



'It was best to be honest'

Ranger J.D. Swed: An interview with historian Lu Ann Jones

ANPR's oral history project demonstrates that stories from the past offer guidance for the future. Interviewed at the Ranger Rendezvous in 2012, J.D. Swed traced a "fabulous career" that began in 1974 as a seasonal ranger at Yosemite and ended in 2009 as chief ranger at Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Early on he learned how to deal with fatalities. An education that began at Tuolumne Meadows continued at other sites. Join us as we talk.

My first (visitor) death was a climbing accident that happened on Puppy Dome. A Boy Scout group was up there learning to climb. Near the end of the day, one of the kids needed a couple of carabiners, so he untied one of the ropes and then tied it off with an overhand, and then took the carabiners out so he could rappel one more time. Another kid rappelled off that rope, and it just came untied and he fell to his death. We had to carry him out and we had to do the investigation, and I was involved in that.

Jones: How do you learn to deal with the fact that you are dealing with death sometimes?

Swed: You know, that death was the first one, and it was pretty vivid. I mean, he was pretty broken up, and there was a lot of blood and brains around, but it was just one of those things. The way we dealt with it in those days was at night we got around the campfire and we drank a few more beers than we did the night when those things didn't happen. And

it was a macho deal, I learned later, you know, much later.

Then my next fatality, that I handled all by myself, was at Tetons. That one taught me a lot of lessons because it was a young woman who rolled her truck and died, and her parents wanted to go to the exact location. Of course, there's a large bloodspot, and I took the fire truck out there and tried to wash it all off and I couldn't. Then, morally, I had to decide whether or not I'd take them to the exact spot because of that bloodspot. I battled with that internally for a little while to try to figure it out. I don't know if I asked for any help; I don't recall that, but I decided that it was best to be honest. I've always done that with all the deaths, and I've handled hundreds with the Park Service in my career now, and that's always paid off well for not only me but for the people that I was dealing with. (For this young woman's parents) I just set it up for them and told them, because I didn't think it was fair to take them to a place that was a hundred yards down the road, because they would always have the wrong spot.

When I was up in Alaska at Denali, in those 10 years there were almost a hundred deaths that I helped manage or dealt with directly, so I got really good at it. I still have people who write me letters or notes on the anniversary of their loved one's death and thank me for helping them get through that. So it's one of those things that I really take great pride in, in how I was able to help people all those times.

Jones: It's interesting when you can find those gifts like that inside yourself and are able to use those.

Swed: Yes. There were a lot of people, especially on my staff up at Denali, who didn't want to make that call, couldn't make that call, and I would always take that burden. It never seemed to be a burden to me, because I always felt that I could really help people — just (by) going through a number of those (incidents), and then I picked up some training on dealing with death and stages you go through, and I always used that to help people.

There's this one example that this woman's husband (and a friend of his) died on a (climbing) route called the Orient Express on Denali, and they never could recover the bodies. Although they could see the bodies frozen in some ice and snow, they could see some colors, it was too dangerous (to get to them). Well, the first year I was there I found the file (on the accident) and I called her, and I said, "I just wanted to let you know that I just flew the area." She had not heard from anybody for years. She was really appreciative. And I said, "This is what I found. I'm not sure I could see a blue parka through there, but there was a different color change, and I think he might still be there, and if I had to guess, I'd say he's there." And she just was so thankful, because for years she had this thought of him dangling on the rope, blowing in the wind, and that was her image of his death and his state. I just encouraged her. I said, "Why don't you come up sometime? When you're ever ready, you come up, let me know. I'll set up a flight for you. We'll take a fixed-wing, I'll fly with you, and we'll go. Have you ever been here?" "No."

"You need to come up here, because I think it'll be healing for you, but you need to do it when you're ready. Don't do it just because I tell you to."

So a year later, she and the wife of the other guy that died came up. We had lunch and we flew over. Then we had dinner. (Seeing the site) just helped them move on. I don't like "closure," because I don't think there is closure in that, but it helped them move on and get (rid of) some of the negative images that they had. Lots of dealing with death in my career. I know that sounds grim, but search and rescue offered me opportunities to do a tremendous amount of good for park visitors. 🏔️

J.D. Swed is retired and lives in Nevada. Lu Ann Jones is a staff historian with the NPS Park History Program in Washington, D.C.