

THE GREAT BEAR WILDERNESS DISASTER: Lessons in Team Learning

Wendy S. Becker
Shippensburg University
wsbecker@ship.edu

Michael J. Burke
Tulane University
mburke1@tulane.edu

Seven Team Decisions, Flight Operations & Search and Rescue Events
September 20–22, 2004

Mon Sept 20	
1:00 pm	Flight delayed; low clouds & obscured mountain peaks
3:00 pm	1. Pilot and chief-of-party make decision to take off in storm.
3:08 pm	Flight departs Glacier Airport en route to Schafer Meadows.
3:15 pm	Pilot reports through “the canyon” & “switching to backcountry frequency.”
	Pilot reports location as “Essex, inbound for Schafer.” Estimated time of arrival: 330.
	Forest Service employee observes aircraft flying above ridge top going west to southwest and hears pilot report “over Essex.”
	2. Pilot and chief-of-party disagree on plane’s location.
	Two bow hunters glimpse plane & hear airplane engine “laboring, then two pops, then nothing.”
About 3:30 pm	Fort Collins Dispatch Center attempts radio contact with negative results; begins radio and telephone search.
	3. Jodee returns to burning plane and rescues Matt.
	4. Matt and Jodee rescue chief-of-party Ken Good.
	5. Ken & Jodee convince Matt that team should stay at crash site.
Approx. 4:10 pm	Forest Service employee provides map of plane’s location to Forest Service dispatch.
4:45 pm	Search helicopter flies 200-300 yards from crash site.
Est. 5:25 pm	Aerial search suspended due to weather and obscured mountain peaks.
Est. 11:00 pm	Ground search called off for the night.
Tues Sept 21	
Approx. 7:05 am	Briefing conducted by Forest Service and Montana Aeronautics Division.
7:45 am	Air search resumed
Est. 8:00 am	6. Chief-of-party dies; Matt & Jodee decide to hike off mountain.
9:45 am	On route to assigned grid, helicopter flies Tunnel Creek drainage
Approx. 1:15 pm	Bow hunters report their sighting of plane; they direct Forest Service to general area where aircraft
Approx. 1:45 pm	Suspected aircraft wreckage spotted from ground by Forest Service.
approx. 2:00 pm	7. Unable to signal search and rescue, Matt & Jodee continue hiking out of the wilderness.
2:12 pm	Search helicopter confirms intense fire at site.
2:22 pm	Crash site confirmed with report of no survivors.
2:30 pm	Ground teams recalled
Est. 3:10 pm	Deputy Coroner Chuck Curry and Helicopter Manager/ EMT Hardy Delafield reach accident site
3:21 pm	Deputy Coroner observes aircraft consumed by fire; announces five fatalities.
Weds Sept 22	
Approx. 11:45 am	Sheriff, under sheriff and evidence technician transported by helicopter to accident site.
Approx. 2:30 pm	Matt & Jodee walk out of Tunnel Creek drainage onto Highway 2.

Exemplars of Dialogue and Reflection from Two Decision Points: Verbatim Quotes Related to Learning and Regulation

Staying at the Crash Site

Much confusion concerned whether there would be a rescue attempt. Although severely injured, Ken's knowledge and experience (35 years with the Forestry Service) was essential to the two younger workers:

Matt: I remember asking Ken about the rescue. And, you know, he assured us that there would be a rescue since we never made it to our destination, that they would know the plane was missing and that they would start a rescue effort that night. I was really concerned like what the probability was that that would happen, that they would find us. And he said, Yes, they will start the rescue, he was convinced that would happen. There wasn't much daylight left that night. But Ken, he had had a long career with the Forest Service, and a lot of knowledge about that stuff. So I asked him a lot of questions. And he gave me some confidence that we would be rescued.

Jodee: He was the chief of the party, so we were kind of looking to him to figure out what to do.

Discussion of this nature led to Matt, Jodee, and Ken staying at the crash site the first night.

Deciding to Hike off the Mountain

After Ken died, Jodee and Matt sized up their situation. No one was coming and conditions were deteriorating:

Jodee: Ken stopped breathing, and I took his pulse one more time and he didn't have a pulse. So I said to Matt, Matt, we need to go. We can't stay here. You'll freeze to death and I can't keep you warm... We won't survive another night. If they don't find us, it's not a risk we can take, because it was snowing and we didn't have any ground tarps to sleep on to keep us out of the wet rain – or wet ground... And so I said, Let's go, Matt.

Matt: Jodee and I were concerned about the rescue, that we didn't know if we would be rescued, if they would be able to conduct a rescue that day because of the weather, or even if they did try, if they would find the crash site. It was really cold, and we didn't want to just sit around there exposed to the elements. So we decided it was in our best interests to try and get help and do what we could. So we decided to leave.

In deciding on the direction to hike, transactive memory was accessed through individual reflection and discussion, contributing to the formation of a shared mental model or plan. Importantly, Jodee's questioning cued Matt to retrieve information from his discussion with Ken the night before Ken died. This knowledge formed the basis for Matt's ability to convince Jodee on the direction to hike.