“OH WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MORNING”

I started the day with an Instagram post “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” as I took a picture of my jeep and pontoon boats #firstdayontheriver #favoritecanyon, at the gas station en route to the river.  And it was a gorgeous day!  I was looking forward to this adventure for the entire month.  As my wife can attest, the South Fork Canyon is my favorite place in the world.  Part of what attracts me to this place is what nearly cost me my life.  This canyon is 17 miles long and lined with volcanic cliffs, phenomenal fishing, and unprecedented beauty.  I like this place so much I have told my wife I want my ashes, when I die, spread at Monkey Face Rock (a rock formation ½ down the river).

In addition to all the goodness of this place is an element of danger.  Basically put, if something bad happens while you are down this canyon you are pretty much in trouble.   There are multiple class 3,4 rapids and perhaps one class 5 rapid down this stretch.  Rumor has it Butch Otter had a similar love for the canyon and helped pass a law to not let commercialized activity down the canyon (ie paid fishing guides, river rafting guides, etc).  The result: a river where very few people go.  I rarely see anybody down this stretch except my buddies. In other words, bliss!

The day started pretty amazing, great weather, the fish were active, we saw a couple Bald Eagles, the regular Merganzer ducks, some chucker in the rocks.  About mile 13 into the stretch is where my story really begins.

With the fires up this canyon a couple of years ago a few changes happened to our canyon.  The fires burned up trees and vegetation and when the rains eventually came down the lack of root strength in the dirt caused mudslides, creating two new rapid sections in the canyon.  One of which is called Buffalo Run.  This is considered a class 5 section and is quite fun to run.  There are two options.  You get in your boat and go down it, or you drag your boat about 100 yards across the dirt and bypass it.  The flows were at 2200 cfs when I went down and I was in my little pontoon boat.  At flows that high I really should have been in my bigger 14 foot raft.  As my friend Trent and I scouted the rapid section, we kept looking at each other and shaking our heads.  The main question looming was whether or not we were going to portage our boats or just go down it.  I remember saying to Trent, “I don’t know if I am just being a big wussy or if I really shouldn’t go down this”. In the end we came to what, at the time, I thought was a reasonable compromise.  I would go down it if he videotaped the entire event.  Sounds reasonable right?  I got in my boat and proceded down Buffalo Run.  After scouting the rapid I was only truly worried about one deep sucking hole on the right and a drop off on the left, my goal was to skirt between the two of them.  As I dropped into the rapid my boat shot forward at incredible speed.  I was able to keep it on the line I wanted and when I got to the “sucking” hole, I hit it straight on and my boat went almost vertical and then straight over backwards and I was in the water.  Not 5 feet further I hit a rock with my left leg and felt it snap just below the knee, before I could make any effort to swim I somersaulted  under the water and hit another rock and this time the current pinned me against the rock for several seconds.  I thought it was lights out for a second, as I lay pressed firmly against the rock, and then miraculously it spit me out and I was swimming again.  My main goal was to GET MY BOAT, for without it, I was truly in trouble.  I could see it about 20 feet downstream and started swimming and only then realized how bad my leg really was.  Every kick I did my leg would just flop to the side and cause excruciating pain.  As I focused on getting my boat and trying not to hit my leg on any more rocks in the river, I realized that something was binding my legs together, this did not make any sense.  It was about this time that I grabbed my boat and made it to the side of the river.  As I tried not to pass out from my crooked leg, I realized that the sensation that I had of binding to my legs was just that, my fly line from my fishing rod had wrapped itself around my legs 4 or 5 times.  It was during the untangling of said line around my feet, trying not to cause any more pain to my leg that I lost the boat.  “Dammit, dammit, dammit” I was officially up that proverbial creek but this time it was without a boat and a paddle.  I just lay back and said a quick prayer and hoped my buddy Trent would be my hero.

Trent, busy videotaping and probably laughing as I flipped my boat definitely had a sense of urgency to get to me as, in haste, he left his life jacket on a rock at the portage site.  He dragged his boat past the passage of doom and jumped in his boat.  At this time I saw him paddling, looking downstream at my boat and only me yelling as loud as I can did he see me in time to come over to the side of the river where I was now laying.  He told me later that the sight of my deformed leg made him almost vomit and pass out, but to his credit, I didn’t know this at the time.  What now?   We sat there for several moments and knew we were in trouble.  First things first, I knew that my leg needed to be stabilized.  I had Trent get two sticks, straighten my leg and tie them down with rope.  I am not going to lie, it felt a little bit better.  We figured our two options were to leave me on the side of the river, have him go down and call search and rescue, who would later come and get me.  This would involve many cold, grueling hours on the side of the river until they got there.  The second option, that seemed smart at the time was for me to get on the back of his “One Man” pontoon boat and finish the last few miles of the float.  We chose option number two….bad decision.  As we pushed off from the side of the river it became clear that #1 I was making his pontoon boat do a “wheelie” and #2 Trent had no control over his boat.  Literally 50 feet into this challenge, we hit a rapid and now Trent’s boat flipped.  As you recall, I am not in the best of shape and Trent does not have a life jacket on and his waders are quickly filling up with ice cold water.  I stayed with the boat and Trent swam to the shore.  Everything happened so fast that I did not have anytime to make a plan with Trent; in fact, I was just worried about staying alive.

Over the next mile, I attempted to pull my self up on top of his boat, or to pull his boat to the side but I was not successful.  I was quite hypothermic and my leg kept hitting rocks.  I found it an interesting dichotomy that I would be praying one second for God to help me through this ordeal and then I would hit my leg and I would yell all sorts of obscenities, and then start praying again.  I think God understood my verbiage.  It was hard to control my emotions at this moment in time.

 About now I realized I was coming to another significant set of rapids that if I did not either get on the boat or get to the side of the river I was in trouble.  When Trent had stabilized my leg he had generously put his heavy fleece jacket over top of my life jacket.  I made an executive decision to swim for the shore.  Besides the wicked fast, icy water, filled with rocks, this would have been a breeze, minus an unstable tibial plateau fracture, and a fleece jacket that was making my life jacket essentially useless.  I spent more time swallowing water and swimming under the current then I did on top of the water.  I knew I had one small back Eddy to get into before the rapid section and I started praying.  “Please God” swim, swallow water, swim, gasp for air, “let me get to shore” hit leg on rock swallow more water, gasp, swear.  It looked like I was not going to make it  but with one adrenaline pumped push with my arms I grabbed a rock on the side of the river and swung to the side.  As I lay holding onto the rock, the strangest thought came to my mind. I had heard a story, in church, growing up of a man hiking along a steep path next to a cliff. This man slipped and fell and was rolling toward the cliff and his death. He said a prayer for God to save him and at that moment his back pack snagged on a tree and stopped his plummet. His response was “Never mind God, this tree stopped my fall.” Catching my breath, holding onto the rock with fierce determination I thought of this story. This rock was my tree and I believe my prayers were answered and this was not coincidental. Safe, for now.  I lay in the water for a good 20 minutes shaking, and praising God, and was so happy to be alive.  The question came again: Now what?

 A few things were clear.  It was going to get cold and I was going to need to get dry fast and I needed to get out of the water.  Over the next hour, I dragged myself up a 50 degree incline of black, jagged lava rocks trying to find some area of comfort.  Two things were foremost in my mind, I was so thirsty and my leg pain was worse than anything I had ever experienced.  I took off my wet clothes and dried them on the lava rocks which helped me eventually stop shaking and then I solved problem number two regarding my thirst.  One of the good things about falling in the water, twice, wearing waders, is there is a good possibility that there will be water inside of them.  Removing the waders from my good foot I was able to drink the river water over the next several hours from the foot space.  As I recall this to my wife she was grossed out and referred to it as sweaty giardia ridden, dirty river water.  To me, it was Manna from Heaven.  After this it was a waiting game.  I knew that to be saved it would require Trent to have successfully gotten to shore, climb a cliff out of a canyon, run several miles and find someone with a phone.  I settled in for the longest 7 or 8 hours of my life.

I successfully managed to dry my clothes, and hydrate with my giardia ridden wader water but I couldn’t get my leg comfortable.  I was seated on a Lava Rock with my leg dangling downwards and after about an hour of this I knew something needed to change.  I viewed a rock about 15 feet downstream that looked perfect.  It took me another 30 minutes to convince me that the pain of dragging my broken leg across the rocks would be worth it to be on a flat surface.  The current pain finally out bullied the future pain and I made the 45 minute trek to my new home.  A beautiful, flat rock upon which to rest my leg.  Through many strings of obscenities, I made it.  I was comfortable for awhile.  I thought a lot about life and family and random things over the next few hours.  I took a second to look around.  I saw a cave across the river about ½ way up and wondered about it.  The thought actually went through my head that it probably housed a cougar and that was my next feat to overcome.  I pictured this sleek cat slowly moving in a crouch, ready to pounce. I then realized with the flow of the river, and the cave on the other side I was probably safe and I was being silly.  I saw a crooked pine tree growing out of a rock and thought about how bad this tree wanted to live.  It gave me strength.  I thought of a friend who taught mindfulness and tried to appreciate everything good that had happened to get me to this place.  I concentrated on breathing in slowly and breathing out my pain.  It worked.  It took games like this to keep me sane as I awaited my fate.  There were times I thought I heard helicopters only to be disappointed when I looked around.  It finally happened, I saw a helicopter hovering downstream about ¼ of a mile.  I was waving my hands frantically but knew I was too far for anyone to see me.  I later found out that after Trent had contacted Search and Rescue he helped them in their search for me.  The helicopters were concentrating on the area downstream where the pontoon boats had floated into a back eddy.  Trent was adamant that they were looking in the wrong position.  He borrowed some binoculars and hiked up stream and scanned the mountain until he found little old me.  He then directed the helicopters to my location and they took my GPS coordinants and dropped me a bag with warm clothes, bottled water, flares and a walky talky.  I am not going to lie, I was a little disappointed when they didn’t drop some basket down for me to grab so they could pull me up.  Apparently that happens in the movies in the ocean.  Instead I had a nice note saying that they had dispatched some expert river guides to come down and get me.  I was thrilled that they were coming and frustrated that I had another 3 or 4 hour wait.

 As the rescue boat got closer I was instructed to light some flares, which I did, so they could find me.  It was a glorious moment when these two humans came and told me everything was going to be alright.  All I know is their names are Joe and Mike and they are total badasses.  I am grateful for people like them.  I would like to think that I would do the same thing for somebody.  Some of the thoughts that popped into my mind while waiting for my rescue made me laugh.  I thought about all of those movies, in which the heroines are running away from something awful and terrible, and one of the lesser characters trips and falls, making it almost certain, that if everyone stops, they will be caught.  In my mind I am usually yelling “Go, Leave them, It is not worth all of you getting caught”.  As I sat on that rock for so many hours I am grateful that people thought me important enough to stop, risk their lives and help me.

 The next hour was filled with excruciating pain being carried down the river towards the boat, put on the boat, hitting rapid after rapid with an unstable fracture, but I was happy.  There was one more moment that almost shattered this happiness and added to this already hellacious day.  The last significant rapid, called the Ladder, had an unexpected log in the middle of it that we inconveniently launched our boat on top of and nearly flipped the rescue boat.  I was thankful, at this time, that they had not tied down my leg to the boat, as was originally planned.  Thanks to quick thinking by Mike and Joe, some skillful “high siding” we were able to get off the log, unscathed after about 5-10 minutes.

 The rest is in the history books.  We got to the takeout to be greeted by about 10 individuals who promptly lifted me into a gurney and then onto an ambulance. My one thought as I was lifted out of the boat, besides complete excitement was how beautiful the night sky was. All I could see were the faces of my rescue party and this exceptional night sky with stars. Amazing stars with none of the city lights to soften their glow. Ten minutes later I was in a helicopter on the way to St. Lukes, 30 minutes later one of my colleagues and “favorite” doctor, Dr. Bodes was giving me exceptional care.  I spent two days in the hospital recovering from my injuries and have a long road ahead of me.

 I am grateful for people who cared enough to stop when I tripped, put themselves at risk and cared enough to bring me out of harms way.  “Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a beautiful day.  I’ve got a wonderful feeling, everything’s going my way”