MOUNTAIN RESPONDER

A new, first-person narrative examines backcountry rescue in sticky situations.

BY DR. GRETCHEN R. BESSER

teve Achelis, Mountain Responder: When Recreation and Misfortune Collide (Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing, 2009).

In Mountain Responder, Brighton, Utah, ski patroller Steve Achelis has written a gripping first-person narrative of backcountry rescues he made during his years with the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Search and Rescue Team. By framing each incident from callout to



The story of this solo, unroped rock climber who slipped and landed on a precarious shelf 70 feet up a waterfall is just one of many detailed in Achelis' firstperson narrative.

conclusion, with thorough descriptions of search efforts in fog and snow, rocky crevices and raging rivers, the need to stabilize victims in precarious positions on avalanche slopes or under waterfalls. and decisions on the most effective or least perilous mode of transportation, from heli-

copter hoist to toboggan slogging, Achelis achieves a you-are-there sense of suspense and immediacy.

Rather than relate his adventures chronologically, he divides them into different types of rescuebackcountry and hiking, waterfalls, rock climbing, avalanche, swiftwater missions, helicopter accidents, mass casualties. Patrollers will appreciate common experiences—effecting rescues in grueling weather conditions, searching for avalanche victims, driving oneself to the limits of physical endurance and experiencing the camaraderie of effective teamwork. In one incident, patrollers from neighboring Alta, Solitude and Snowbird participate with their avalanche dogs in locating four buried snowboarders. But most of Achelis's backcountry missions entail greater physical exertion and discomfort, personal danger, decision-making responsibilities and life-and-death emergencies than the average ski patroller experiences in a lifetime.

Achelis goes into detail about the equipment he uses, the style of messaging on his pager and specific code terms ("Echo" means a fatality, "10-86" refers to a patient's condition, LAST is an acronym for the necessary sequence of "locating, assessing, stabilizing and transporting"). He preserves the spontaneity of action, the suspense of drama, the excitement of a "newbie," the grave responsibility of a "commander." He is always on call. His pager beeps at all times of day or night, at his daughter's soccer game, at the gym or when he is sitting on top of a mountain after a strenuous climb. Over the July 4th weekend in 2003, Achelis responds to five calls and treats nine victims in the space of 40 hours—feats that include teenage hikers stranded between vertical cliffs on Mt. Olympus, a disabled hiker atop 11,000-foot Lone Peak, a victim hit by a 50-pound rock near the summit of 11,300-foot Pfeifferhorn and a hiker clinging to a rock face with her hands and feet.

Achelis instructs and muses as he narrates his adventures. The summer months are the busiest time of year, when the sheriff's office receives half its calls, mostly from hikers. In the United States, some 25 people are killed in avalanches each year. National Park data between 1925 and 2001 indicate that more than half of 11 rescuer fatalities resulted from aviation accidents. The paradox that helicopters both save and cost lives complicates the decision to use them. In the backcountry, rescuers have to triage patients not according to the most seriously injured but the most "salvageable." Achelis waxes philosophic about his feelings when he retrieves a dead body.

In spite of the dangers to which he is exposed, the rigors of racing up a trail or climbing a vertical face to reach a victim, the difficulties of stabilizing a severely-injured patient on a rock ledge, the necessity for snap decisions, the toll taken on one's family, Achelis never seems less than eager to answer each call. In fact, he admits to feeling privileged to have participated in hundreds of rescues and proud to have been a member of the team. As he swings into the night sky aboard a chopper, not knowing what hazards await, he feels a buzz of exhilaration, an adrenaline high. •