

Survival Story: Winter Breakdown in Wyoming...100 miles from home...

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I wrote this story last year, on February 25th, 2013, after a disastrous trip home, caused by a breakdown in the middle of nowhere. Lots of things I should have done differently, beforehand. Learn from my mistakes...and read on.

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Catastrophic explosive failure at high speed.

Trapped in the vast wilderness of Wyoming, in the same area that hundreds died over several years...on foot...traveling with what they could carry, push or pull.

No cell phone service, little bit of food and water...

Freezing cold, hypothermia, severe shivering, not enough material to stay warm in this environment, even though we were out of the wind.

\$500 to rescue and save us, and get us back home. But, 9 hours of worry, frustration, and real fear that we might freeze to death if we failed.

Yes. That was us. And that was our day yesterday. We saw what happens personally, when we aren't prepared enough to have what we need when we need it.

Spent the weekend down in Rawlins, Wyoming getting to visit with our three grandkids we had not seen since Christmas. They needed some special time and so did we. So, we got a hotel room at the Comfort Inn, and camped out with them for a couple of days of down time. It was much needed by all of us.

Monday morning, we took them home, since it was President's day, and no school. We got our hugs and kisses goodbye, filled up the gas tank, and headed home to Riverton, a paltry 2 hour road trip, which we've made a 100 times in the last several years without incident.

Not this time. One of the longest stretches of empty rural two lane highway in Wyoming, extends from Muddy Gap, to Lander, Wyoming. This Highway, State highway 287, parallels and crosses many times the ruts and paths of the 150 year old wagon ruts and foot paths of The Mormon Trail, the Oregon Trail, the California trail, and the Pony Express routes. One near ghost town, several historic markers, one rest area, and vast empty wilderness (with associated wildlife) are what you find on this route.

So...what happened?

We were doing 70 mph, traveling west, having just passed Split Rock, named after a mountain that has a large cleft and served as a landmark for folks walking the Oregon Trail, which also runs right through this area. As we were driving, we started hearing a squealing sound, every few seconds, lasting for a couple of seconds. Suddenly, the temperature gauge went from normal to WARNING, in about 10 seconds, so I pull over to the shoulder. Steam is pouring out from under the hood and the front wheel wells of our Xterra. Shit. Not good...not good at all.

I pop the hood, and it takes a good minute before all the steam has cleared from the engine compartment. It's 11:30 in the morning, the sun is bright, there are a few high clouds, and thank God, calm winds...for now.

Having just replaced the entire engine last April, including the water pump, timing belt, many bearings, exhaust manifolds and a LOT of hoses, tubes, and smaller parts, I am concerned on just exactly what has failed. Everything is new...less than 20,000 miles on the engine.

I look down into the space between the radiator and the front of the engine, examining what looks odd and out of place. There are three smaller serpentine belts on this truck, a 3.3 liter V6 engine. I notice the belt has come off the water pump. Why? That IS odd. I ponder what I'm seeing. Did a pulley on this particular belt seize, causing the belt to jump off truck? No. The pulleys I can reach from the two inch opening at the top of the engine all spin without drag. Hmmm.

I take off my thin jacket, to give me more reach into the depths of that engine area behind the radiator. I start paying close attention to the fan blades attached to the front of the pulley on the water pump. They look ever so slightly askew...as in, not exactly parallel to the front of the engine. Squeezing my hand farther down into the thin space available, I get a grip on the base of one of the fan blades, and move it around, up and down, in and out. Double crap.

The new water pump of less than a year old has exploded at the main bearing coming out of the housing, where the shaft exits the pump to the front mount, where the fan clutch and blades bolt on. We are dead in the water. We are now trapped in place, where the truck sits, in the middle of nowhere.

I climb back into the truck after wiping the grease and antifreeze off my hands, and tell Annie what I've found. Panic, while not out rightly showing, is starting to dig into the back of my mind. My Craftsman toolbox, normally residing in the back of my truck, sits at home in the garage on my workbench, last being used to replace the Mass Airflow Sensor on the truck a few weeks ago. Not that it's going to help. I don't usually carry a spare water pump in the truck.

What to do. Behind us, to the northeast, stands Split Rock, a natural geologic formation that could be seen for 50 miles on a clear day on the emigrant trail. The highway behind us has a rise that we can't see past for any passing traffic heading west, until they crest the hill. To the west, the old uranium mining town of Jeffrey City, 14 miles away, with one roadside bar, no working gas pumps, and at least a known working phone. With my binoculars, kept in the back seat pocket of the passenger seat, I can see at least 7 or 8 miles of highway and traffic coming from that direction.

We have no cell service whatsoever. Our carrier is Verizon, and they just don't reach this far into nowhere. I do know that Union and AT&T work out here...but that doesn't help us at the moment. I climb on to the rear bumper of the truck, holding my hand and phone as high as possible, getting maybe ten feet of elevation off the shoulder of the highway. No bars...no service. To the east; Split Rock, 4 miles away. To the south, Green Mountain, a famous hunting area known for lots and lots of elk, a few bear, and wolves. To the west; unseen, Jeffrey City.

Dare I go mountain climbing to try to get a signal from some distant, unseen Verizon cell tower? I decide...no. If I'm going to die, let it be somewhere that they can find our bodies, not deep down an icy crevasse in a cold Wyoming winter.

Annie can't go anywhere. She can barely walk, and her wheelchair is needed everywhere but home. I'm not leaving her here alone. I can't climb one of those mountains to seek cell service, because she'll be alone for at least a few hours, or worse.

Solution? Sit and wait. Hood raised, flashers on occasionally. It's half an hour before the next vehicle passes, then several more. After a while, some stop to check on us. I know I need to find somebody with Union Cell service, so I can call a couple of friends to start getting a wrecker sent my way. First two folks that stop are heading opposite ways, one to Rawlins, and one to Lander. I write a note for each, with our situation, our location, and our need of a wrecker. They head out. I learn later, that both made the calls.

In the next several hours, we are passed by 150+ cars, semis, and various other vehicles. 16 vehicles stop to see if they can help. A few have cell service. Some have passed us, than slowed down to turn around and come back to check on us. Angels. Every one. I was really starting to feel that we were going to need a higher power to get through this day, and get home safely. Turns out we do.

I make some more calls, with every passing traveler who stops to check on us (and has cell service), to see if anyone has received the message of help needed, and if a wrecker is on the way. My son Kenny in Nashville has gotten the message, and is calling every wrecker service in Riverton, our destination. No one will come out this far, and especially not with payment by his credit card over the phone. Boy, I cannot tell you how much THAT sucks. We're getting cold, we can't turn the motor on for heat, and we've only got the clothes we are wearing, what we have in our suitcase, and a few pillows.

No blanket or sleeping bags, which are normally in the cargo area, and my two bugout bags don't have any truly cold weather gear. My CERT bag has an emergency blanket, in the bag since 2005, but it's plastic, and whatever was coated on the plastic has powderized, and when we unfold it, we have a tremendous amount of plastic/powdery dust that coats EVERYTHING in the front of the truck. In other words, we're screwed. With the sun up high in the sky, we had some warmth built up and retained inside the truck, keeping us at least somewhat cozy. With dark approaching, we had nothing except our own declining body heat to say alive.

Finally, about 5:30 in the afternoon, the sun is setting behind the Rockies far to our west, it's gotten much colder, and the wind has picked up. A couple traveling home to Cheyenne has passed us, turned around, and pulled in behind us, to see if they can assist us. They have AT&T, and we are able to make a couple of calls, again learning that no one, and no wrecker, is on the way. The driver, Jeremy, has an idea, at exactly the same time I do...call the highway patrol, which he does. The entire time we've been on the side of the road, not one patrol car or county deputy has passed us. Not one.

Every time I've gotten out of the truck to talk to someone that has stopped to check on us, I've gotten colder. My teeth are actually chattering, I've got a full body shiver, and I can't stop shaking. This...is not good. Signs of hypothermia. Cooling off of my body's core temperature. If not stopped soon potentially fatal.

The highway patrol checks their list, and contacts a wrecker from Fremont Motors of Lander, exactly where I bought the truck 4 years ago. They call back in 10 minutes, saying the wrecker is on its way. Thank God. The nightmare is almost over. Jeremy and his wife allow Annie and I to sit in the back of their SUV until the wrecker arrives 90 minutes later, to warm up and help us stop shivering. It takes Annie almost 10

minutes to walk back from our truck to theirs, and to get into the back seat, with me helping as much as humanly possible.

Finally, she's in. They are the angels we needed to help us out of our desperate situation, letting us warm up, and they stay making sure we get loaded and on the road. We visit, talk, and get to know each other a little bit, while we wait for the cavalry to arrive.

Because of Annie's bad hip, she can't climb into the cab of the roll back wrecker. I talk to the driver, and he lets Annie and I ride all the way to town, and then home, sitting in our Xterra, perched high on the wrecker's bed. I don't care if it was safe, legal, or recommended. Annie had no choice, and I was not going to let her ride back there alone, as cold as it was. The temperature outside was heading towards the single digits as we started heading back into town. Too damn cold.

I cannot recommend enough to everyone else. DON'T do this, unless you have no choice. Possibly the worst, most uncomfortable emergency car ride I've ever made...worse than any roller coaster I've ever been on. Potential whiplash, snapped spine, and a whole myriad of other horrible physical injuries, JUST from the bumps, dips, sideways jerks, and horrible vertical bounces, magnified by the lack of the wrecker rear suspension, and our truck tied and chained down all the way to the bottomed out shocks. And, it was still very cold. We had ice on the inside of the windshield, and side windows, as bad as any frost I've ever scraped off the windshield on a cold winter morning. We were freezing...absolutely freezing. The water bottle half filled, sitting between us in the cup holder, started icing up.

We get to Lander, still 30 miles from home, and stop in town. The driver has to call his boss, so we can figure out what this rescue is going to cost us. The entire trip, from our road side breakdown, to our home driveway, and the truck dropped off the rollback wrecker comes to \$500. Looking at how close we came to dying of hypothermia out there, it's worth it, and much cheaper than life flight helicopters and hospital stays, or funeral costs...our only other alternatives.

The driver gets us home, around 9:30, 10 hours after our breakdown. Buddy Mike has cooked dinner for us, and unloads the truck for me, after helping me get Annie from the truck to the front porch, and inside after climbing those three steps up to the porch...something both she and I thought was really going to be a problem.

We plug the space heater in to increase the warmth in our bedroom, and pull out a very thick comforter.

I eat maybe half of my dinner, so tired that it's actually hard to chew. Annie finishes hers, and I go put the dishes away. We turn the light out, and we're both asleep literally within a minute. Dead to the world...figuratively and, thankfully not literally at the end of this cold, harsh, dramatic, and ugly day.

So...the next day.

I stay home from work, to take care of Annie, to restore my exhausted health, and begin to pull the radiator, hoses, belts, and other parts out of the way to pull the blown water pump. A replacement pump sits at O'Reilly's Auto in Riverton, lifetime warranty for \$69. I just need to hop a ride with a coworker to work the rest of the week.

What went wrong, in all the above? Well, there was nothing we could do about the water pump. It's just one of those things. I've had two dozen or more vehicles in my life, and I've only had to replace water

pumps maybe 6 times. Some vehicles we're never had to worry about. A few, we have had many problems with, up to and including replacing engines and transmissions ourselves. No big deal. I'm a computer geek AND a motor head. Parts are parts, built to be repaired or replaced.

Next, the bigger problem. Winter in Wyoming. I did not follow through and keep my winter survival kit prepped and ready, Just In Case. No blankets, no sweaters, no extra coats, nothing to heat the vehicle with (such as a propane heater and fuel, which sits in my garage. I had kept a sleeping bag and an extra blanket in the truck for a long time, but they were taken out a few weeks ago for washing and cleaning while I was doing those engine repairs and sorting the tools, jacks, and other cargo area items. I never put them back in, and we paid the price for it.

Cell phone service. We're really going to look real hard at an alternative to Verizon, because it nearly killed us. Union seems to have better coverage over the entire state. It's time to change services. A life changing event, but needed if we're going to continue living in Wyoming. And, we are.

Insurance. We currently have liability coverage on the Xterra. Time to go back to comprehensive coverage, at three times what we're paying now for liability only. The tow into town and finally home would have been free, or much, much cheaper. Also just checked on Triple A Autoclub Membership. \$148 a year, and that 100 mile tow would have been completely covered. Seems that hindsight IS 20/20. It would be a good idea to do both. Yesterday was the perfect example of WHY. Nobody was hurt, except me with a couple of scraped knuckles, from examining the water pump damage.

Plans. Planning to purchase two 3 layer [Military Modular Sleep Systems](#). Keeps you warm all the way down to 15 below zero.

Two (or more) [REAL emergency blankets](#), not the plastic mylar ones, but the ones that are quilted, with blaze orange material on one side and silver reflective material on the other. Like this...

Food and Water. We had some with us, but not enough. I have a rocket stove in my Alice pack bugout bag, but I had removed the hot chocolate and ramen noodles due to age. Keeping them freshly replaced and updated regularly would have solved this problem. Plan to keep this food in a small ammo box in the cargo area, to keep it from getting crushed or broken open, as might happen when moving the two packs around in the cargo area of the truck. Water. Hmmm.

In Wyoming, where it can stay below zero for days on end, bottles would freeze and explode if always left in the truck. Solution...keep several cases in the house, and when heading out on a road trip like this weekend, grab a couple of six packs of water, and if not used, bring them back inside at the end of the trip, or return trip home.

Transportation. I bought this Xterra for many reasons. It's four wheel drive. I've got all terrain tires on it. It handles great on ice and snow (which is part of the Wyoming Lifestyle). It has helped pull other cars out of bad situations (two tow straps and a 20 foot tow chain always in the back). It's low enough to the ground that Annie can get in (considering her walking and wheelchair issues), yet high enough for off road access and safety.

Dependability? I replaced the engine last year with a zero mile full block, as well as nearly every bolt-on component, including that damned water pump. I've got the tools, know-how, and skills to do a multitude

of expedient repairs, and any and all major repairs at home (engine hoist and engine stand, 60 gallon compressor, air tools, and rolling tool box full of needed tools). Last year, my old 1982 Dodge Van finally croaked, the last vestiges of life taken slowly after hitting a deer at 60 miles an hour, a few miles from home, months earlier. I need a second vehicle for commuting, something that gets 30+ miles a gallon. We've already been looking for a few weeks. The Xterra WILL be taken care of, maintained, and used as our main transportation on any non-commuting trip...for the above reasons.

Bottom line. Due to an unforeseen mechanical failure, we nearly froze to death. Annie and I spent the hours before the wrecker arrived discussing what we should have done, could have done, and needed to do...to be able to better handle this kind of survival situation.

A tremendous teaching moment, for both of us. We suffered greatly, yet we lived...and made it home. We used humor to keep ourselves mentally aware and thinking positive thoughts, which we really needed. References to Monty Python ("If I go first, I want you to eat me."), to Star Wars (Skywalker cutting open the Tauntaun with his light saber to survive on the ice planet Hoth...which by the way, you can get a Tauntaun sleeping bag here...ThinkGeek), to other strange and odd things that were humorous and funny to both of us.

We're ok. We survived. We learned several shortcomings that we need to remedy. We WILL fix those shortcomings. Hopefully, you might pick up a tidbit or two from this story that can help you survive in a similar situation. Thank the Lord, for those angels that did stop to check on us, help us make a few calls, and even spared a few bottles of water for us.

I've helped hundreds of stranded strangers on roads all over the country in the past 30 years. I've rescued people trapped in the middle of nowhere, including one person trapped in an upside down car, down a ravine, pinned between trees, with a crushed roof. I only heard the accident, and then went and found them, and went back and got help on the way.

I've performed emergency first aid to traumatic accident injuries and kept people alive, more times than I'd like to count. I've pulled people and their cars a cumulative hundreds of miles with my vehicles, to get them home, or to some place of safety and resources. I've fixed cars with small mechanical issues, changed tires, fetched cans of gas, or replacement belts, and got them back on the road.

I've been that angel that those stranded travelers needed at that moment of despair. Yesterday, I was on the other side of the fence, and saw many angels stop to check on us.

Of all the passing traffic, fully one in ten vehicles stopped to offer aid. I've never seen that before...that high a ratio of nice and concerned individuals who care enough about fellow human beings to check on them. That should tell you something about the people of Wyoming.

On New Year's Day, 2001, I had a front wheel bearing seize on my one ton Dodge dually, on the side of the road between Mojave, California, and Lancaster, California (100 miles north of Los Angeles, 40 miles west of Edwards Air Force Base).

Thousands and thousands of cars and families were headed home from a holiday weekend in places north and east (Lake Tahoe, Reno, Las Vegas, etc). During six hours on the shoulder of that highway, the front wheel off, tools scattered all around me, and me trying to resolve the situation with hand tools, and

a 44 foot flatbed trailer hanging off my rear bumper, I had NO ONE stop to check on me, except for the third highway patrolman to pass me (who had passed two hours earlier going the other way). It was him that got a wrecker coming my way, and finally towed into town. Strangely, my huge cell phone of the time just happened to NOT HAVE CELL SERVICE either.

I see a trend here.

I'll close now...another survival story shared. Complacency nearly did us in. Freezing to death was a real possibility. Tools failed to work when needed most. Human beings saw an opportunity to show compassion.

It was a bad day...but, it was a good day. We're home, and alive. We're more broke than before, but we'll work it through. Stay safe, friends, always.

Rich



Rich is the founder of SurvivalRing, now in it's 17th year, author of multimedia CDs and DVDs, loves the outdoors, his family, his geeky skill-set, and lives in rural Wyoming. Always ready to help others, he shares what he learns on multiple blogs, social sites, and more. With a background in preparedness and survival skills, training with county, state, and national organizations, and skills in all areas of media and on air experience in live radio and television, Rich is always thinking about the "big picture", when it comes to helping individuals and families prepare for life's little surprises.

Since 1997, he has provided guidance, authentic government survival history, and commentary on why we all need to get ready for that fateful day in the future, when we have to get our hands dirty and step in to save the day. He is an award winning videographer (2005 Telly Award), has received state and national scholarly recognition (2006 New Century Scholar and All USA Academic Team), and is a natural with computers, technology, gadgets, small furry mammals, and anything on wheels.

Rich likes making friends, solving problems, and creating solutions to everyday issues. He doesn't mind mixing things up, when there is a teaching moment ready to happen. As a constitutional conservative, he's staying quite busy these days.

[Rich Fleetwood](#) – who has written [727](#) posts on [SurvivalRing](#).