

Trapped! The Mike Turner Story

Deep in Wyoming's Wind River Range, an accident with a sliding boulder makes a hiker confront his life, his fate, and his faith in God.

By [Jeff Rennie](#), *BACKPACKER* Midwest Editor, June 2002

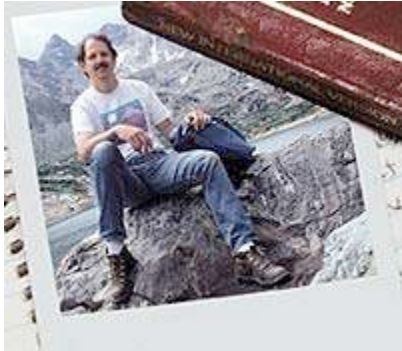


Photo by Mike Turner

The nameless lake sits at 11,400 feet in Wyoming's Fitzpatrick Wilderness, tight up against a ridge known as the Brown Cliffs. This high in the Wind River Range, there is no gentle fringe of trees, no sprigs of wildflowers to soften the sharp angles of the

rocks, nothing but a few wind-blasted banks of snow. The blue eye of water stares straight up from a cracked bowl of boulders into a remote, seldom-visited land of wind and rock and sky.

At 1 o'clock in the afternoon on August 2, 1998, a lone hiker with a black dog was making his way through the chaos of boulders along the eastern shore of the unnamed lake. He was a tall man with a gait that was used to eating up the miles, but here he was moving slowly under the weight of his pack, picking his steps carefully and sweating under a chocolate-brown floppy hat. It was day 4 of a 9-day hike, and the going was tougher than he had hoped for. Snow and ice in the passes had rubbed the dog's paws raw, slowing the pace. And now all this rock.

Nearing the lake, the hiker stepped onto a large boulder that shifted precariously under his weight. Instinctively, he leapt. The rock ahead was solid but tilted up at an awkward angle. His boots hit, and slid. The boulder behind kept coming, closing the gap. Just as his legs slipped off the edge, the boulders slammed together, catching the man above the knees, pinning him as if in the jaws of a trap.

There would have been pain, panic rising hot in the back of his throat, a swirl of dust in the air like smoke. There would have been the gunpowder smell of cracked rock and the ricochet of smaller pebbles clattering down the slope and splashing into the lake. And then nothing. As suddenly as it all had started, the rocks stopped rolling. The deep silence of the wilderness flowed back in like the water that closed around those few small stones settling without a sound on the bottom of the unnamed lake.

In the first moments following the rockslide, Mike Turner lay stunned. His breath came in ragged gasps choked with dust and fear, his heartbeat thumping against the rock. The dog, a Labrador mix named Andy, pricked up his ears at the commotion, waiting for his master to get up and move on.

Turner checked himself for injuries. Miraculously, his legs were trapped but not broken. With his bare hands and then using his tripod as a lever, he heaved against the tremendous weight of rocks, trying to pull himself free. At first, the boulder moved enough to ease the pain, though not enough to free him. A flicker of hope rose in him like a flame. He tried again, the tripod nearly snapping under the strain. Nothing. And again.

For more than an hour, he pried and shoved. But caught facing away from the boulder that pinned him, legs dangling in midair, even a big man like Turner could not gain enough leverage to move a piece of granite the size of a small car. The flicker of hope began to fade.

Exhausted, he rested, mind racing. This didn't make sense. People don't get trapped this way. How many thousands of times before had he stepped on boulders that wobbled? Perhaps he could dig himself out. He couldn't reach the ground. Maybe he could yell for help. The wind swatted the sound from his throat.

He looked around. His view was nothing but rock, sky, and a glimmer of lake. He had almost made it; a dozen more steps and he'd have been at the lake's edge, resting, filling his water bottles, the dog lapping happily at the water, nudging him to move on around the lake. Below, he noticed a few scant pockets of snow in the shadows. He needed to calm down, take his time, and think this through rationally. And so the Reverend Mike Turner reached for his journal and began to write.

"About 2 hours ago a large rock rolled upon me and trapped my legs," the journal entry reads in scrawling, jagged letters. "I was very careful, be sure of that, but I hurt... I am in your hands Lord...I don't know what I face."



Photos by Todd Meier, Mike Turner (inset)

For 10 years, Mike Turner had been the pastor at Boone Memorial Presbyterian Church, a pleasant brown brick building on a quiet, tree-lined street in Caldwell, Idaho. At 6'6", the 48-year-old Turner could, at times, seem larger than life, yet parishioners say they were drawn to his open face and ready

smile. They describe him as "an inspirational pastor" who was active in all aspects of his

congregation's life. "I had five operations in the last few years," one church member says, "and Pastor Mike was always with me, making the long drive whenever I needed him."

The seemingly opposite joys of both leading a 500-member congregation and witnessing the solitary beauty of wild places peacefully coexisted in Turner's life. "Mike saw God's hand everywhere," his wife, Diane, says, "in church just as much as in the backcountry." Childhood hikes took him deep into the cathedral-like light of the Sierra. He celebrated his ordainment as a minister in 1976 with an 18-day hike in these same Wyoming mountains. The first time he held hands with Diane was in Rocky Mountain National Park; vacations with the kids were hiking trips, and he enjoyed long theological discussions with friends on the trail. "Mike was drawn to the high country," says friend Mark Smith. "It was where he felt closest to God."

So in the summer of 1998, when Turner wanted to cap off a 3-month sabbatical with something that would challenge both his body and his spirit, he naturally looked to the high places. The Wind Rivers rise out of western Wyoming like a crest of waves gone to stone--100 miles long, with 48 peaks above 12,500 feet. They are the highest and wildest mountains in the state. The 60-mile hike Turner planned, much of it off-trail, would begin and end in the 428,169-acre Bridger Wilderness. It would cross the Continental Divide twice, traverse a glacier, top 12,000-foot passes, and take him deep into the 191,103-acre Fitzpatrick Wilderness, one of the most remote places in the lower 48.

He wanted to do it solo. Hiking alone, Turner reasoned, would let him travel at his own pace, linger over his photography, and enjoy some quiet retreat time with God. It was to be the trip of a lifetime. In big letters across the top of his itinerary, he called it his "Wander in Wonder."

On the morning of July 30, 1998, Turner loaded his gear and his dog Andy into his blue Honda Civic. Before he drove off, he gave his wife of 20 years a bouquet of flowers. "Thank you for letting me live this adventure," the card read. "Know wherever I am and whatever I'm doing, I am thinking of you!" With that, Mike Turner walked into the Wyoming wilderness.



Photo by Mike Turner

He spent his first night alongside Eklund Lake, 6 miles into the Bridger-Teton National Forest. A few birds sang. A breeze stirred the pines. *"...so quiet, so perfect. Is it all just as you want it, God? Or like skeptics say...is it just random events and we are nothing before the beneficence and*

destructiveness of nature? You send the winds and rain and yet even amidst the deep savagery and destruction of life, I sense your hand. In threatening my comfort, even my life, you challenge me to cope. In beauty and peace you refresh me. And all of it I need...God bless this trip. May it fulfill your holy purposes."

Turner wound his way to Island Lake, the beautiful, sky-blue heart of the Winds with its "amazing beauty that fills my soul," then up 12,150-foot Indian Pass. The rocky notch is the border between the well-traveled Bridger Wilderness, with its web of maintained trails, day hikers and sport climbers, and the virtually empty and trail-less Fitzpatrick Wilderness.

Atop the pass, Mike Turner took a few photographs, checked his map, then stepped over the Divide onto Knife Point Glacier, an immense ice field rippled with crevasses. To cross it, Turner had to negotiate three increasingly steep pitches. On the second pitch, Andy, whose paws were tender on the ice, began to slide and whine. On the third pitch, it was Turner who slid. Without crampons or an ice axe to stop himself, all he could do was point his feet downhill and ride it out. "What a tough time."

Although he downplays it in the journal, that "tough time" may have had a role in what would turn out to be a fateful decision. If he had kept to his intended route, Turner would have veered south from the bottom of the glacier back up into the snow of Alpine Lakes Pass. Or he could have moved north through the grassy valley of the North Fork of Bull Lake Creek, a longer but lower and even less-traveled route. "We decided to take a longer route" is all the journal says of his divergence from his "Wander in Wonder" itinerary.

At first, the place seemed almost magical. They "entered an enchanted valley of wildflowers and grasses. Beautiful." In a dimming, golden light, he set up his tent and heated some soup. Andy sat licking sore paws while Turner opened the journal to write.

"Tiredness is the fruit of one thing I love about wilderness, the chance to be fully committed to something. We worked hard today, faced danger and risk, played it safe though, too, where wisdom was called for. I will remember this day. It is filled with the ecstasy, the essence of life. By it, the Lord will fill me with strength, conviction, wisdom and trust. Thank God we made it down that hill."

He closed the journal and stood to stretch, feeling his body tingle with the mix of exhaustion and exhilaration that comes from hard work in wild country. Then he crawled into his tent, snapped off his flashlight, and drifted to sleep beneath a blanket of stars twinkling like ice chips in the blue-black mountain sky.

The next day, a sliding boulder would change everything.



Photo by Diane Turner

After the terror of the rockslide, the panic of realizing he was trapped, and the initial struggle with the immovable boulder, Turner turned his thoughts away from getting free and toward surviving the coming darkness. He passed a fitful night with his sleeping bag jammed awkwardly around his legs for warmth. Surely in

the morning he'd figure a way out of this.

The journal passage for the next morning shows him listing his concerns as if thinking things out on paper:

"I am concerned about first losing my legs, second running out of snow to melt for water, and fuel, third hypothermia. My biggest concern is water. I have only 2 quarts left. The irony is that the lake is only 30 feet away...I am drinking 1 quart today, saving a quart for tomorrow. I am also saving my urine. I wonder how it will taste with Crystal Light?"

Emptying his pack, Turner set up a makeshift "camp" around him. He had his stove, sleeping bag, and food for a week or more. Careful not to let anything slip out of reach, he took stock of each piece of gear, pondering how it could be used to free him or signal for help. His camera became a wedge to pry the rock. The rain fly to his tent became a sun shade and a means to catch rain, a possibility he didn't know whether to pray for or dread.

"On one hand, a rainstorm could save my life, giving me the water I need. I've got plans to catch every available drop...but then the rain is also my worst enemy because if I get soaked my legs will get very cold...A rain...would be very hard to survive."

As if the writing of the words sparked another thought, he added, *"I just had an idea about using the tent poles that just might work"* and signed off to try it.

"I know one of the reasons he didn't write even more in the journal," says Turner's friend Mark Smith, "is that he was busy trying to think of ways to get himself free, or at least survive until someone found him. That's the kind of person he was. There is something honorable in the way he fought every way he could think of to survive."

That first full day in the rocks, of all that were to come, was probably the best. Turner had enough water, at least for a day or two. There was no intense pain or significant bleeding. And he still had hope.

"I had dreamed of a special time alone with God, facing the elements, the passes, thinking about my life, the direction of the church, about my family. Indeed this has been all of those things only magnified 100 times. Thoughts about life, God, people, risk, filling my time. When I think about it this way, I believe I will survive, smarter or wiser, more thoughtful, more aware of my limits...I do feel confident in my Christian hope. God will make a way either earthly or heavenly. My only dread is not seeing my family and being present with them in body. That's what I think about."

He even found the strength for a bit of humor, writing to Diane, *"If I make it, you will hear a lot about this time, details you are probably not that interested in but I know you will listen."*

And Turner himself was listening, straining for any hint of hikers approaching. A single hiker could get him water and go for help; a pair of them might be able to pry the rock free. A group from the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) had gone through just 2 days before the boulder pinned Turner's legs. But now, there was no one. Once, there did come the whoop-whoop of a helicopter out of sight behind the ridge. At first the sound must have seemed like a miracle, yet it came no closer. After a time, Turner realized the helicopter was not for him. Despite his own predicament, his heart went out to whoever was in trouble. *"Hope they find that lost person too,"* he wrote, in a weakening hand.

Eventually, the sound of the chopper faded. The solitude that Mike Turner had longed for was beginning to tighten around him like a noose.



Photo by Mike Turner

Danny Holgate, search commander for Tip Top Search and Rescue, pressed his hand against the cold plexiglass window of the Bell 206B3 Jet Ranger helicopter to blunt the vibration and stared out at the jumbled landscape of rock and ice passing below. His eyes peeled back every shadow, untangled every

knot of fallen trees, searching for any movement or flash of color that might be a hiker in trouble.

According to the "Wander in Wonder" itinerary, Turner was to complete his hike in 9 days and meet his family and friends at the Big Sandy trailhead on Saturday, August 8. When he didn't show up at noon as planned, Diane at first felt little worry. "Honestly, I just felt irritated," she says. "I figured he was out there taking pictures, leaving the rest of us to carry the gear to the first lake, our 'plan B' if we didn't meet up at the trailhead."

As Saturday afternoon dragged on and the party set up camp at Dad's Lake to wait, questions began to creep into Diane's mind. What was slowing him down? Was it the knee he had injured skiing 4 years ago, or a dog with sore paws? "Before Mike left," Diane says, "Katie, our youngest, had asked him what we should do if he didn't show up. We laughed, then thought it would be a good idea to set a deadline." If he didn't arrive by Sunday at 4 p.m., they would seek help. But as that second deadline neared, Diane found herself re-reading the words printed on her map: "You will be charged for the rescue costs (i.e., helicopter time or horse rental)."

"I knew Mike wouldn't want us to make a big deal over nothing," Diane says. And so they waited.

By the time the moon rose that Sunday night, casting the peaks in an eerily beautiful silvery light, Diane knew something had gone very wrong. Her husband was missing. They would go for help in the morning.

The call came in to the Sublette County Sheriff's Office in Pinedale at 10:06 a.m., August 10, and the dispatcher notified Danny Holgate. A strong, compact man with a cop's direct gaze, 42-year-old Holgate has been working search and rescue for 18 years, the last 6 as search commander. He's helped build Tip Top Search and Rescue from a "jeep and beer operation" ("jump in a jeep, drive to a remote spot, and drink beer until the guy walks out") into one of the best all-volunteer units in the country. Yet every instinct told him this one was not going to be easy. The search area was immense: two national forests, two sides of the Continental Divide, two counties, three designated wilderness areas, and the Wind River Indian Reservation. As one volunteer claimed, "You could have every volunteer in Wyoming link arms and never cover a quarter of it."

As the helicopter banked for another pass, Holgate strained to make out new footprints on Gannett Glacier and thought, "Hell of a place to get lost."



Photos by Todd Meier, Mike Turner (inset)

I feel so foolish taking this longer pass," Turner wrote on the Wednesday after he was trapped. "So lonely, more than I imagined...Who would have guessed that 4 days would have gone by and no one has come this way?"

Although the loneliness was difficult, the weather was his most immediate threat. Records from the weather station at nearby Big Piney show that temperatures during that time broke 100°F during the day and dropped to 39°F at night. Five thousand feet higher in the mountains, the cold nights would have seemed endless, the midday sun brutal. The merciless cycle of cold and heat wrings the

water from a human body. At rest, a human male loses about 2 1/2 quarts every day through sweat, urination, and respiration. Heat, exposure to sun and wind, and physical exertion such as struggling with a boulder can double the loss. Thirst begins at just a .8 percent drop in body weight from water loss. A 3 to 4 percent loss, which can easily occur in just 24 hours of exposure, can cause fatigue and confusion. At 10 percent, physical and mental deterioration begins. A 15 to 25 percent drop causes death.

At first, Turner melted snow, but the few pockets he could reach soon ran out. Once, he tied a length of cord to the lid of his water bottle and tried tossing it into the lake. It jammed in the rocks just a few feet short. Another night. The dead cold of the boulders sucked the warmth from his body. He woke again and again, shivering.

Another day, hours on end with nothing but the sound of the wind shoving against the mountains, an occasional whistle from a pika in the talus. Without water, exposed to the elements, Turner soon began feeling the effects, hallucinating once that he could see Diane and Katie standing nearby.

"They had been on the rock. I cried out aloud for you. The rock seemed to have moved...[I]t is like others are present, only it is Andy and then I am doing something because 'they' suggested it."

But there was no "they." Every moan of the wind must have seemed like a human voice, every clatter of rock like an approaching footstep. Still, no one appeared. Mike Turner was alone, almost.

"God is with me but I am angry with him. Why this terrible injustice, or is it the product of pride? This sense of wrestling against God or the angel of God is distressing. What can I do against God?...I don't want to be fighting against God's will. How am I failing him or what does he need me to teach? What is the purpose of this ordeal? Will I ever know, or continue to be puzzled, angered, and feel quite abandoned by the one I serve?"

To a man who had spent most of his adult life teaching others the joys of God's eternal presence in their lives, the sense of abandonment must have been gut wrenching. Steeped in biblical teachings, he could not help but recognize the parallels between his entrapment and the imprisonment of Paul or the Old Testament sufferings of Job. He understood that even a lifetime of faith and obedience did not keep a person from pain and suffering, but this was more than even he could have imagined.

"Last evening I was getting my bedding set around my feet, my bedding can't get down there normally, when I noticed something like a cast on the front of my leg. It was my leg without feeling. I felt like I had to get out and began working from 9 p.m. to 12, slowly levering the rock. Now it is tighter. I cried out and cried out to God who doesn't seem to care about my suffering, struggling, and pain, and the loss of my left leg. I begged and prayed for some help in moving the rock but none seemed to come."

He was, in a sense, living out his own parable deep in the wilderness, alternately wracked by guilt, anger, hope, betrayal, and yearning. The question of faith must never have seemed so stark, so simple, and yet so difficult. Alone in a way few people experience,

Turner had only the biblical promise that nothing, "neither death, nor life, nor angels...nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God."

Sometime after the 5th day, as Turner shifted his body or struggled against the boulder, the journal slipped out of his reach. In the time he had been trapped, the notebook had kept his voice and hopes alive, providing him with a thin, frayed connection to his family and friends, to a life beyond the pile of rocks. Now it was gone. Frantically, he dug for anything to write on. In his first-aid kit he found a pocket New Testament, and over the next few days he filled the blank pages at the front and back. When those were full, he used the margins of the only piece of paper he had left, the instruction sheet for his one-burner camp stove.

These notes are less organized, less legible. *"Shutting down,"* he wrote as he passed a week trapped in the rocks. *"Getting low. Thought I would be found yesterday...Many thoughts, most of church, future for kids, some friends...I love you Diane, terribly sorry for stupid [unreadable word]."* Even with the scrawled, undated entries in the Bible and on the instruction sheet, it is impossible to imagine what the last days of Mike Turner's life were like—the burning dryness of his throat, the cramping muscles, his mind losing track of time and place. "3," he wrote, and then circled it. *"Journal, the Bible, and this,"* clues to be sure all his notes would be found. *"Fading to nothing. So skinny."* He removed his wedding ring and set it on a rock nearby so that it would not slip off his finger and be lost.

As a pastor, Mike Turner had been called upon hundreds of times to comfort others in the face of death. At funerals and in the hushed living rooms of mourning families, he had overseen the passing of others. Now, alone in one of the wildest places on the continent, he was, in effect, overseeing his own. *"Fill me with peace, Lord. May the conditions not deny my love for you...I am ready to die, though missing my family. To live is Christ. To die is gain...I will trust in God though he will slay me, yet will I trust him, he is the way, the truth, the light."*

As his final hours approached, Turner's body was shutting down; but it was as though his spirit was opening up. All the questions, all the doubt and anger seemed to dissolve like so much morning mist on that unnamed lake. What remained was the unbreakable bedrock of belief.

"God loves [unreadable word] Love Dad, Mike," the last legible line reads. A boulder could crush his legs; it could not crush his faith. And then, 10 days after he was pinned, Mike Turner's journal goes silent.



Photo by Mike Turner

In the flurry of days that followed Diane's initial call for help, a "hasty team" traced Turner's itinerary. Retailer REI faxed in the track pattern for the size 13 Asolo hiking boot Turner wore, so searchers could look for prints. Posters went up at trailheads, in every storefront from Pinedale to Lander. The Turner children collected names

from trailhead registers and matched them with phone numbers off the Internet. Carloads of volunteers from Turner's congregation converged on the Wind Rivers to help. "We've never had a search like this one in terms of the family and friends being so involved and so helpful," Holgate says. "It was obvious from the start that this guy was loved and respected."

But even with all of those eyes out there looking, clue after clue led nowhere. And time was running out. More than 70 percent of lost victims found alive are discovered within the first 48 hours. Of those who don't survive, 75 percent die within the first 3 days. "I pulled Danny aside at one point," Mark Smith remembers, "and asked straight out how long someone could last out there." Holgate answered that with a traumatic injury, "you'd probably make it through the first night. You might make it through the second. The third night would probably get you." It was now nearly 3 weeks since anyone had seen Mike Turner.

On August 23, the search for Mike Turner was called off. "The case isn't closed," Holgate told the family. "We'll throw everything we have at any new lead. But for now, we've done all that we can." As the days grew colder and the first snow dusted the high peaks, it seemed that Mike Turner's fate would become a secret of the mountains. "We needed to catch a break," Holgate says.

And then they got one.

Five days after the search was called off, Turner's dog Andy walked out of the wilderness led by a pair of hikers who had seen the posters at the trailhead. Wet, footsore, and 20 pounds lighter, the dog was exhausted but not hurt. He was taken to a veterinary clinic and rested while searchers and the family regrouped. "Andy being found alive opened up a whole new realm of emotions for me," Diane says. "I was hopeful but still trying to be realistic."

On August 31, more than a month after Mike Turner had set out and 23 days after his family had expected him at Big Sandy, a search team set out on one more trip into the Wind Rivers, hoping Andy would lead them to some answers. That same day, Jeff Stewart, a hiker from San Diego, was making his way along the edge of the unnamed

lake near the Brown Cliffs on a 9-day cross-country hike with a route eerily similar to Mike Turner's. Intent on his footing in the loose rocks, Stewart glanced up and, 50 yards away, saw what appeared to be a man sitting up in the rocks. "I had seen the posters at the trailhead and knew they were looking for someone," he says. "So I called out, 'Hey, are you all right?' There was no answer. I knew there wouldn't be." Stewart already knew who it was.

On September 3, just as the search team prepared to drop off Indian Pass onto Knife Point Glacier with Andy in the lead, their radio crackled to life. It was Danny Holgate: Turn around, he said. A hiker had walked into the Sublette County Sheriff's office carrying a wallet. It belonged to Mike Turner.

The coroner performed an autopsy and filed a report showing that Mike Turner had died sometime on August 11, the same day the first helicopter carrying Danny Holgate lifted off to begin the search.



Photo by Diane Turner

More than 3 years after her husband's death, Diane Turner sits in the family room of her home in Caldwell, Idaho, gently holding a thin, red spiral notebook, the journal of Mike Turner's "Wander in Wonder." Daughter Jill, who was just starting college when the search began, is now engaged to be married; Ben is a

freshman in college; Katie, a junior in high school, plays volleyball. Andy goes on fewer hikes these days, but he still smears the patio doors with his nose trying to get in or out. "Oh, if he could only talk," Diane says with a sad smile.

"It was only this spring," she says, "that I began to finally see things not through the filter of Mike's death." There is still pain and tears and questions. But there is healing, too. "We knew an extended solo hike could be dangerous, but I've always believed that to live fully sometimes involves risk," she says. "Our Christian faith points us towards a life of courage."

One year to the day after Mike Turner was to complete his hike at Big Sandy trailhead, his family and a small group of friends returned to the Wind Rivers. They hiked the same torturous trail; Diane carried her husband's ashes on her back. In a private ceremony deep in the heart of the Wind River Range, Mike Turner's ashes were given to the winds over Island Lake, the spot that had filled his soul with its "amazing beauty." That night, while walking alone on the lake's edge, Diane Turner looked down to notice millions of stars reflected in the still water, as if heaven were glancing at itself in a mirror. "It was

perfect," she remembers, "the beauty of God's heaven reflecting in the beauty of God's wilderness."

It was the kind of moment Mike Turner would have loved.