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Volume 123, Issue 25

White-knuckle ride through a white-out

First-person account of a harrowing ambulance run through a blizzard... and advice: Stay home

by Jordan Almen

Last Wednesday, this area got its first significant winter weather of the year. Unfortunately, a large number of people decided they could “beat” the storm... or maybe they just thought they could power through it. This resulted in a disaster on area roads.

Even worse, medical emergencies continued to occur during the blizzard (shocking). One such event happened to someone stranded in DeGraff, and when the call came in, the Benson Ambulance didn’t think they could make it. Dispatch reported that there were around 40 vehicles in the ditch or stuck on the road between Benson and DeGraff, on top of the complete white-out conditions. As a result, dispatch asked the Kerkhoven Ambulance to take the call instead. Scott Lamecker, director Chrissy Thompson and I responded to the call.

To call the trip difficult would be a laughable understatement. As soon as the ambulance left Kerkhoven city limits, visibility evaporated. The dispatcher who had paged us asked us to pick up stranded motorists along the way, but it was immediately clear that there were too many, and that it was going to take us too long to respond as it was. Several dozen vehicles — from huge semis with trailers to small sedans — filled not only the ditches, but were scattered across the road. Many, it seemed, had realized they were on the wrong side of the road and just stopped there.

The blowing snow was so dense that from the driver’s seat Scott could not see the road. Chrissy, in the passenger’s seat, tried to guide him. She watched out her window, often rolling it down or opening her door, to monitor where the white line lay. The complete white-out meant that any time the rig was put on the right path, the direction to go straight meant nothing because the swirling mass around us didn’t leave a straight option. It also blocked from view any road signs that could guide the way, and the wind blew so hard that we were constantly being pushed to the side.

At one point, the combination of the blowing snow and the mess of stranded vehicles made navigation so impossible that Chrissy and I left the rig to try to lead Scott through. A pickup that was in that particular mess saw our struggle and decided to try to lead us through. They got us to Murdock, but then they got stuck in drifted snow just outside of town.

From the Catholic cemetery outside of Murdock, up to the Koch plant, was another high-congestion area. We called dispatch to ask them



Pictured is a photo taken by Kerkhoven Ambulance EMT Jordan Almen, looking at the dash and through the windshield of the rig during last Wednesday’s run amidst a raging blizzard. It took the crew an hour and a half to navigate from Kerkhoven to DeGraff, a distance of eight miles. In order to stay on the roadway, fellow EMT Chrissy Thompson often had to stick

her head out of the passenger window to see the white line painted on the side of the highway, telling driver/EMT Scott Lamecker where he was. Along the way they stopped to rescue three people who had been stranded in their vehicle alongside of the road. Many others had to wait it out for the Murdock Fire Department.

to send Murdock Fire to pick up all of the people stuck there. When Scott finally saw the Koch plant, all three of us were shocked — surely we had been driving for far too long to only be that far from town?

When we finally got near DeGraff

we decided we would pick up whoever we found. Three men left their vehicles to find safety in town. By the time we finally arrived at the DeGraff Community Center, it had been an hour and 15 minutes since we left Kerkhoven. Typically an

entire call, from when we leave the ambulance shed until we return, is an hour and a half.

At the Community Center, we found our patient, who had been brought in with a family member by a Sheriff’s deputy after being strand-

ed in their car for three to four hours. Luckily, a local nurse had been able to go to them and start taking vitals and background information, as well as help them stay calm during the long wait for our arrival.

While our patient definitely needed to go to the hospital, we were relieved it wasn’t one of the situations where minutes or seconds can mean the difference of survival or not. We were also relieved when Sheriff John Holtz showed up and informed us that they had cleared the highway to Benson, and he would give us an escort into town.

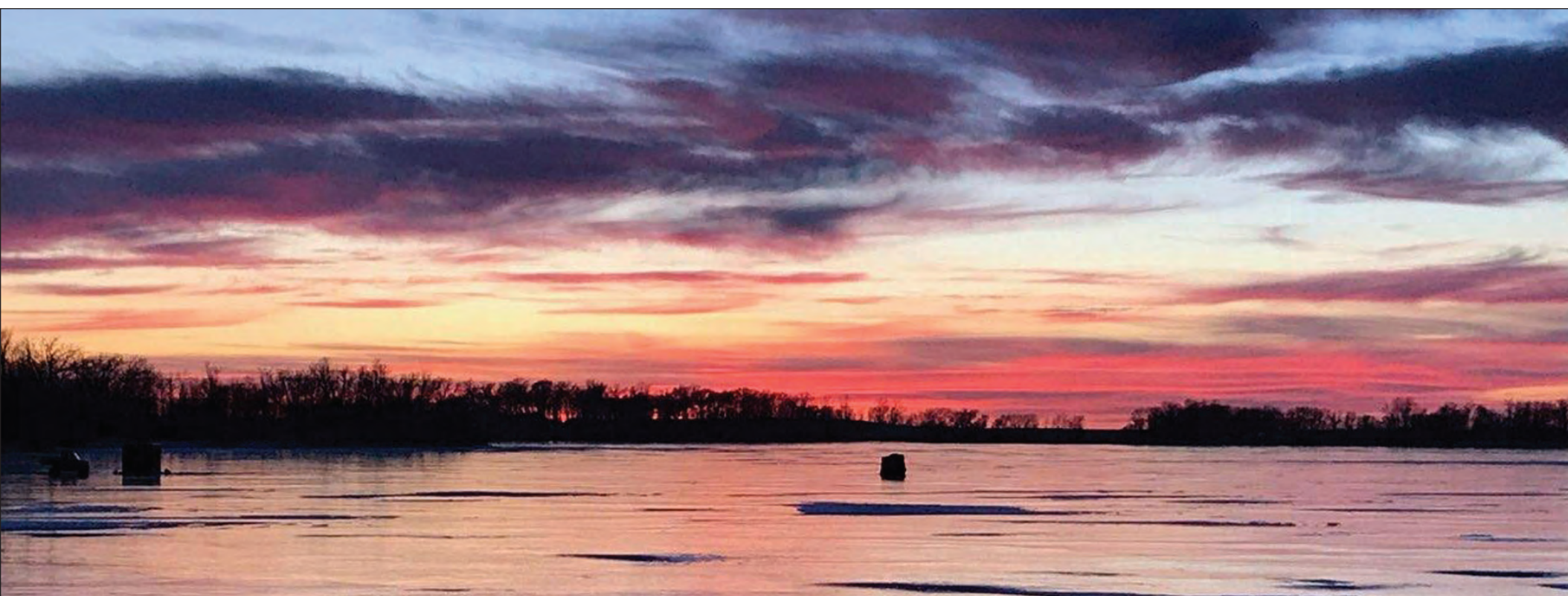
After handing off our patient to the staff at the Benson Hospital, Scott, Chrissy and I had a decision to make — whether or not to drive back to Kerkhoven. We had made it this far, and between DeGraff and Benson had been manageable. In town, it seemed that the weather was calming down. We decided to head home.

Not long after we left Benson we discovered that people had continued to try to travel. Because of a line-up of vehicles, a drift had formed across the road. It took 15 to 20 minutes of rocking, but eventually we were able to push through, and only because we were in a five-ton vehicle. In our slow return trip, Chrissy observed that she could see the stars, but not the road.

In total, the Kerkhoven Ambulance spent three and a half hours on the call Wednesday night. All three of us were frustrated and drained. No matter what, it was going to be a difficult call, but it was made immeasurably worse by all of the people who thought they could drive through the storm. To be very clear, the added delays caused by other vehicles in the road could have resulted in the death of a patient.

All of those people — at least 80 vehicles between Kerkhoven and Benson — made the decision to drive in extremely hazardous conditions. In doing so, they not only put our patient’s life at risk, but also their own, ours, and those of all of the other emergency responders and tow truck drivers who had to come to their aid.

Sure, some of those people were likely caught off guard when the weather turned. But most knew what they were driving into. The next time a weather app, the Sheriff’s social media, or your gut tells you that travel is not advised, just stay put. Don’t make a dangerous situation worse. Remember that getting home is not more valuable than your life, or than the lives of the people who will have to come and rescue you.



Mesmerizing Monson

Gorgeous sunsets have painted the countryside this past week. Monson Lake provided the canvas for this idyllic landscape portrait last Friday -- a Christmas Day gift for anyone passing by. --photo by Kari Jo Almen

scape portrait last Friday -- a Christmas Day gift for anyone passing by. --photo by Kari Jo Almen

It's time



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