

Book Review: Billy, A. 2020. NORTH SHORE RESCUE: If You Get Lost Today, Will Anyone Know?

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About the author: Allen Billy served as a North Shore Rescue volunteer team member for twelve years and participated in over 700 search and rescue operations in mountain, wilderness and urban environments. Allen has 30 years' experience in post-secondary education, primarily in Allied Health and Biology education, teaching a variety of Human Anatomy and Physiology and basic Biology courses. Allen has a doctorate in zoology, University of Texas at Austin, and BSc degrees (zoology) from University of British Columbia.

This book will be of interest to all those engaged or interested in volunteer search and rescue. Although the book focusses on one team – North Shore Rescue (NSR) in British Columbia – the issues, stories, frustrations, and humour described herein will be recognized by those in other areas.

Allen Billy takes the reader on a historic journey of NSR from its early days as a Civil Defense organization with barely adequate vehicles, equipment not suitable for mountain rescue and rudimentary communications, up to present time as a technical innovator and leader in Canadian search and rescue. As a volunteer team, NSR responds to requests for assistance from fire, police, ambulance service and municipal and provincial governments. Although NSR is an autonomous registered society, it nonetheless finds itself in the often complex and frustrating world of government and agency bureaucracy. Some of the narratives in the book show how accommodating to the myriad of bureaucratic requirements has been an evolution in itself.

Allen Billy has done a superb job of capturing compelling anecdotes and memories from North Shore Rescue team members and through them and along with his own memories and experiences, has woven a fascinating story of NSR's contribution to the community.

The book makes no pretense of historical or factual accuracy; rather the team members' narratives appear as they are remembered. Also, the author chose not to highlight the team's most dramatic or spectacular operations or focus on the contributions of any particular team member. As the author puts it: "I was interested in capturing a wide spectrum of memories and perceptions...as the people involved chose to tell the story". Also, the author warns: "This book contains profanity, politically incorrect statements and dramatic content associated with traumatic injury and death.... some stories may be troubling for readers."

In this series of narratives, the book portrays the broad cross section of the types of search and rescue operations undertaken from simple ground SAR to more complex helicopter flight rescue, swift water and advanced back-country medical intervention. It also captures the broad range of skills, attitudes and passions of the 40 or so members of North Shore Rescue; a mix that enhances the operational strength of this and all SAR teams.

Many of the stories told in this book show something of the selflessness and perhaps humbleness of the SAR volunteers in doing what they are trained to do at any time of day and in all conditions. Some readers will know that this ethic is shared by all volunteer SAR organizations – an ethic not commonly known or acknowledged by the general public or those whose actions have triggered the need for this life-saving service. At times the frustrations of inadequate recognition, and never seeming to get ahead of the curve through education and prevention comes through in the team members' recollections.

The book's narratives, and there are a lot of them, are told by a diverse group of volunteers, and fairly represent the complex make-up of the team. NSR has attracted members from many backgrounds, skill levels, ages, and both genders. However, all share a common purpose and passion – helping others. Some stories demonstrate the volunteers' mission-focus on operations, with individualities, and egos left at the trailhead.

Is SAR life disruptive? The book has many anecdotes from team members and spouses regarding the "disappearance" of team members to attend a call-out; often at 2AM or coinciding with a planned family or social event. As Allen describes, the family harmony can be severely strained when this happens. Of course, this is usually ignored at the time by the team member, naively believing that the call-out will always be more important than family. This is not necessarily the view of the abandoned spouse; however as some have explained, the abandonments, the frustrations, the inconveniences are eventually made up for by the realization that someone's life may have been at stake. Some, however, have described a period of frosty silence that pervades the household upon the eventual return of the team member. Allen fails to mention that to partly compensate for family inconveniences, NSR frequently hosts family get-togethers and outings in part to ensure no one spouse feels alone in the "great abandonment" common in SAR life and to allow those left behind a chance to see, and to some extent experience what front line SAR life is like.

Over the years NSR has found the need to establish several speciality groups. A dive team was formed early on mainly for body recovery and evidence searching, until the RCMP assumed this role. A dog team has been used off and on for many years, with team member dogs and police dogs utilized. The book relates several, sometime humorous, stories of inappropriate use of this resource. A kayak team has been very useful in rapid searching of the three main waterways in North and West Vancouver. The team's turn to helicopter assistance was a major leap in SAR technology for NSR. Use of helicopters for searcher deployment, aerial searching, and subject extraction has meant that the team can efficiently respond to the over 100 calls per year with its existing personnel. North Shore Rescue was the first SAR team in B.C to

certify in Helicopter Flight Rescue Systems, and now with a local helicopter company has Forward Looking Infrared Radar, and night vision capabilities. The book does a good job chronicling how these innovations have helped in many aspects of SAR work.

The book also covers the darker side of SAR – dealing with the unhappy outcomes that all SAR teams have learned to cope with, death and injury. The book describes these as “disturbing memories”; an apt term as some of these experiences live a long time in volunteers’ minds. For North Shore Rescue members, these have included the recovery of 10 or so bodies from debris torrent events, and the only death experienced by the team during a training exercise. The book also describes the only serious injury to a team member during a search operation. Importantly, the author mentions the continuation of the search following the extraction of the injured team member – an example of the mission-focus that SAR teams must have to carry out their work, despite the associated traumas.

Readers familiar with SAR work will know that death and injury to those seeking help are not uncommon in SAR operations and can create psychological issue with some volunteers; even those who have been exposed many times to operations involving serious injuries and body recovery. These and other forms of personal trauma have led NSR to employ CIS counselling for its volunteers more and more frequently. The author could have explored this in more detail given the importance of this service in maintaining volunteers’ mental health.

Humour is described in the book as a counter to the darker side of SAR volunteering. Allen talks about the team’s annual Green Door Award, given to the team member who has made the most humiliating blunder that year. This is usually a mental lapse such as hiking past the party they were searching for or turning off the portable radio in order to conserve battery power and wondering why normal radio checks were not being made. The book also includes several quotes of team members which contain expletives and demonstrate some of the “black humour” that creeps into SAR work in part as a coping mechanism.

The book also touches on two activities that follow all SAR operations. The first is a traditional meal immediately after volunteers leave the field where team members relax, unload stress and undertake a very informal debriefing of the operation. One senior team member quipped: “It’s the tie that binds”, referring to the need to unwind from the stress and get ready for sleep or work. The second is the formal debriefing later on where all aspects of the operation are discussed, lessons learned, and improvements and adjustments are made.

The book would have benefitted from a broader treatment of the need for more effective outdoor safety education. Although the book describes the various outdoor safety programs offered by the team, it makes no mention of their effectiveness. With escalating call volumes, seemingly due to the same causes year after year, the reader may wonder whether the education programs are being effective.

All in all, this book is a worthwhile read, not only by those engaged in volunteer SAR work, but for outdoor enthusiasts who may one day be in need of this valuable service.

*Ross Peterson,
Former member North Shore Rescue.*