

## Rangers and Soldiers Team Up for Swift Water Rescue

By CR Crystal Ling

Fourteen Canadian Rangers, two instructors and seven soldiers participated in a Swift Water Rescue course, from July 23-27, 2014, instructed by the Wild Blue Yonder white water rafting company, in the Grande Cache Patrol area. Although we hailed from different patrols, we worked together as a team through realistic rescue scenarios, which developed our skills and drew on our individual strengths. Following preliminary dry land exercises, we further developed and practiced our skills in the water, as we spent the final 4 days and 3 nights paddling in rafts on the Kakwa and Smoky Rivers, through class 3 and 4 rapids, and camping in pristine wilderness along the shore. Our guides took excellent care of us, as they taught us how to “read” the river and rescue victims from swift waters, prepared delicious meals, kept us on a safe course and kept our spirits high, even when the weather was bleak or our bodies were spent.

We began the exercise with dry land exercises. Once we had perfected our throw bag aim and technique, we moved on to foot entrapment rescue scenarios, the most common swift water rescue scenario encountered. Our final lesson on mechanical advantage had us working in teams to set up multiple hauling systems, including 3:1, 2:1 and 1:1 using ropes, pulleys, carabineers and the knots we had practiced. The morning was jam-packed with information, and I was full of questions, which Yo and fellow Rangers patiently answered. (I ask a lot of questions, and was eventually limited to a 5 questions per day limit by a WO).

After getting sized for equipment, we packed and loaded everything and departed for the river. Upon arriving at the Kakwa River put in, we donned our wetsuits, unloaded the rafts and loaded the gear and ourselves onto the rafts.



Participants work together to hold the live bait rope on the shore during a complex rescue scenario involving multiple victims

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Each raft had a capable guide steering with giant oars. We paddled in four self-bailing rafts, each with a guide: Yo, Freeman Wasdal, Dean Pollock and Annie Beals. An additional raft carrying only gear was commandeered by guides Daron and Felipe Vega Diaz, who surprised us by strumming away on the ukulele as we commenced our rafting

adventure. Within about 2 minutes of setting out, Freeman’s raft had hit a rock and one tube had a large gash. WO Coventry was in that raft and didn’t seem too pleased, but we rowed on. We paddled to our campsite, where Freeman patched up the hole.

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Heading down the rapids, not a dry day for this boat’s crew.

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Candidates on the swift water rescue course attempt to cross a raging river as a group.

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In the morning we set out for the Devil's Playground, a series of rapids. Along the way, our guides helped us to identify river morphology features, such as tongues, pillows and eddies, as well as obstacles, including twisted cables and logs.

Yo led us through multiple exercises, offering to be the victim multiple times. We practiced tossing the throw bag to the victim and being "live bait" – a rescuer with a rope securely attached to their life jacket (via carabineer) who swam to grab a hold of the victim, while rescuers on shore towed them in to safety. Live bait rescues resulted in the loss of a few water shoes, and this was a testament to the serious effort put forth by participants during the rescue scenarios. Yo had us attempt solo river crossings while holding on to a paddle, which proved to be a huge hindrance. We then attempted group river crossings, which were more successful, demonstrating the effectiveness of working as a team.

Afterwards, we had a few swimming lessons, practicing defensive swimming (floating on your back, with your feet facing downstream and up, thereby minimizing the risk of foot entrapment

and injury). Swimming in the water wasn't easy, especially with the strong current and water flowing into every hole on your face. Fortunately we had plenty of downstream safety rescuers and live bait ready to go, if needed. We also attempted swimming through holes (underwater ledges with froth at the surface) and catching eddies (calmer sections of water that form behind exposed boulders and cause water to flow upstream). After our lessons, Yo graciously offered an extracurricular swim, which Adam, Andrew, Matt and I took him up on.

Our skills were put to the test in multiple rescue scenarios, each more challenging than the previous scenario. We started with single, uninjured victims, floating down the river, capable of swimming to shore and grabbing hold of a rope when prompted by the rescuers. Sometimes it took more than one rescuer to bring the victim to safety. For example, I rescued WO Coventry, but he's bigger than me, and considering his mass and the force of the current, he almost dragged me into the water when I tried towing him in by myself. Fortunately, chivalry and teamwork were abundant, as my teammates helped me with the towing. Amidst the excitement and adrenaline

rush, we made some errors. Once a throw bag behind was tossed behind, onto shore, instead of into the water. The victim was still rescued as he swam to shore when yelled at him to swim to her. It took some time to perfect our tossing and swimming techniques, but we soon became comfortable enough to handle scenarios of increasing complexity. We were thrown a few curve balls, such as depleting resources (number of rescuers and equipment) when additional victims were added to a scenario and victims had variable abilities (for example, drunk, non-swimmer, unconscious or injured) that made the rescue more challenging and the use of live bait necessary.

From start to end we greatly increased our skills and abilities to perform swift water rescues as individuals and as a team. We were all grateful for being given the opportunity to attend this training exercise, meet so many amazing people and learn valuable skills from each other, as well as our incredibly patient and knowledgeable guides. To remember our trip, we left with Wild Blue Yonder t-shirts that stated, "Proud to be a river rat." I think I'll amend mine to say, "Proud to be a Rescue Ranger river rat."



One swimmer makes it over the Log while others wait their turn to attempt the same.

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