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THE LIGHTS THAT NEVER WERE *By Jim Dixon*

Excited to reconnect with each other and the natural world, my buddies, Doug Aubshon and Warner Dozier, and I left our cozy homes in Shaver Lake, California, and drove to the eastern side of the Sierras, ready to climb Mt. Whitney, October 4-6, 2005. With an elevation of 14,497.6 feet, Mt. Whitney is the highest point in the contiguous United States.

Late into the season, snow had fallen a few days before, coating the high mountains with a pretty good ice pack. We came prepared with cold weather gear, including crampons and ice axes.

The first night we camped at Whitney Portal. Located at about 8,000 feet, it is still in the trees. Climbers there warned us to be careful. A climber had fallen down the ice chutes above Trail Camp the day before. His body was not discovered until the next day.

The next morning was a beautiful, clear day, but cold and windy. Daytime temperatures were around 30 degrees. We headed up to the Trail Camp (elev. 12,500) to rest up for the next day's climb to the summit.

Arriving at Trail Camp about 5:00 p.m., we set up for a quiet, relaxing evening, enjoying stories and hot chocolate. Just before turning in, something caught Warner's attention.

"There are lights coming down Whitney," he said. "That's strange."

I turned toward the summit and said, "Somebody must have dropped their flashlights. The lights are zigzagging straight down the hill."

Doug confirmed the lights were going "down the hill pretty fast," not in the normal trail area. Hikers must have dropped a flashlight or two off of the trail. They would pass through Trail Camp in about an hour.

As the hour passed, we shouted a few times, but received no response. We sensed an urge to climb to the spot where the lights had stopped, though going out in the moonless night over ice and snow with only two small

headlamps and a mini-mag flashlight is against "mountain rules." We set out, lighting the way for each other.

After an hour, I kneeled and prayed, "Lord, if we are going to find anybody, we need to find them soon. It is below freezing, this is a big mountain, and we don't know where we are going except where the lights came down."

Moments later, Doug and Warner shouted, "We found them! Come quick!"

Two climbers were huddled together, badly injured, their clothes wet, frozen, and covered in blood.

They had slid down an ice chute.

Having planned to go up to the summit and back down in a day, the hikers lacked warm gear. We had no extra. We rendered first aid, then half-carried, half-dragged them to our camp, 650 feet down the treacherous pathway. They were too weak, cold, and injured to make it further. By now it was about 11 p.m.

Warner and Doug left their gear for the injured hikers and climbed down the mountain to contact the Inyo County Sheriff's Department, a huge risk in itself. With only headlamps it was a long way to Lone Pine, a difficult hike even in the day. I stayed with the hikers, tended their wounds, and tried to keep them warm.

After nearly three hours, Warner and Doug arrived at the bottom of the mountain. The next day at about 10 a.m., a Eurocopter A300 rescue helicopter skillfully landed among the rocks at Trail Camp and loaded up the injured hikers and me. They were evacuated to Lone Pine Trauma Hospital, stabilized, and sent to Los Angeles for many reconstructive surgeries.

When the hikers asked how we knew they were on the mountain and where to find them, we told them we saw their flashlights drop down the chute. Shock registered on their bloody, frozen faces. "We did not have any flashlights when we fell," they said.

Equally astonished, we replied, "We would not have come if we hadn't seen the lights."



Doug Aubshon, Warner Dozier, and Pastor Jim Dixon



The injured hikers were grateful to be found.



Jim Dixon is the pastor at the Church at Shaver Lake, in Shaver Lake, California. Each year on the anniversary of their "chance meeting," he contacts the injured hikers to remind them of the "lights that never were."

