

Buck Hale-Part 8-Snow Load

Less than two miles from his picking up the pace Buck was cursing himself. Rather than a brief flurry, soon over, the storm was intensifying and settling in for the long haul. It was becoming all too obvious that Buck just might be in trouble.

The cursing came from Buck as he realized he had broken the cardinal rule of hiking the Sierras: *Be prepared! There are no constants.* Seasons meant nothing to the mountains. Though it was late September and significant snowfall usually held off until November it was certainly no hard and fast rule. Rules of weather were only for talking heads on TV weather broadcasts and even they knew better than to bet against snow at 5500 feet. The added weight of a down jacket and, perhaps, waterproof pants was less than three pounds. For the lack of three pounds, Buck realized, he may quite well become a Popsicle. *Frozen man on a stick for Felix*, came to mind as he plodded onward.

The point he was approaching on the trail now was about one mile of uphill. The change of elevation was almost 600 feet. Easy enough for one in shape as Buck but the snow was accumulating fast and about three inches lie on the ground now and was starting to pile up.

Looking ahead he knew he would have to slow his pace or risk slipping. A slip here, he knew, could be fatal. Not so much from the fall but from possibly incapacitating injury; a broken bone or twisted joint should the fall be hard or awkward. He knew he had no choice other than to slow down out of caution and avoidance of such a mishap. Add to this, he was getting chilled. The sweat from hurrying was quickly affecting his heat retention and, though he had put his parka on, it was of little help. It barely kept him from getting wet and had little to no effect keeping him warm. Cursing and shivering

Buck took the incline.

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“Let’s saddle up.” Geoff had been looking at the clock which told him an hour had passed. It was now 4:11 pm. “Sylvia, grab a change of my warm clothes and two or three wool blankets. Put what’s left of the coffee in the thermos and, oh, hell yeh, grab that bottle of Jack from the cupboard.” He was referencing a bottle of Jack Daniels which he kept in the cupboard for when drinkers came over. Though not a tea totaler Geoff was not much of a drinker himself. “no telling what Buck’s gotten himself into. If I told him once I told him a thousand times not to trust Sierra weather!” It was a pet peeve of Geoff’s that Buck thought a season would be on good behavior and do the expected. AS Geoff tried to tell him, “Always take along what you think you won’t need. It could save your life up here.” Geoff knew this range of mountains after living in them for almost 35 years.

They quickly had the Jeep loaded. Geoff had equipped it with a PT0 plow on the front as he used it primarily in the winter to get around the ranch and into town during the snow season. He rarely took it off which suited him just fine at this juncture. Putting it on now would have taken about 40 minutes. That was 40 minutes that he might or might not have.

The snow was already a few inches deep as they started out. Geoff’s property bordered the National Forest and he had conceived and built a gate which was pretty much camouflaged so it was difficult for hiker’s to see from the trail. The trail passed within a quarter mile of his property and early on in the 1990’s he’d had problems backpackers using his fields for a short cut to town. Most were fine but the few wrecked his crops or squatted in his ditch leaving their waste for him to clean up. After a year or so he saw the light and disguised his road out with a gate made of steel I-Beams welded to a makeshift track assembly which made opening the

gate fairly quick and easy. It pivoted open with the touch of a finger.

They swung the gate open and had started toward the trail when Sylvia said that she thought it was illegal to drive the Jeep on it. Geoff's reply was curt, "Fuck the law!" He figured the Feds could quibble with him after he found Buck. Not before.

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Granite's exfoliation process goes on unceasingly over eons. The process of freezing, heaving and thawing cause separation on the molecular level forcing layers both thick and sometimes of massive width to slough off and fall where ever, and whenever, gravity and momentum chooses. Some shatter on impact, creating rocks and gravel while others haphazardly stack; leaving voids both large and small.

The pines and conifers shed their needles and the shrubs their leaves over those same eons eventually breaking down to form the soil which, in turn, allows more trees and shrubs their potential to grow. The rain and snow melt had moved this earth and gravel to form a natural concretion around the voids created by exfoliation; the aggregate congealing into large, deep holes in the rocky bluffs. Holes which, though randomly formed, sometimes provide warmth and shelter for any of the wild creatures that find them. So it has continued for centuries.

At the very crest of this granite bluff stood a stunted and precarious Ponderosa pine. Like a sentinel it stood, rooted into a cleft of granite angled between the face and the top of the bluff. A lightning strike decades ago had sheared it off. From the huge scar the tree had sprouted a new top which now stood some twenty feet from the older, scarred trunk. The new growth had forced the roots deeper into the cleft firmly implanting the weight of the tree and weakening the rock which caused an adjoining piece of granite to exfoliate and crash

silently, unheard into the forest below. It had been mid-winter that this occurred and only one living thing had been aware of the noise.

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Buck Hale-Part 8-Snow Load 2

“You’re gonna catch hell when the rangers find your Jeep on the trail! Can’t you just park it and we’ll walk up and find Buck?”

The look Geoff gave Sylvia silenced her. His face was turning red and that meant that he had reached his limit for suggestions. Staring straight into the blowing snow he hit his high-beams to see farther up the trail. The hill went up from here with rocks close in. The trail was meant for walking not for Jeeps. But, Geoff knew, the Forest Service kept ingress wide enough for trucks to get in in case of fire or other emergencies. In this case, Geoff was sure, this was just such an emergency and he’d be damned if there was anything going to get in his way. As he stared ahead he felt his tires spin for the first time. The snow was building and was now about three inches deep. He jammed on the brakes and jumped out to spin the Warn hubs for the front tires. The Jeep was an old CJ 5 with a 302 V8 and 3-speed shift. Modern day Jeeps have, for the most part, done away with hubs on the front in favor of electric engagement of the 4 wheel drive. In 1975, Warn hubs were standard on Jeeps as was the three speed manual transmission and manual just about everything else.

Hubs spun he shifted the transfer case into 4 wheel high and rammed the accelerator pedal down. The 302 roared and jumped forward like a spurred horse, throwing Sylvia back in her seat

with an utterance, "Lord have mercy!"

The Jeep easily topped the hill and they were looking down on a switchback. Geoff took advantage of the hilltop to look as far down the trail as he could. Seeing nothing but trail, he shifted into first and let compression slow him as he crawled the Jeep down to the bottom. At this point, he knew, they were only a half mile from the trailhead and he guessed that if Buck wasn't here yet then trouble was exactly what he had run into.

He couldn't take the jeep as far in on the trail as he had hoped. Once into the trees it narrowed as tree trunks and huge boulders claimed their own real estate. The Jeep, small as it was, would never fit between them. Another mile and they'd be walking. Besides, much farther, he knew, and he wouldn't be able to turn the Jeep around. The decision was made, he'd take it in as far as he could and hope that they met Buck on the short trip in. Hopefully, they'd meet him whistling a tune with a spring in his step and not a care in the world. At least, that's what he hoped would happen.

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