

Guest Column: A community of river guides copes with loss

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The Grand Canyon boating community — devoted to each other and to the Colorado River — was shocked to learn this fall that we’d lost two of our own.

Former river guides and rangers Mark O’Neill, 67, of Chimacum, Washington, and Kim Crumbo, 74, of Odgen, Utah, didn’t return home from a Sept. 13-17 canoe-packing trip in Yellowstone National Park.

Then on Sept. 20, Mark’s body and the boat were found on the shore of Shoshone Lake. He’d succumbed to hypothermia. Kim remains missing.

We who guided in the canyon with both men, sharing our intimate knowledge of the place with thousands of visitors, have spent many hours trying to make sense of the loss.

“Damn it,” a fellow canyon guide, Jeffe Aronson, wrote me. “We live and love in a world of ghosts.”

One way we're coping with grief is to share stories. Both men began guiding in the 1970s, going on to rack up some of the most extensive experience anyone can acquire. In the 1980s, both worked in the canyon as National Park Service river rangers.

Mark had already been a waterman all his life as surfer, lifeguard, skipper — basically “all things water,” says his sister, Toni Kelly, a former Green and Colorado River guide and ranger.

Kim Crumbo (“Crumbo” to most) served two tours in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL. By spring 1971, he was home running rivers in Utah, a place, he once told me, he had wondered if he'd live to see again.

When I asked how he'd survived two tours, the second with a platoon known for the highest casualty rates in SEAL history, he shrugged. “I had to become the scariest guy out there.”

“He's tough,” my fellow Park Service river ranger, RuthAnn Stoner, said of Crumbo. “The toughest person I've ever met.”

RuthAnn and river ranger Kim Johnson remember Crumbo's persistence on a Grand Canyon patrol where they found an injured peregrine falcon around River Mile 140. At the time, peregrine falcons were listed as endangered, with less than 30 breeding sites in the canyon. The birds were just emerging from decline throughout Arizona and the West.

Crumbo offered to do as he'd done before — row his boat 26 miles downstream to Havasu Creek, hike out to Havasupai Village and call for a helicopter evacuation. But River Unit Supervisor Curt Sauer was already on inner-canyon patrol with a Park Service helicopter pilot, and when they saw a mirror signal they landed. After a heated back-and-forth, with Crumbo insisting that the falcon — starving, its wing broken — had to be “evacuated now,” Crumbo prevailed. The falcon got its ride out, wearing a bandanna hood to keep it calm.

Later, Curt helped release the rehabilitated bird back into the wild, calling it a triumph that “wouldn't have happened without Crumbo.”

“Crumbo just never gave up,” as RuthAnn Stoner tells it. “That same season he was jumping out of helicopters to rescue people off the rocks below Crystal Rapids after one of the big rigs flipped.” Rescues like that were all in a day's work for both brothers.

Mark's outstanding swiftwater rescue skills earned him awards for “courageous and professional” recovery efforts on flooding rivers and in remote forests. After leaving Grand Canyon, he continued his Park Service career in Olympic National Park, where he served 20 years until retiring in 2016.

Crumbo, too, dedicated 20 years to conservation work with the Park Service, then gave another 20 years to wilderness advocacy through the Rewilding Institute, Wildlands Network and other organizations, retiring in 2019. He also became known for his well-argued essays about climate resilience, the latest titled, “Hope in the Age of Humans.”

While many of us have found it unfathomable that a lake could make ghosts of such men, consider the lake — 12 square miles of icy, unpredictable mountain water. At the time Mark and Kim were out on it, an early

snowstorm blew in on 45-mph winds, causing Shoshone Lake to surge with waves at least 2 feet high. Any boater, regardless of experience, would have survived a capsizing in Shoshone's 48-degree F water for only 20 to 30 minutes.

These "two good men," as Curt Sauer describes them, gave their best to their families, the canyon and humanity. "Any stories we tell about them," he says, "are love stories, pure and simple."

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