

# THE STORY OF MY BEAR ENCOUNTER

By Joe Frazier

## The attack and the path back to healing

**M**y old college roommate and I used to get together every year at the end of the summer and do a 3-4 day marathon backpacking trip in either Wyoming or Montana. He was a grade school principal in Cody, Wyoming and I was a federal employee in Montana. In 1993 it was his turn to organize the hike. Instead of hiking he decided we should do something different. I brought my canoe down from Montana and we met at Fishing Bridge in Yellowstone Park. We put the canoe on the ferry and got dropped off at the mouth of the Southeast Arm of Yellowstone Lake. We paddled upstream to a campsite he had been to before. We were both fly fishermen and the first full day there we were just nailing cutthroat trout. The next day we woke up to 30 mph winds with gusts over 40 mph. So much for fly fishing. We decided to do an all day hike to an area about 5-6 miles from camp. He knew from previous visits that there would be a lot of elk drops and whoever found the largest one would get the six pack of beer we had in camp.

At about five miles we split up and I followed a stream while he went up to an adjacent terrace. While I was walking along the stream I surprised a grizzly bear that was sleeping next to the stream. I was about 40-50 yards from the bear when he stood up and about 20 yards from a lone pine tree out in the adjacent sagebrush. I thought I could get up that tree before he got to me. Wrong. He was on me in a flash and hit me from behind in my left leg. I went down so fast that he actually went over me before he could turn around. I thought I had a broken leg and that he would come back and attack my head, a favorite spot in bear attacks. I got into the tuck position as best I could and wrapped my arms around my head thinking if he started chewing on me I wanted to protect my eyes. It was so windy I could not hear him and after a minute or so I decided he had left. Wrong. As I moved my head to see around me, I discovered to my dismay that he was behind me no more than three feet away. When he saw me move he swatted me on the hip and rolled me over. I immediately tried to get back in the tuck position but my leg hurt so bad I had to leave it out straight. I waited for what seemed like forever and nothing happened. So, I turned my head to look and he was still there, another swat, another attempt to get back into the tuck position. By now my leg was giving me incredible pain. This happened one more time and then on the fourth time to look, he was gone. All this probably took 10-15 minutes but it seemed like an hour. I laid there for a long time thinking my friend would come back. He actually did but he was next to the stream about 40-50 yards away. The wind was so noisy and the sagebrush I was in was tall enough to prevent us from seeing each other. After a couple of hours I

decided he was not coming back my way so I started crawling around that lone tree gathering up all the fire wood I could find thinking I may have to spend the night. I found only enough wood to last maybe two hours. I did find six piles of bear scat and a dished out area where one had been laying. Prospects of surviving the night there were slim to none. I used the straightest pieces of wood I had gathered, some parachute cord (I always carry a little in my fanny pack) and half a role of black electrical tape to make a splint. I managed to get upright and hobbled off toward camp, five and a half miles away. At the first stand of timber I came to, I found a forked stick, taped my T-shirt around the fork for padding and found that it made a pretty good crutch. After an hour or so I came to the fallen log that we had used to cross the stream. It had enough branches sticking up that I thought I could go from one to the next and get across. Wrong. I fell in about half way across and managed to get to the bank about 50 yards downstream. That did not do my leg any good. After an hour of drying off and redoing my splint I resumed hobbling back to camp. I was blowing my whistle every 100 yards and did spook another bear, but he ran away. When I got to the main trail my friend had built a pile of rocks with a note stuck in the top telling me that he was going to wait until 10:00 pm and then canoe out to a ranger cabin that we had passed on our way in and get help. By now it was 9:00 pm and luckily a near full moon was shining. I made it back to camp with 10 minutes to spare. My buddy told me I could have that six pack myself and it might relieve some of the pain. I said if I drank six beers, I would be up going to the bathroom every hour. Forget that! We spent the night there and canoed out to Yellowstone Lake the next morning, caught the ferry, and arrived back at Fishing Bridge at 3:00 pm. We got help loading the canoe and getting me in the cab of our pickup and headed for the emergency room at the hospital in Cody.

At the hospital in Cody I got X-rays and exams from the orthopedic surgeon. He said I had about 48 hours to get the leg fixed or I would probably limp the rest of my life. I had snapped the patellar tendon, broken the ACL and torn the MCL. It had already been 24 hours and he assured me that he could do as good a job as any surgeon in Montana. I said "lets do it". I had enough time to call my wife and tell her that I was in the Cody Hospital and was going into surgery in about an hour. She said "sure, which bar are you and Bob in". I told her I had encountered a grizzly bear and she said "BS". I handed the phone to the surgeon and he finally convinced her that I was not in any bar. After the surgery I spent six weeks in a full length leg brace that went from my hip to my ankle and with no bend and no weight on the leg. The next six weeks I would go into the physical therapist weekly and get another 5-10 degrees of bend in the brace. The last six weeks I wore the brace all day but could take it off in bed. After 18 weeks the surgeon told me to put the brace and crutches away and start gradually working into my normal routine. He also said I would probably have some level of pain for at least a year if not longer. I started jogging again after six months.

That was the easy part. The hard part was coming. The next eight years resulted in ever increasing pain. I kept calling the surgeon in Cody who told me I was probably overdoing it by hunting,

backpacking, packing out elk, training for triathlons etc. After six years of favoring my left knee, I tore the meniscus in my right knee. The local orthopedic surgeon fixed the knee with arthroscopic surgery. No big deal, I was back to my normal routine in a couple of weeks. Another year went by and the pain kept increasing in my left knee. I was referred to a surgeon in Billings who said that the pain was coming from the large amount of scar tissue around the knee joint. He used arthroscopic surgery and removed a lot of the scar tissue. Trouble was, even with an MRI and an X-ray, he missed what was really going on in my knee. The surgery did not relieve the pain, in fact it got worse. A couple of months later I had to quit jogging because the pain was too intense. At the end of eight years, after spending a week in the woods hunting elk, I developed a quarter sized blister on my leg several inches below my repaired knee. I went back to the local surgeon who had repaired my meniscus. When I told him I had just spent a week hunting and sleeping on the ground, he said it looked like a spider bite. He prescribed an antibiotic. It went away in a couple of days. Two weeks later it was back again but lower on the leg. I went back to the same surgeon who suggested I get my house fumigated and prescribed a different antibiotic. Again, the blister was gone in two or three days. Two weeks later it reappeared again and lower on the leg. Time to switch doctors. I went to my local doctor, a GP. He took one look at it and said "I want you to go home, pack you shaving kit and some clothes and get on the road to Billings tonight". "I do not know what it is, but it's serious". I spent the next three days in Billings being prodded and poked by three different infectious disease doctors. Their prognosis was a low grade staph infection that had turned into osteomyelitis and was eating away at the bone in my lower leg. The infection most likely resulted from the operation eight years earlier. The surgeon said the repair on my knee was old technology even eight years ago and needed to be redone. They operated by cutting open the leg from the knee to just above the ankle and scraping the bone to remove the infection and redoing the repair to the patellar tendon. I was then put on the strongest antibiotic then available for the next six weeks which was administered twice a day through a catheter in my chest. I was also given another antibiotic via a daily pill which they normally give tuberculosis patients. Another six weeks in the leg brace with no bend and no weight on the leg followed by another six weeks of gradually bending and putting weight on the knee. After that things got back to normal, or so I thought. I still favored my left knee and after 15 years completely wore out the cartilage in the right knee. I needed a total knee replacement. The two previous major knee surgeries had resulted in 30 weeks in a full length knee brace and 18 weeks on crutches and many hours of rehab. I was not looking forward to another major knee surgery. To my surprise, they had me up walking (with a walker) six hours after surgery. After three days in the hospital, I went home and never used crutches, a walker or a knee brace. I was hitting tennis balls on the ball machine after five weeks and playing tennis a week later. Week eight saw me hiking with the club again. Surgical procedures have come a long way since I met that bear 27 years ago. Isn't science wonderful!