

START HIKING™

OPERATION YOSEMITE BOUND 5

By SSG Ken Weichert

Hiking Half Dome is no easy feat in one-day. The 17-mile round-trip journey is steep and intense. Only the physically fit and well-prepared experience the adventure without problems. Because of our training and preparation, we were also able to rescue injured and lost people along the way. It was an experience that will live with all of us for the rest of our lives.

SAFETY BRIEFING

The START Fitness™ team has been leading expeditions across California for over eight years. Prior to every special event our Tactical Instructors always provide “Safety Briefings”. In our briefings, we also stress that any expedition can easily turn into a “rescue mission”. The bottom line of the Safety Briefing is to prepare for the worst in order to achieve the best!

Last summer we led a group of civilians to the Half Dome Summit in world famous Yosemite National Park. This mission marked the fifth time that I have led new hikers up Half Dome. Coincidentally, it was also the fifth time that my teammates and I have discovered and aided lost and injured people while hiking.

THE MISSION:

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My team was comprised of members from my civilian fitness boot camp. Part of the training for missions such as these include intense physical fitness and detailed lectures covering emergency medical, land navigation, and outdoor gear packing training.

My friend and START Fitness instructor, Sensei Lohsen (Sensei is Japanese for “Karate teacher”) and I arrived at the Yosemite View Lodge on a Friday night. The rest of the team began their four-hour drive to Yosemite from San Francisco at 8:00 am on Saturday. Upon

arrival, I issued my Safety Briefing while they ate heartily.

When hiking Half Dome, I prefer to start later in the day in order to avoid crowded trails. The thought is, begin mid-afternoon, summit at sunset and make our way back to the van under the light of the moon wearing headlamps.

At 3 pm we headed to the trailhead to begin an incredible journey. Sensei Lohsen started out with one group and I with another.

On this summer day, the weather was a bit hotter than we had anticipated. Shortly after leaving trailhead, team members from both teams sounded off through two-way radios, “Drink water! Pay attention to your buddy!”

We reached the first stop, Vernal Falls, early. We made adjustments to our gear and took a moment to note the natural splendor of the waterfall.

Finally, we came out of the wooded areas and began the final approach to the summit by way of a narrow trail and cables. The 400-foot cable climb is the most unique experience in the world! On a mountain that would normally require complex climbing equipment, the National Park Service has taken great care to make this peak accessible for nearly everyone.

Sensei Lohsen, led the first group to the summit. By the time they made it to the summit, the sun was setting on the edge of the horizon.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN RULE

At 11:00 pm, when we made it back to the falls we discovered a family wandering around without flashlights, backpacks or water. They had made it to the summit several hours earlier and had been blindly trying to find their way



OPERATION YOSEMITE BOUND 5:
 Top: Seeley climbs the cables to the 8,836 foot Half Dome Summit;
 Center: The Team at 7,000 feet;
 Bottom: The final “Hooah” at the Motel...Mission Complete!

“There will be moments presented to all of us where we will make the critical choice to serve others during their time of need. I believe it is the actions that we take, or do not take, that define our character.”

- SSG Ken Weichert

back down the mountain in the dark. They were cold, dehydrated and lost. I noticed the elderly woman with them was walking with a terrible limp.

My teammates looked to me for leadership. Although a few offered to wait with the family until daylight, I decided that it would be best if we carried the elderly injured woman and led the rest of the family members down the remaining three miles of steep terrain. After examining the elderly woman's potentially broken ankles, I was certain she would need emergency care. I feared that additional time in the wilderness could advance the injury slightly beyond repair. Besides, the alternative of leaving behind a group of people exposed to wild animals and the elements could potentially put them further at risk.

I stepped into action barking orders, "I want someone with a flashlight in front and in back of every person without one. I want Mike (the biggest guy on our team) to assist the injured woman. I want Jillian in front of her. I want us to go down in two teams. I will be with the lead team that will sprint down the mountain in order to get the vehicles and drive them to the Trailhead. Sensei Lohsen will take command of the trail team. I want the two-way radios with the team leaders. Line up and let's get these people home!" They met my orders with a "HOOAH!"

Before taking off down the mountain, individuals from both teams immediately pulled the long-sleeve shirts and jackets off of their backs and placed them over the backs of our new guests. I was awed by their display of selflessness.

RECOVERY

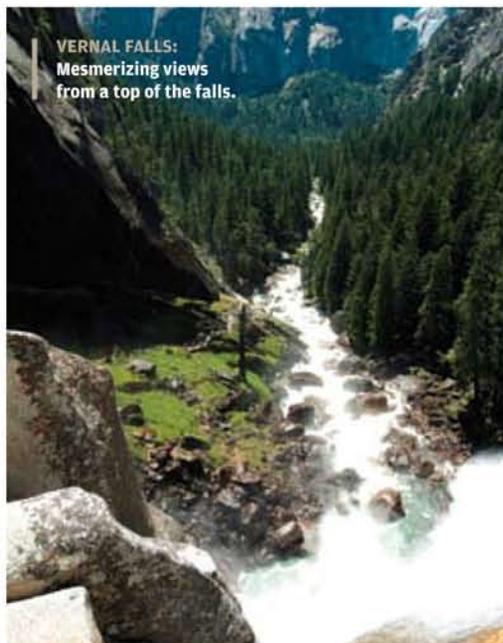
We made it to the motel by 1:30 am and finished the mission with a toast at the lodge pub. One week after the hike and rescue mission, we received a "Thank You" card from the family that we aided. Because my team had placed the needs of others before our own, I felt great about our actions that night on Half Dome. However, I still shudder when I think of people like the family we met that night who are not thoroughly preparing themselves for expeditions such as Half Dome.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The United States military training is second to none! My first military tour of duty was with an active duty Air Defense unit (Patriot). Immediately after that I joined the Army National Guard. I cannot think of a better opportunity to serve our state and our country. In return we receive the same physical fitness and survivability training that our active duty colleagues receive and a great deal of college money as well. Most



SUNSET CLIMB:
Climbing the cables to the Half Dome Summit just before Sunset



VERNAL FALLS:
Mesmerizing views from a top of the falls.

of all, to be able to use these acquired skills in the real world is something that makes me proud to be an American!

Finally, enjoy your time outdoors! And, if you wish to join our team this season, simply contact me for more details. HOOAH!

ALL GEARED-UP

As far as a packing list is concerned, we always plan and execute based on weather, environment, and the length of the mission.

Our team received the following packing list as part of WARNO-02

WORN :

- Trail Shoes or Boots (1 PAIR)**
SSG Ken suggests: Asics Trail Shoes \$55-\$95
- Athletic Socks (1 PAIR)**
SSG Ken suggests: Thorlo socks \$20-\$25
- Shirt (1)**
SSG Ken suggests: Underarmour \$25-\$30
- Athletic trousers or shorts (1 PAIR)**
- Hat (1)**

PACKED:

- Water (AT LEAST 1.5 LITERS)**
SSG Ken suggests: Camelbak, or T.H.E. PACK made by SPEC OPS, \$60-\$160
- Athletic Socks (1 PAIR)**
- Light Jacket or Pull-over (1)**
- Gloves (1 PAIR)**
- Headlamp or Flashlight (1)**
SSG Ken suggests: BLACK DIAMOND headlamp. \$25-\$45

OPTIONAL:

- Hiking Poles (1 PAIR)**
- Protein Bars**

THE START FITNESS™ TEAM PROVIDED THE FOLLOWING:

- First Aid
- Rations (MRE) and Snacks
- Two-way Radios
- Forest and Parking Permits
- Maps
- Compasses
- Water Purifier

SGT Ken has reviewed many products in each category while hiking more than 150 summits over the past eight years. Prices are approximated.



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