

## To The Rescue

### A FAMILY TOGETHER FEATURE

*By Kathy Vilim DaGroomes*

**Whether participating in a wilderness ground search or supporting it from home, this family of five makes every search and rescue mission it undertakes a team effort.**

- [On an M/SAR Search Operation](#)

It's 2 a.m. at the Paulding's Columbia, Md., home, and the phone rings. It's the Maryland Search and Rescue (M/SAR) Venturing crew's vice president of operations, alerting Pamela Paulding that a 3-year-old girl is missing in a remote wooded area some three hours away. A search is being launched immediately, he says, and the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (ASRC) is requesting that M/SAR, the Venturing crew which Pamela heads as senior Advisor, send searchers to the scene now.

The lights go on. Pamela, one of 40 youth and adult members of M/SAR potentially available for the search, agrees to be part of it. She awakens or calls those of her three children—Clayton, Georgia, and Alice, all veteran members of M/SAR—who are currently available. Within 45 minutes of that first phone call, dad Jeffrey bids his ever-prepared family members adios into the night.

Welcome to the ready-at-a-moment's-notice world of ground search and rescue (SAR), in which every minute counts in saving a life. And meet the Pauldings, a family that's up to the challenge.

"It's rare to find young people willing to devote so much of their time to rigorous search missions," says Erik Nystrom, director of the BSA's Western Region and formerly Scout executive for the [Baltimore Area council](#). "The Pauldings take search and rescue seriously."

Clayton Paulding, 23, earned his Eagle Scout Award as a member of Boy Scout Troop 874 in Howard County but simultaneously participated in Maryland Search and Rescue Venturing Crew 616 while in high school. He visited one SAR Venturing crew meeting at the invitation of an adult leader in his Boy Scout troop and was hooked.

Recently having returned to Columbia after graduation from college, Clayton serves as communications adviser for M/SAR.

Mom Pamela became involved with the Venturing crew when Clayton joined in 1994 and has served as senior Advisor since 1996. Georgia, 20, who attends a nearby college and has worked the last three summers as a staff member at Philmont Scout Ranch, has been a member of M/SAR since 1996; she participates in the Venturing crew's rigorous monthly trainings and searches when possible.

So does her younger sister, Alice, 16, who is vice president of training for M/SAR and a high school junior.

## **Missing persons and planes**

Venturing Crew 616 participates in prolonged SAR missions mainly in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania to find missing persons and downed planes. That means the Paulding household relies heavily on that all-important person at home to coordinate people, and family plans and events.

"No one does search and rescue without support of family and friends," says Pamela.

Enter dad Jeffrey, business owner; former Army ranger trained in jungle, mountain, and arctic environments; and a recently retired lieutenant colonel with the U.S. Army Reserve.

Not only has Dad been a good sport throughout the years about handling carpools and pet care on short notice, but he has also passed on indispensable land-navigation and other skills honed as an Army infantry officer in wilderness areas at night to his wife and children. He has especially helped them in two key aspects of SAR: always knowing one's location and being comfortable in the woods at night.

"Knowing how to find where you are in the woods and travel from that location to another location involves studying maps and compasses and knowing how to correct for magnetic error and those sorts of techniques, which are not precise," says Jeffrey. "Nowadays, we have GPS [global positioning system]...but you can't necessarily rely on that."

"When you are on searches," adds Alice, "if you find a clue or the subject or if you're just on-task, the people working at base have you do radio checks. Usually they ask about what your positioning is on the map...Your goal is to constantly know where you are so that you don't have to tell base workers to stand by; so that you don't get lost and cause more problems; and so that if you find a clue or the subject, you know immediately where you are on the map."

Being comfortable in the woods at night is an "attitude" they have encouraged in their children, say both Jeffrey and Pamela.

## **Concentration is everything**

"I taught my children all the tricks I used in the Army—how to walk, and how to look using your peripheral vision so you can see better at night," says Jeffrey. "I've always taught the kids that you're safer at night; you just use your ears. You have to blend in; you can't let your fears take over."

Adds Pamela: "When you are on a search, concentration is everything. So if you are distracted by bugs buzzing or you are afraid that you are going to touch poison ivy or, 'Oh my goodness, I might get dirty,' you cannot put your full concentration on hunting for clues or hunting for a subject."

"Most people think that when there is a search, we are looking for a person, but what you are [first] doing is looking for clues," explains Clayton. These clues are called in to "base," then flagged on-site and/or followed up on at a later time if deemed important by search coordinators.

## **Stuck in quicksand**

It is the searching, not rescuing, that constitutes the main part of any type of SAR, because, sadly, most searches result in body retrieval rather than rescue.

"We don't really call them search and rescues; we call them searches," says Georgia, "because it's not typical that you are going to have a rescue."

"On the rare occasions that you are on the Find team, or the Evacuation team, your glee surpasses all description," adds Pamela.

But the infrequent glee is offset by hard realities.

"Being on a search operation means dealing with the pressure of not knowing whether you will find a person in need of immediate medical attention or someone already deceased," Pamela says. "It means eating old, cold food because that is all that is left at base when you get back from your task at 2 in the morning.

"It may mean seeing up close the pain of family members who are facing the stark reality of a lost child. Or it could include dealing respectfully with the ignorance of well-meaning local volunteers, who are there because they want to help but lack search training and are often inadequately dressed for the weather and terrain."

And there are dangers as well.

"One time we were looking for an Alzheimer's patient, and I got stuck in quicksand," remembers Georgia. "I was still pretty young—the youngest on the search team—and I didn't want to draw attention to myself or show that I was doing anything wrong. I tried to get myself out of the mess I was in, but when I couldn't, I finally realized that I had to call out to the field team leader."

## **A chance to make a difference**

Alongside the harsh realities and dangers, though, are the rewards.

"Once you actually go on the search and start to see some of the tangible evidence of your involvement, it's a great feeling that you can actually help out," says Clayton.

"As a teenager, there are not many opportunities to do things that actually make a difference," Alice adds. "Search and rescue gives you a real opportunity to make a difference in someone's life."

Jeffrey knows well the effort put forth by his wife and children in their SAR participation. "Pamela was asked to be senior Advisor of the Venturing crew, and she's become more and more involved and comfortable in the outdoors," he says. "Of course, it started with Clayton—he set the example for Georgia; Georgia set the example for Alice, so it's sort of built upon itself for each of them. Search and rescue requires them to focus that energy and makes them develop the skills and confidence to do all this."

The Pauldings say they have grown closer because of their SAR involvement.

"The first time I ever went on a training weekend," Georgia recalls, "my brother sat me down, got out his pack, and put all sorts of stuff that I might need in it. He wasn't going to be there, but he took such good care of me. He gave me all sorts of hints and tips."

Then there's the experience of working on a search together. "The opportunities for any two or three of us to be on a search team together—it's an unbelievable experience," says Pamela. "For example, Georgia and I were on one together that turned out to be a very pivotal task [in identifying an important clue]."

### **Family life comes first**

While Pamela almost puts in enough hours weekly to make a full-time job out of her Venturing Crew 616 senior Advisor responsibilities, she emphasizes that a family's commitment to SAR shouldn't come before family life.

"Search and rescue is something that we do, but it's not our whole life," she says. "Your own family life has to come first, and you must be very careful not to let your desire to help other people cause you to neglect your own family."

That said, the mother of three points out that in a family of people with very different interests, SAR has given her family a point of shared experience.

"We are really a family of individuals," says Pamela. "It's rare for the five of us to be together. Alice does ballet; Georgia does theater; Clayton is a computer nut and also a musician; Jeffrey is a bicyclist. But being in the woods and doing search and rescue, then coming home, sitting around the dining room table and talking about the search, whether one went or not—there is such a team effort.

"Search and rescue has given us a common language."

*Kathy Vilim DaGroomes is associate editor of Scouting magazine.*

## On an M/SAR Search Operation

The broad outline of a Venturing Crew 616 search is typical of those undertaken by Venturing units that specialize in search and rescue (SAR), and looks something like this:

Maryland Search and Rescue (the crew's professional name, or M/SAR) is notified by the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference (ASRC) that a wilderness ground search has been called for a lost person or plane. Within an hour of the call, about 15 to 25 percent of M/SAR's active membership—some 5 to 10 people—has met at a central location, collected equipment and gear, and boarded cars and the crew's emergency vehicle for the search location.

Once there, Venturing Crew 616 members help form the ASRC's much larger trained search group. Possible wilderness locations include swamps and semipopulated areas, dangerous because residents there live far apart and are wary of strangers—in this case, searchers conducting interviews or requesting permission to search private property.

While M/SAR has 35 to 40 active youth and adult members, the ASRC to which it belongs as one of nine member organizations has more than 500 active members in four states. As such, ASRC serves as one of the largest SAR resources in the country.

### Physically able, mentally tough

Depending on the skills and certification levels of the trained participants present, whether or not dogs will be used, and whether it is daytime or night, the M/SAR-ASRC searchers will either lead groups of untrained volunteers or form groups composed of trained searchers only. In the latter case, a group of 5 to 8 searchers might be assigned a thumb-size area on the map to search, which could take them roughly six hours.

M/SAR trains and drills year round in the various aspects of SAR, including first aid, litter-carrying, land-navigation, hiking, backpacking, survival preparedness, rappelling, and rock climbing—many of the Venturing Ranger skills. Physical ability and mental toughness are musts for SAR.

Venturing Crew 616's skills are called on frequently: M/SAR was contacted for 8 searches in summer 2001 alone.

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