Aron Ralston - Between a Rock and the Hardest Place

What happens when a solitary day hike turns into the ultimate test of survival?

By: MARK JENKINS

Photo: Illustration by Istvan Banyai
At 11 O’CLOCK ON THE NIGHT OF FRIDAY, April 25, 27-year-old Aron Ralston parked his truck at the Horseshoe Canyon Trailhead, west of Canyonlands National Park in southeastern Utah, and slept in the covered bed. The next morning at 9:15, he bicycled 15 miles south along Maze-Robbers Roost Road until he reached a shortcut leading to the head of Bluejohn Canyon’s main fork. He locked his mountain bike to a juniper tree and set out on foot toward the gulch.

By 2:45 p.m., Ralston had started his solo descent into the deep, narrow slot of Bluejohn Canyon. Passing over and then under boulders that clogged the three-foot-wide penumbral passage, Ralston was negotiating a ten-foot drop between two ledges when an 800-pound boulder shifted above him. He snapped his left hand out of its path in time, but his right hand was smashed between the rock and the sandstone wall.

"The adrenaline was pumping very, very hard through my body," Ralston recounted at his May 8 press conference at St. Mary’s Hospital in Grand Junction, Colorado, one of only several broadcast appearances he’s made since his accident. (At press time, he’d done no print interviews; he had, however, assisted Outside in verifying the account that follows.) "It took some good, calm thinking to get myself to calm down and stop throwing myself against the boulder."
Ralston was trapped, alone in a remote canyon. Rescue was unlikely: He'd neglected to inform anyone of where he was going, which he later acknowledged is "something I almost always do but I failed to do this time."

Six foot two, long, lean, and fit, Ralston is an accomplished outdoor athlete. He first became interested in climbing in 1996, after reading about the Everest disaster in which eight mountaineers lost their lives in a single storm. "I wondered what I would do if I were in a situation like that," he told a reporter earlier this year.

He grew up in Colorado and graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon University in 1997, with a double major in mechanical engineering and French, then worked at Intel for five years, hopscotching to posts in Phoenix, Tacoma, and then Albuquerque, where he volunteered on a local search-and-rescue team. In the spring of 2002, he moved to Aspen, Colorado, took a retail job at Ute Mountaineering, a local shop, and began training to become a guide. According to his Web site, Aron's Optimal Experiences On-Line, Ralston has built an impressive outdoor résumé: topping out on 34 of the 50 states' highest points, soloing 45 of Colorado's 59 fourteeners in winter, and, in June of 2002, summiting 20,320-foot Mount McKinley.

This kind of serious adventure invariably involves risk. In March 2003, Ralston and two companions were backcountry skiing on Resolution Peak, in central Colorado, when they got caught in an avalanche. "I just remember rolling down with it. Powder was swirling all around, and I was trying to breathe, but I would breathe a mixture of snow and air, and you'd swallow it like seawater," Ralston told The Denver Post after the slide. "It was horrible. It should have killed us."

It didn't. Buried up to his neck, Ralston was rescued by his friend, and together they dug out the third skier. It was less than a month later when he embarked on a solo day hike in the Utah desert.

After the boulder crushed his hand, Ralston explained at the press conference, "I very quickly figured out some of my options. I began laying plans for what I was going to do." He also inventoried his provisions: two burritos, one liter of water, and some candy bar crumbs. One possibility was that "someone would happen along the trail" and rescue him. No one did, so he
spent the first of five nights in the slot canyon working on Plan B: futilely chipping away at the rock with his multitool, a cheap knockoff of a Leatherman model.

The next day, Sunday, using his climbing gear and his search-and-rescue skills, he moved to Plan C: rigging ropes in an attempt to hoist the boulder off his hand. This also failed.

On Monday, he rerigged the ropes and again tried moving the rock. "At no point was I ever able, with any of the rope mechanics, to get the boulder to budge even microscopically," Ralston said.

He kept chipping away at the boulder, but over the next few days he would often simply pause. "There were times when I thought that was the most efficient use of my time," he explained.

He thought a lot about dying and was afraid at first, but he "came to peace with death over the time spent in the canyon."

On day four of his ordeal, Tuesday, April 29, Ralston ran out of water. Realizing he would die of dehydration within days, he prepared to reckon with his last resort: severing his hand with the blunt blade of his multitool.

"Essentially I got my surgical table ready and applied the knife to my arm, and started sawing back and forth. But I didn't even break the skin. I couldn't even cut the hair off of my arm, the knife was so dull," he said.

On Wednesday, he managed to puncture the skin but realized he wouldn't be able to cut through the bone.

By Thursday, May 1, growing weak and having passed through stages of depression, hope, and prayer, Ralston decided he would have to break his arm near the wrist to extricate himself. "I was able to first snap the radius," he calmly recalled, "and then, within a few minutes, snap the ulna at the wrist, and from there I had the knife out and applied the tourniquet and went to task. It was a process that took about an hour."

He sawed through the soft tissue between the broken bones and amputated his hand.
"All the desires, joys, and euphorias of a future life came rushing into me," Ralston stated at the press conference. "Maybe this is how I handled the pain. I was so happy to be taking action."

Ralston rigged his rope, set his anchors, rappelled 60 feet to the floor of Bluejohn Canyon, and hiked five miles downstream into Horseshoe Canyon, supporting the bloody stump of his right arm in a makeshift sling fashioned from a CamelBak pack. He ran into three hikers from Holland who gave him Oreos and water and helped him carry his pack another mile. At 3 p.m., he was finally rescued by a helicopter, which had begun searching for him when friends in Aspen, worried because he hadn't shown up for work, called the Utah authorities.

Flown first to Allen Memorial Hospital, in Moab, Utah, he walked unaided off the helicopter to a waiting gurney team. Later that day, he was transferred to St. Mary’s Hospital in Grand Junction, where he underwent the first of several surgical procedures to prepare his right arm for a prosthesis. Three days later, a team of 13 rangers trekked into the canyon to retrieve Ralston’s hand. Using a hydraulic jack and a grip hoist, it took them an hour to lift the boulder. Ralston had carved the words good luck now into the rock just before he severed his hand.

IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS after the accident, more than 500 articles worldwide and hundreds of TV and radio news segments recounted the gruesome details of Ralston’s self-rescue. His story held us spellbound.

Why?

Because it was real. It trumped the repulsive sensationalism of Fear Factor, the voyeurism of Survivor, and the improbable terrors of The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook. It was life-or-death. No safety net. No film crews. No prizes but the biggest: life.

But there was something else.

A friend and I were discussing the story when he confided, "You know, I guess I have doubts. I don't know if I could do that." This from a man who recently had climbed six peaks in Peru in six weeks. And he wasn't the only one. I had dozens of conversations like this after the story hit the press. Aron Ralston, through simple courage and cool self-appraisal, had cut through all the feckless fakery of "reality" TV and prompted us to ask ourselves the inescapable question: Could I do that?
Al Siebert, ex-paratrooper, founder of the Resiliency Center, an outreach program in Portland, Oregon, and author of the 1996 book *The Survivor Personality*, has studied hundreds of stories of survival and has found that, in many cases, the answer may lie in a handful of specific behavioral traits.

"Survivors rapidly read reality," says Siebert. "When something horrible happens, they immediately accept the situation for what it is and consciously decide that they will do everything in their power to get through it." That is, they have the ability to rationally accept dreadful circumstances without becoming angry or passive, two common responses to extreme stress.

"Getting angry is just a waste of precious energy," says Siebert, "and playing the victim dramatically increases your likelihood of dying."

After adjusting to the new circumstances, survivors start looking very hard, but also very imaginatively, for solutions. "I call it integrated problem-solving behavior," says Siebert. "By that I mean it's a mixture of left-brain thinking—logical, linear, Mr. Spock—and right-brain thinking—intuitive, creative, lots of leaps of faith."

One of Siebert's most intriguing discoveries is that survivors tend to exhibit "biphasic personality traits," which means they have oppositional, counterbalancing behavior. "It is to be proud and humble, positive and negative, selfish and unselfish, cooperative and rebellious, spiritual and irreverent," Siebert writes in *The Survivor Personality*. In other words, Hollywood has it wrong: Survivors are not brutish, one-dimensional Rambo types or combustible Scarface maniacs; rather, they are complex, compassionate, and, most important, open-minded.

Peter Suedfeld, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia, who has researched survival psychology for more than 40 years, puts it this way: "Beyond the fundamental will to survive, the foremost character trait of a survivor is intellectual flexibility.

"People under high stress are more likely to become rigid, which only decreases their chances of survival," he continues. Even in a jam, "survivors are extremely adaptable people. They know how to improvise. If one solution doesn't work, they try another. They don't fixate on one answer. They keep an open mind, searching for options, developing strategies."
And there are two other important survivor indicators: optimism and unflappability. True optimists recognize that their predicament is temporary, isolate the problem, understand that even if they haven't found a solution yet, it doesn't mean there isn't one, and recognize that they do have a modicum of control over their fate.

To be unflappable, meanwhile, is to be able to "tolerate bizarre experiences without freaking out." It's the old cliché: Panic kills. There are only three ways to cope in a tough situation—leave the environment, change the environment, or change your attitude. According to Suedfeld, "survivors are capable of recognizing which one, or which combination, will best increase their chances."

So, considering the psychological profile of survivors, if you tend to react to dicey situations with impatience, intolerance, panic, pessimism, passivity, pigheadedness, anger, or any combination thereof, you may not make it out alive.

FORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT JUST a matter of innate character or instinct.

"People absolutely can be trained to survive," says Frank Heyl, a retired air force officer and director of the Combat Aviation Survival School, in Helena, Montana.

"Everybody is born with the will to survive," says Heyl, "but it's like a muscle or a skill. You've got to nurture it, train it, build it up."

You can pick up the basics from any survival manual or basic wilderness-safety course: Never venture into the backcountry alone without leaving word of your intended route and return date. Always, even on a day hike, stock your pack with the fabled "ten essentials": knife, water, food, matches, map and compass, headlamp, cord, proper clothing, and sun protection. Heyl puts two additional items at the top of the list: "Your head is number one. It's the best survival tool there is. Number two: a basic med kit and the understanding of how to use it."

Then you've got to take this knowledge into the field. "It's all about hands-on experience," says Heyl. "Go into your local woods at night, in the wind, when it's raining, and see if you can build a fire. Go out in the winter and practice building a snow shelter. The more you practice survival skills, the better survivor you become." Ralston's SAR skills and his previous experience with
close calls in the backcountry—his own and others'—are what gave him this mental preparedness.

Even for a hardened military veteran like Heyl, surviving isn't about being macho. "Men like to do things by the numbers. They like routine, but this kind of rigidity works against them in a survival situation. Women tend to be more flexible in their thinking, more adaptable, and this can make them better at survival," says Heyl. "It doesn't take Herculean strength to survive."

ARON RALSTON CLEARLY used his head, but would a medical kit or an informed friend have saved his right hand? Probably not. His experience lies at the outer limits of the backcountry-accident bell curve. "You are exponentially more likely to be hit by lightning in the backcountry than to be forced to amputate your arm," says Eric A. Weiss, emergency physician and associate director of trauma at the Stanford University Medical Center and author of A Comprehensive Guide to Wilderness and Travel Medicine. "Lightning is the number-one natural-hazard cause of death, and a sprained ankle is the most common backcountry injury."

Statistics from NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School, bear this out. From 1998 to 2000, NOLS had 465,753 program days and only 526 injuries, 48 percent of which were either sprains or strains caused by slipping on the trail. Wounds, bruisesings, and bee stings accounted for another 21 percent, fractures and dislocations a mere 7 percent, and head injuries 2 percent. Frostbite, dental pain, burns, and infections made up the rest.

Even so, it's the fluky, once-in-a-lifetime accidents that keep us up at night, and it's the survivors' ingenuity—not their errors—that leaves the most lasting impression.

In 1997, Doug Goodale, a 33-year-old Maine lobsterman, cut off his right arm above the elbow after getting it caught in a winch. In 1993, while fishing near St. Mary's Glacier, in Colorado, Bill Jeracki, an ER technician, was pinned to the ground when a boulder crushed his left leg. Snow was forecast, and he'd left his warm jacket in his truck, 300 yards away; Jeracki, 47, didn't believe he would survive the night. Fashioning a tourniquet out of his flannel shirt, he cut his leg off at the knee with his pocketknife, "like you fillet a fish," using metal clips from his fishing kit to clamp the bleeding arteries. Then he dragged himself out to his truck and drove into town to find help.

That same year, bulldozer operator Donald Wyman was clearing trees from a forest in western Pennsylvania when a massive oak crushed his left leg. Using a rawhide bootlace as his
tourniquet (which he tightened with a chainsaw wrench) and a three-inch pocketknife as a scalpel, Wyman amputated his broken leg below the knee.

BUT HAVEN'T WE ALL done what Ralston did—just shot out into the wilds alone without telling anyone? Desperate for quiet, famished for rock, thirsty for streams, craving the smell of pines. And, yes, of course, the chances of our quick trip into the wilderness turning into a life-or-death struggle are remote, but what if...? That's the clincher. What if that boulder, which has been in that same position for a thousand years, inexplicably shifts a fraction of an inch, just at the very moment that your hand is beneath it? What then? What would you do? Would you die?

It's not being dead that scares us. The most frightening thing is being a witness to our own death. Watching it come, knowing we are trapped, alone, with no one to call for help. Perhaps most of all, though, fearing we may have a choice but may lack the courage to fight, or the resolve to tell death to go screw itself—whatever the cost.

Aron Ralston had a horrible choice: to die or to mutilate himself. When a serac unexpectedly falls and instantly kills a climber, we are not fascinated, only touched by grief. There was no choice, no existential struggle, no opportunity for the human will to pull ancient power from the depths of its core and transform fear into focus. This, the steadfast, implacable will to survive, is what Aron Ralston has. And, should circumstances demand, it's what we all want.