The Anatomy of a Cold Water RESCUE, Upper Sacramento at Soda Creek access, Castella

My friend and fellow angler John [redacted] invited a number of his friends and acquaintances to a year-ending 'pick up' outing to the Upper Sacramento River. Cold, snowy conditions were expected, which was *fine*, as it kept most anglers home, leaving open water for the more hardy of us. It was cold & icy but sunny & bright.

The group started out a little larger, but as departure time arrived, John, Mike [redacted], Anne-Marie [redacted], Sue [redacted] and me ended up as the participating party.

We all took separate cars (COVID precautions) and planned to drive up and fish Friday afternoon to start the weekend behind our rented home in Castella off Soda Creek Road. (John found us a beautiful home overlooking the river, below the train rails with views of Mt. Shasta & Castle Craig's).

A huge 3 story home with more than enough room for our little party. The gals were in charge of breakfasts, the guys in charge of dinners.

Back

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A highway backup in Cottonwood due to emergency road repairs delayed our arrivals for a couple of hours. This killed the Friday afternoon fishing for many of us. Mike had arrived earlier in the day and drove to a spot near the house to fish with no luck at that first attempt.

John hiked down late that Friday afternoon (with only an hour or so of daylight) and found a spot above a couple of pools and bagged a few nice fish. He targeted this spot for us to hit the next morning as it appeared productive from this first showing…

Friday evening, Mike served us a platter of deli-meats and cheese for appetizers then cooked us a gourmet tri-tip dinner with all the trimmings. For desert we enjoyed a basket of homemade sweet bread and assorted treats his wife sent up for us. The meal was amazing. We finished the evening tying flies over wine and sharing some of our favorite patterns and techniques before turning in.

For breakfast Saturday morning, Sue made us a fabulous scrambled egg concoction and dressed up left over potatoes with English muffins. We had a leisurely morning breakfast over plenty of hot coffee before *wadering up* for our hike to the river. We all dressed warmly. It was a clear morning, but cold. It hadn't snowed in a couple of days so the snow was fairly hard packed, which made it easier to hike. Although the altitude wasn't too high, (~ 2300), combined with the cold air, made it somewhat difficult breathing when exerting oneself. I think it was bothering me more than the others, I was the oldest (71) so I mentally paced myself and didn't take the hike too fast. (I think it was something under a mile from the house).

An aerial view of a section of the river near where we fished. As illustrated there was a lot of snow and lots of diversified water to fish. The *active* railway tracks are a fairly steep drop down from the house. Then we dropped down further to the river when we saw selective access with fewer bushy areas.

John & Mike moved down to the water first, spreading out in the pools they found. Anne-Marie & Sue moved farther downstream and found an area maybe 100 yards away. I stayed in the middle, looking for an access that I could get down to, but also could get out of, ☺. It was nearer the boys but I kept the girls in sight.

I spotted an eddy next to the bank, coming off a tail water that emptied into a plunge pool before moving into a fast, wide, deeper run. The eddy was 3 to 4 feet deep with slack water that I was comfortable in. I felt very safe and stayed away from the eddy's front edge where the speed picked up coming off the tailout. From there, I could cast my Euro rig up and into the tail water and let my flies drop and sink into the plunge pool which I thought would be a good holding area. On my second or third cast, I got a solid grab at the end of my drift, but couldn't hang onto him. 8 to 10 casts later I felt it was time for a change up in this small area I was working. I tied another streamer on point with a small Paragon tag, 20 inches up off my point fly.

I continued to work that tailout & pool for another dozen casts with no action. I decided to move.

I reeled my flies, secured them to my rod keeper. Using my wading staff, I turned around to face the bank, took a step and I got hit with some heavy water that blasted out of the tailout and into my eddy, I was in over my head then. It surprised me. I didn't expect strong hydraulic changes in this slack water eddy. I've seen surges similar to this from time to time fishing other tailwaters closer to their dams when there was unexpected releases. *God heard the first of my many prayers then*.

Thinking about this later, I thought maybe an entire snow bank might have loosened and fallen into the river creating somewhat of a surge in the tailwater just above me that surged through the eddy I was standing in. Whatever it was, the surge knocked me off my feet and sent me into the plunge pool I was working, down a *shelf* and into a deep, fast, rocky run. I held on to my rod & staff. After a tumble or two and a good soaking, I knew I needed to get turned around, face down stream with feet up, to evaluate what to do.

The water was *instantly* & shockingly cold. I knew I was in trouble, but the cold was, *beyond belief*. I hit a few semi-protruding rocks/boulders, nothing hurt at this point. I was numb from the cold and these only felt like glancing strikes. I thought about riding the river out. Surprisingly, it wasn't too difficult to stay upright with my wader belt holding off filling my waders, but the cold water was exhausting me at a surprising rate and I didn't think I'd have any strength left to grab and or pull myself out of even a shallow riffle. This was NOT a mind-over-matter situation. The cold was physically debilitating, and this was more distracting than my precarious situation.

The water I was riding was too strong for me to steer my way to the bank, although I was able to make small positional moves. Twenty or thirty yards in front of me I saw a slight protrusion. It looked like a boulder tip. I made the decision to use this to try and stop my decent. I had to move toward this 'protrusion' in the run and I was able to hit it, stopping me with my butt. It was not a solid position. I felt like I was slipping, but it was difficult to tell without any feeling in any of my limbs by now. Thankfully, I had my wading staff still in my hand, along with my rod. I was able to wedge my staff behind me somewhat, just behind my butt, which made me feel a little more secure in holding this spot for a while.

I was completely submerged. I tried to sit up to get my upper body out of the water. But the water pressure behind me built up to push me off the rock tip every time I tried to sit up. So I had to stay submerged with only my boot tips and face above the surface. (There are no words to describe the *intensity* of the cold). I felt stable for the moment and started to look around. I tried to look behind me

to see if either of the boys had seen me take the plunge. No one was coming that I could see. I looked down stream and saw Anne-Marie was on a rock casting. I knew she was fishing with Sue. I called out to get their attention and they heard me on my first call. They both high-tailed to where I was.

It took maybe three to five minutes for Anne Marie & Sue to get there. It looked to me they were taking off their fishing vests to maybe get into the water after me. I hollered to them NOT to do that, to call John & Mike so they could figure out what to do (if anything) as a group.

Sue pulled out her whistle, alerted the boys and twelve to fifteen minutes later they were all at water's edge next to where I was. I was fading fast, I'd been totally submerged around twenty minutes by now. I didn't think I could hold on to my rock much longer, my body was shutting down and I was getting mentally confused.

Sometime during these first twenty minutes, Anne-Marie checked her cell signal and thankfully called 911, seeing a potential rescue by them alone was beyond our little groups ability. I'm told Mike hiked back to the house as fast as he could (all up hill) to look for a rope (which he found). John, seeing I couldn't make it much longer where I was, moved upstream to find a safer entry area, climbed in, half waded, half swam and came up behind me. (Just in time as I was slipping away).

John planted his feet on the boulder under us and was able to keep most of his torso above water and lift me so my shoulders were above of the water. He repositioned both of us as securely as he could. He took off his wool buff and put it on my head and pulled me in tight to his chest to try and keep me warm until help could come.

John [redacted] saved my life.

We were in the water well over an hour more until Search and Rescue was able to get to us. I lost consciousness from time to time, John rubbed my hands and talked me awake throughout.

After maybe an hour and a half, I looked bankside and saw a team of men & women coming down the snowy slope in a number of different uniforms. A few looked like they were in space suits. One of the biggest ones in a dry suit tied on a rope, wrapped the other end around a tree for his teammate to hold while he made his way into the water toward us. When he got in front of me, he was able to lift me higher (with John's help) and fitted me with a sling they use for helicopter pickups. He appeared to be in communication with someone through his headgear. I suspect it was the helicopter crew, as he was asking my weight and cut open my waders that were full by them to lighten the lift.

Next thing I knew a cable appeared in front of my face. They hooked me up and I was airborne. Surprisingly, after sitting in *indescribable freezing water* for over an hour and a half, it got MUCH colder on that airlift to an ambulance waiting in a field.

That was an experience I'll never forget. I started spinning the closer I got to the helicopter, then saw they weren't bringing me in for the flight to the ambulance. They left me outside spinning as we traveled until the hoist operator set me down on top of one of the landing skids. (I never liked roller coasters or similar types of carnival rides as a kid or when I was raising mine.) It was scary. My hands weren't working, (there wasn't anything to hold onto anyway!) I was at the mercy of the single 3/8" cable hooked to the rings on my sling.

I'm not sure how long I was in the air. I could see we came over an open snowy field where an ambulance was parked with doors open and a half dozen people waiting.

We landed (much to my delight). Two guys came up, disconnected me and asked if I could stand? (No) They helped me up and asked if I could walk? (No) They shuffled me to the ambulance where there was a (gorgeous) female supervisor type (they know how to wake an ole guy up) with what appeared to be two male assistants ready to assist in the ambulance.

As soon as I got in the truck, they cut off my wet clothes, waders, jeans, long-johns, shirts & jacket. They covered me with heated blankets, started 'hot' IV's in each hand. The Supervisor was interviewing me as she was rigging my heated IV's. I had my DVFF medical card sealed in the front of my wader pocket which she retrieved and communicated the info to a Doctor waiting at Shasta Hospital. When I got there, they rushed me into a room, put new hot blankets on me (they may have been electric) reconnected more 'hot' IV's and monitored me until my body heat came back to normal.

It took a long time for me to stop shivering, even after my body temperature got back to normal.

After a final examination from the emergency room Doctor, he released me to my fishing buddies Anne-Marie and Sue [redacted]. After some heartfelt hugs and maybe a few tears, we headed back to the house for dinner and for me to see and thank John & Mike for all they had done.

We had originally planned to make a lasagna for dinner at the house, but I was so happy to be alive and as tired as I was from the day's ordeal, we decided to go out for a celebrative meal with champagne at Maddalena's in Dunsmuir. We had a wonderful happy meal celebrating life together.

Special thanks to my fishing buddies Anne-Marie [redacted], Sue [redacted], Mike [redacted] and of course John [redacted] who risked his bacon to save mine.

Post Script

I forgot to add, my ‘rescue team’ buddies experienced a well-deserved serendipity as they were gathering to leave.

It seems the railroad (that was one of the agencies involved in the rescue effort) shut commercial traffic in the area (both ways!) with so many people on the tracks and send an engine to pick everyone up and give them a lift to where they could get a ride!