



Surviving the Santa Fe Watershed 2003

As we started the drive up to Aspen Vista (the trail head that takes you to the Santa Fe SNOTEL site) our spirits were high. There was more traffic than usual that Friday morning, as the fresh powder that had fallen over night, the skiers out in droves to take full advantage of the ski slopes in the Santa Fe Ski Basin. Dan Murray and I had made arrangements earlier in the week to meet Rhett, a reporter with one of the Albuquerque television stations, for an interview that morning. The station wanted to video tape an on site interview with me and Dan measuring the snowpack.

As a matter fact, we had been up to this site several times earlier that week for other interviews, as the news media had shown a keen interest in the snowpack. On Monday of that week, Dan and I thought it would be a good idea to go up and make sure that we could get into the site. We had tried to take snowmobiles into the site but found that we were not able to traverse a steep wind blown slope about a quarter mile from the site. So we decided on a place where we would leave the snowmobiles and snowshoe into the site. On Wednesday morning we had visited the site with a reporter from one of the Santa Fe newspapers. The trip went as planned: we rode the snowmobiles to the location we had decided on earlier in the week, and snow shoed into the site. We ground truthed the pillow, conducted the interview and were back in Santa Fe in time for lunch.

On Friday morning, Dan and I left the state office before 7:00 am headed for Santa Fe to meet up with Rhett. Arriving at Aspen Vista we had to search for a place to park the truck and trailer because of all the skiers heading for the slopes. I opened up the back of the truck and we started getting the equipment ready for the trip up the mountain. We off-loaded the snowmobiles and loaded the sampling tubes, snow shovel, satellite phone and survival packs onto the snowmobiles. Rhett arrived a few minutes later.

Dan broke trail and I followed, with Rhett riding behind me on my snowmobile. The fresh powder made for great snowmobiling.

The trip up the mountain was typical...beautiful, but uneventful.

We arrived at the same spot we had stopped at on Wednesday. We parked the snowmobiles, put on our snowshoes, packed up the sampling tubes and started up the trail. After having gone a couple of hundred feet I realizing that I had left my survival pack on the snowmobile. I can remember looking back at the snowmobile

with the survival pack and saying to myself, "I won't need that, we will only be in for 45 minutes", and we continued up the trail. Hindsight is 20/20 - I should have gone back. This goes against everything that was taught in our annual NRCS Snow School. Not only did I decide not to go back for my survival pack, I also forgot to take the satellite phone that was in the snowmobile. I must have thought, "Hey we're going to be out in 45 minutes, we won't need the satellite phone either."

We arrived at the SNOTEL site. I opened the shelter and read the manometers, and Dan started putting the sampling tubes together. The reporter had started up the video camera and we started sampling and made note of the site conditions in the snow notes. I can remember telling the reporter that this is the most snow I have ever measured in New Mexico...80 inches plus. The reporter interviewed Dan and me, and wrapped up the interview with some more video. We completed the snow notes, locked the shelter, disassembled the sampling tubes, and set off for the snowmobiles and lunch in Santa Fe. Everything was going well.

When we started out, I noticed the snowshoe tracks we had made earlier in the week and decided to follow them. This would make the hike out that much quicker. As I followed the tracks, I could see that as the tracks started going into an open area they had been covered over by the recent snowfall. At this point I mentioned to Dan that I could not tell in what direction the tracks were headed, and that it might be better to follow the tracks we made coming in that morning. We started back tracking to the trail we had come in on. Then Dan noticed some more of the tracks we had made earlier that week, and we agreed to follow them. We followed the tracks until they began to fade, not really giving it much thought. We continued on, even though we were not able to see where the tracks were going. After a couple of hundred feet the tracks were gone. I continued on, using "dead reckoning" to pick my way through the trees back towards where I thought the snowmobiles were. I can remember coming to the edge of a very steep slope and saying to myself, "You need to be carefully here!" So I anchored my left foot into the fresh powder, and stepped off with my right foot onto the slope, and anchored it as best I could. As soon as I took my weight off my left foot, my right foot gave way, and I was on my back shooting down the slope.

You think of the strangest things when you're in a situation like this. The one thing that came to mind when I was ripping down the slope was the line in the song "Hot Rod Lincoln" and it goes something like "and the telephone poles looked like a picket fence" that's what the trees looked like as I went shooting down the slope. The thing that saved me was the sampling bag that I was carrying on my back. The sampling bag managed to get tangled up in the branches of a tree and stopped my fall. I managed to untangle the sampling bag from the branches, and I worked my way down what remained of the slope.

I recall yelling up to Dan and Rhett not to come down the slope, for it was far too steep to negotiate safely. I thought Dan and Rhett had heard me. I started looking for a way out. First I tried climbing up the canyon, then down. In every direction I looked, the terrain did not look familiar.

After about an hour, off in the distance, I heard what sounded like snowmobiles. I thought to myself, Dan and Rhett had made it out. I continued trying to find my way out and at one point actually found some tracks and thought to myself "Is there someone else down here?" I followed the tracks, after about an hour, I found another set of tracks. I asked myself, how can this be, so I broke off a branch from one of the trees and placed it across the set of tracks. I continued on, after about an

hour, I realized that I had been walking in one big circle, because I had just walked up on the branch I had placed in the tracks an hour earlier.

The skies remained overcast and grey through the afternoon making it extremely difficult to determine what direction I was going. So, not having any idea exactly where I was, I decided to head down the drainage because everything pretty much drains down into the city of Santa Fe. I continued following the drainage down into the canyon for several more hours and came to realization that I was not going to make it out that day. It was now about three o'clock so I decided to start building a shelter. I found a tree well and started digging in. I cut tree branches for the floor and roof of the shelter. This took about an hour and a half. I opened up the sampling bag, removed all of the tubes and used the sampling bag as the door to the shelter. Not having taken the time to go back for my survival pack, I was not able to build a fire. I had nothing more than a pocket full of pistachios.

By 6:30 pm the sun had set and I was spending the night in the Santa Fe watershed. I was able to get some sleep through the night, but it was cold and I do remember my teeth chattering through the night. I woke up frequently throughout the night, hoping for the light of day to come... eventually it did.

I was up and moving before sun-up. About 7:00 am I could hear a helicopter flying search patterns in the area. While I was able to see them, they were not able to see me through the dense tree cover. This lasted a couple hours. I kept trying to position myself where they could see me, but there were too many trees and they never saw me. Around 9:00 am the helicopter left the area and I continued to head down the canyon hoping to find my way out.

About an hour later, the helicopter returned and started flying search patterns in the area again. I remember looking up to see the helicopter directly over me several times, but they were not able to see me. Around 10:00 am I recall seeing the helicopter break from its search pattern, fly out and hover over an area that was a mile or so from where I was. It hovered over the area for awhile and then started flying the search patterns once again.

At the same time all this was happening I noticed a rock ledge several hundred feet above me. I thought to myself if I can reach that rock ledge they just might spot me. So I started to climb up the side of the canyon. About half way up the canyon, I looked up and it looked like the helicopter might fly over me again. So I gave it all I had to reach the rock ledge and I did. I positioned myself right at the point of the ledge.

I could see the helicopter and it seemed like it just might spot me but I was not sure. So I started breaking the branches off trees to make an SOS sign in the snow with the hopes that they would see me. I was still scrambling trying to finish the SOS sign when the helicopter swung over and spotted me. One of the crew opened the sliding door to the helicopter and waved to me and I waved back.

The helicopter was positioned several hundred feet above me and started to descend. The prop-wash was intense enough to take you off your feet, so the crew member motioned for me to move back into the trees. The helicopter continued to descend until it reached the tops of the trees. Then one of the crew members swung out an arm with the cable attached and strapped himself into the sling and was lowered down to the ground. He unharnessed himself and motioned for me to come out off the trees.

He asked me if was alright and I told him I was fine. He told me there were over one hundred people out looking for us. He proceeded to secure me into the sling, and told me to wrap my arms around the sling and not to let go. The other crew member hoisted me up into the Blackhawk helicopter and secured me into one of the seats. He then lowered the sling to pick-up the crew member that was on the ground. He was lifted into the Blackhawk and we flew off down the canyon for Santa Fe, where we landed and I was taken to the hospital to be examined.

It was at this time that I was told that Dan and Rhett had both been missing as well. Rhett had managed to walk out on his own, suffering fairly serious frostbite due to poor boots, and the ground rescue crew had found Dan earlier that morning. I was at the hospital when Dan arrived and we gave each other a big hug. Dan and I were examined and released that day.

Quite the experience, had it not been for the training I received at the Snow School, I have no doubt that the outcome could have been much worse.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the instructors that provided the invaluable training in Big Sky, Montana in 1996.
I salute you all.

Respectfully,

Richard Armijo
NRCS Snow Surveyor
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Editor's note: Rhett, the television reporter, jettisoned his camera during his flight out of the Santa Fe watershed. As of this date, the camera, with all of the interview footage, has not been found!