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First Aid -- Wilderness and Remote style

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This entry isn't a chronicle of a long endurance hike or a weekend of backpacking trudging through the wilderness, but nevertheless documents one of the best weekends I've ever spent in the woods. Throughout the years, I've always wanted to take a first aid course, but always relied on 'common-sense' and notions about safety that I usually try to employ on every excursion into the outdoors. However, after what we learned on the weekend, from classroom instruction on the first day to crazy and intense real-to-life scenarios in the following days and nights, I realized that a few changes would come to my hiking trips, with particular improvements to my knowledge, equipment or planning of my trips. So, on the weekend of March 8, 9 and 10, 2002, Kris Griffon and I headed out to the Halifax Search and Rescue Base located in Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia. It would be an interesting, informative and challenging weekend of first aid and practical learning.

When we arrived at the base for the 10pm start time, Kris and I were a bit skeptical about the course, as well as the type of people that we would meet. But, after entering and beginning the first day, we realized that the group of 25 participants that were also taking the course would be an interesting eclectic bunch of outdoors enthusiasts, from day hikers and trail runners, to hunters and group leaders and us, the serious backcountry types. Also during the first day, I immediately became aware of the knowledge and enthusiasm of the instructors, particularly Blair Doyle and Andrew Foran. Hailing from Search and Rescue and Paramedic backgrounds, it became clear that we would learn a lot from these guys, who showed that First Aid could be made simple...and could certainly be performed by the ordinary person, stripping the commonly held interpretations that effective help in an emergency can only be meted out by professionals.

The first day was mostly classroom bound, where we learned the basic sections of a 'standard-first aid' course, including introductory talks about the human body and its functions, as well as CPR and Artificial respiration. As the day progressed, it was made clear that the difference between this course and the urban first aid courses was the depth. During the weekend, we became aware that urban first aid only covers the essentials, relying on the 911 response system where first-aiders maintain the situation or emergency until EMS arrives.

Wilderness and Remote First Aid goes well beyond the basics of urban aid, addressing many issues that quickly become important when an emergency occurs in the backcountry, including the environment & terrain, shelter, food and distance! We learned quickly that the backcountry first aider has much more responsibility in the event of a serious injury and must take many of these factors into consideration. What do I mean? Well, say for instance that you are on a long distance hike to Pollett's Cove for example, which is 9kms from the main (dirt) road (and much further distance from the nearest hospital at Inverness). If a serious injury unfortunately happened, it might be at least a day before help could arrive at the location. In that time, we learned that many things can take place, injuries can become more serious and even life threatening, groups can become restless and the basics of food and shelter become more important. So, in Wilderness First Aid we were instructed how to retain control of a difficult situation, by assessing the incident, taking data and information of the injury, performing an assessment of the injury and planning and effecting a treatment and evacuation. From the course, we learned a structure of administering aid that would guide how we reacted to situations and scenarios of every dimension that occurred in the following days of the course.

The course continued the next day, and involved much more outdoor learning, where we quickly found several uses for our hiking gear in first aid, changing my perceptions on what is necessary to bring! Scenarios in the woods were lifelike, with actors feigning injuries (or death in some cases), where the instructors assessed how we approached the situations. We applied our structure of aid, used the team and group for help, and also used our equipment to treat anything from a broken leg, lacerated hand, diabetic and even spinal injuries.

The best and most eye opening situation that we were presented with was one that occurred late Saturday night. In the situation we encountered, we came across a group of boaters whose craft had capsized in a nearby lake, and several injuries had afflicted the group. Kris and I were the first on the scene, and began working on the people closest to us, including one man who was floating face down in the lake. During what ended up being an hour and a half scenario, we had retrieved the man from the lake, treated him for hypothermia, performed Artificial respiration several times, as well as a difficult evacuation to a nearby campsite. From this situation, I learned so much...and it was unbelievably intense. After successfully keeping the man alive (who was one of the instructors), and hauling him to camp, I was exhausted, drained and stressed! I couldn't imagine a real situation that would span several days! It was an excellent test of our abilities and judgment, as well as our patience.

After three days and overnighter in the woods, Kris and I came out of the course a bit tired, but full of enthusiasm and knowledge about first aid and trip planning. We learned that hiking and backcountry travel is a bit more serious than we had always taken it. We'd always done things hard and fast, but after this weekend, we'd probably do things still at the same intensity, but with a little more preparation and knowledge of what 'could' happen, and taking steps to prevent or manage the unexpected. Overall, I would recommend this course to anyone who travels the backcountry, or really anyone who ventures out for anything outdoors. It is a well planned and FULL weekend of learning, that will redirect your knowledge of the activities you do, in a bit to be able to offer help, but to also remain safe! A special thanks goes out to the instructors for an excellent and confidence-building weekend.

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