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White Water

by Carl E. Lind

Seldom does one look death in the eye until one's final hour. My final hour beckoned twice in a two-day period, on a float trip down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho, aboard a World War II rubber raft (also known as a pontoon boat). I never knew the real meaning of fear until that experience!

The purpose of the trip was to test Sears camping products before launching them in the consumer market place. Every year we took a similar trip, which was attended by our Sears people and those of our major source, Kellwood Co. (makers of tents and sleeping bags). It also provided time for joint discussion of problems and marketing opportunities.

In 1970, we chose a float trip, the one I refer to above. The burden of responsibility was mine since I was Sears' National Merchandise Manager of sporting goods. The key participant was Sir Edmund Hillary of Mount Everest fame. It was he (the New Zealander) and Tenzing Norgay from Nepal who were first to reach the pinnacle of the highest mountain on Earth, one never before conquered. As Sears camping advisor, Hillary tested camping products under the most rigorous conditions encountered in his world-wide adventures. Hillary often scribbled his evaluations while in a sleeping bag, sheltered within a tent. A more dedicated person I have never known. He was a quiet man with deep convictions; he was tall, had a weathered appearance and a rugged frame. He was highly respected by everyone, and when he spoke they listened. Sir Edmund was an adventurous soul who had courage to tackle the highest mountain, as the story goes, "merely because it was there". I felt very humble as Ed and I shared a tent at night and were partners on a boat by day during this white water adventure.

The Middle Fork of the Salmon River snakes its way through the primitive area in Idaho in one of the deepest gorges in North America. Late winter snow melt combined with early warmth was, in late June, sending torrents of water into the River, creating greater depths and much swifter flow than ever before. Little did I know that this routine trip would turn into a life-threatening escapade.

Our party used two inflated rubber rafts; one was twenty-two feet long, the other thirty-three. They looked like oval-shaped doughnuts and had plywood decks from which two oarsmen, one after the other forward, with fifteen foot oars guided the boats through the wild white water.

Each of us wore a high-visibility yellow life vest, securely fastened to our upper body, as we took positions that would keep the boat evenly balanced. Hillary and I were in the twenty-two footer, which took off as if it were shot out of a cannon, such as was the speed of the current. Suddenly, I had a premonition that this wasn't going to be a normal trip. The oarsmen were supposed to keep the raft going in the direction we were facing and avoid crashing into the shore. Sometimes it wasn't a shore at all, but tall cliffs of rock, and adding to the danger were large boulders scattered in the middle of our watery highway. Despite the best efforts of the oarsmen, they were no match for the powerful river, and into the shoreline we crashed!

We decided to go ashore for a breather, but how do you stop a twenty-two foot boat, loaded with supplies and people, going twenty miles per hour? You find an open area with shallow water close to shore. Several voyagers then jump into the water holding a rope, which is attached to the boat, and pull it ashore. The trick is to wrap the rope around a tree quickly and tie it fast, halting the boat with a jerk, as in instant stop!

I was last to disembark and was standing on the edge of the deck when the boat swayed and knocked me off balance. Into the swirling water I tumbled. Immediately I was sucked under the boat; in alarm I raised my hands upward to feel the boat bottom, to get a sense of how long I might have to hold my breath. In a flash the current popped me out from under

and to the other side. This was frightening--until I looked downstream. To my horror, directly in my path was a huge boulder with foamy white water crashing over it. What I feared worst was going to happen. If I met that boulder head-on, it would break every bone in my body, and it would be good-bye world for me. My fright had become a fight for my life!

Bieng city bred, I had minimal swimming experience. Whether by instinct or adrenalin, I desperately thrashed my arms and legs as I angled toward the shore. I saw a delicate twig from an overhanging tree and ever so gently, grasping it in my fingers, inch by inch, felt my way to a bigger branch, then hand over hand tugged and crawled my way to safety. How quickly it all happened! There wasn't time to think, only to react, time being measured in seconds. Real fear set in after that event, when I reflected on the outcome that might have been!

After a good night's sleep we were ready to attack the Salmon's Middle Fork a second time. Ed Hillary and I were assigned to the clumsy thirty-three footer, which was tossed about, getting little guidance from the oarsmen. We soon reached a stretch of the river known as Pistol Creek, which was our undoing. The boat completely spun out of control, and the oarsmen lost their oars. As we smashed into rocky cliffs rising out of the river, part of our decking was torn off, and the patched up bottom gave way, allowing supplies and equipment to spill into the river. When we swerved close to areas of accessible shore, one by one the men began jumping off, using hand-held ropes to try to pull the boat ashore. It was impossible! Ed Hillary and Carl Van Peenen, my buyer, jumped into water that turned out to be shoulder high and so had no footing to hold back a thirty-three foot boat against the raging torrent.

Two of us were still left aboard, the camera man and me. By now the deck was completely gone, leaving us to ride bareback, legs wrapped around the top of the inflated tube. Fortunately, around the tube were strands of rope and a supporting chain; for dear life I gripped one hand under the rope, the other under the chain. I couldn't believe this was happening to me after my experience the day before. But now there was more time to think about what might happen, the worst kind of dread, especially knowing there was absolutely nothing I could do about in except hang on. We were at the mercy of nature, and what a ride she gave us!

Down the river we went, sometimes forward, sometimes backward, sometimes in circles. Then a huge boulder showed its ugly face, and into it we were swept. What a terrible sensation! I was at the back of the boat when we crashed; the front dipped down into the swale behind the boulder with me perched high in the air at the rear. The rear then plunged down into the swale, and for a short instant I was submerged. As the raft began swirling in circles, my knuckles were turning white from grasping the rope and chain in a death grip. For the second straight day, fear was my companion.

Then a miracle happened. The river took a sharp turn left, but the raft spun to the right and into a rare pool of quiet water. As we drifted ashore, I bailed out with the braking rope in my hand and tied it to a tree. How wonderful to be safely in land once again!

But what about the safety of the others in our party? In a final reckoning, this trip was my responsibility, another concern that I didn't need just then. Angling across the turbulent ice cold water from the opposite side, I saw a bobbing life vest. I expected the worst. Then a head surfaced along with the movement of arms that were stroking. Soon into the quiet cove where we had landed came none other than Sir Edmund Hillary. He figured the angle correctly and had safely swum across the river. His courage in tempting that river seemed almost routine!

"Where is Van Peenen?" I asked. Hillary said, "He is waiting to cross as I did and is getting up his courage - that water is bloody cold." We ran to the bend in the river carrying extra life vests that we could toss to Van Peenen in the event that he misjudged the angle. Again, good luck; he made it! From the large craft, others, who had jumped off upstream, came straggling in. The smaller raft soon joined us, after a turbulent but safe ride. In camp that night we said many prayers of thankfulness and appropriately decided to abort the expedition after having covered less than half the distance planned. Upon our return to civilization, we learned that eleven people had lost their lives on the Salmon River that week (a river dubbed the River of No Return). This trip, so innocently begun as a testing of Sears camping products, had turned into a fearsome struggle between life and death. Fortunately, all in our group survived!