.

"These folks stepped up in very difficult circumstances and made it all come together with the best results we could have hoped for," Wheeler said.

Faith Cooley said she is happy to have bought the GPS beacon and plans to get her husband a satellite phone for his future solo treks, which she said are inevitable. But it's not the technology she's most thankful for - it's the people who went in, she said.

"There's not enough good to be said about the people who rescued him," Cooley said.