

It Left a Mark On My Mind

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Last night I woke up to pee, but then stayed awake wondering whatever happened to Jay? He probably doesn't remember me, but I will never forget him and that night I found him in the woods.

About 16 years back I took a Monday night shift for Bill. It was mid-March and not many skiers were left by the time we gathered to sweep. I was on the Rocket and as I reached the run-out and peered off trail into the woods, I saw the bottom of a snowboard.

I first thought that someone was having some fun with me by planting that snowboard off trail. My second thought was "Oh shit, there's a person attached to that board!" I saw a body wedged between two trees, folded over at the hips like a Leatherman® multi-tool.

I called out to George who was on the trail next to me and one of us made the radio call for help. I followed-up, reporting that the patient was unresponsive, but quickly corrected that he was responsive to pain. He moaned when I rubbed what was probably a facial fracture. There was no blood and, other than being bent in half, no obvious sign of injury.

I can still hear Mike saying, "I can't get his jaw open" (to ensure the airway). And I remember saying we'd have to push him out from between the trees and that Sally should try to maintain cervical stability as Mike and I did so. I can still see Jay's one open eye looking at me as he was loaded into the ambulance. But can this be real? He should have been strapped to a backboard, not partially sitting-up on the rig's gurney. And I still remember watching the helicopter paramedic forcefully intubate him.

But most of the rest of the event is missing from memory. I've since learned that such partial memory is not uncommon. It was like a movie director took a 10-minute scene, cut it up into 15-second segments, saved a few and threw the rest away.

Later we learned that Jay sustained multiple skull fractures – but somehow no other injuries, and was hypothermic. He must have been in the woods for 30 to 45 minutes. This is weird because I remember riding up the chair at about the time we figured he crashed. I heard someone whooping with wild joy; but then silence. Was it him?

Jay survived. I saw him in the neuro-ICU a few days later. He had no idea what had happened.

Fortunately, I understood that my replaying the event, not being able to sleep and being distracted and edgy was to be expected – abnormal responses to an abnormal situation. And I had the invaluable support of my fellow patrollers to help me get back on track.

But that incident is still with me. Like a fall on hard snow, it left a mark – but on my mind.