

Second camper found dead

Man, 78, had set out in darkness, on steep trail, to help friend.

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The woods were pitch-black that moonless night when Jerome Smith set out for help, a 78-year-old on a crumbling hillside trail in the wilderness near Lake Tahoe.

His friend and neighbor, Thomas Hylton, 70, was in desperate need of medical attention, perhaps suffering a heart attack after pitching their tents — two elderly men alone in the woods when a camping trip turned into a frantic search for help.

Smith didn't get far.

El Dorado County authorities found Smith's body — about a half-mile from the pair's campsite — along a rugged hillside Saturday, two days after authorities launched a search for the two Lincoln men, who were camping in the Desolation Wilderness Area.

On Friday, they found the pair's campsite — Hylton's body sprawled near the men's tents, about a mile south of Eagle Lake, just west of Lake Tahoe's Emerald Bay.

Deaths: Longer outing planned

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there, lots of shale. It's very steep," Lovell said.

Along the way, Smith must have lost his footing, tumbling 40 feet down a hillside, near Eagle Lake, while attempting to reach Highway 89.

Authorities pieced together the events that led up to the men's tragic end, but details remained unclear.

Lovell said autopsies will be performed on both men, who lived a few houses apart on Crocker Lane in Lincoln Hills. It's unclear if either man had a cell phone — and if so, whether a call from the deep woods could have reached the outside world.

Authorities had launched a search for the two men on Thursday after their wives reported them overdue from their two-day camping trip.

"This was supposed to be a dry run for a longer camping trip. They planned a 12-day trip in September," said Smith's only son, Stuart, who lives in Reno and who joined the crew of 75 that searched the Sierra on foot, on horseback and by air.

"My dad was very active, and stayed active. He was still very agile, but probably not as agile as his mind was telling him," the younger Smith said of his father,



JEROME SMITH

The Lincoln man, 78, apparently lost his footing and fell 40 feet.

a retired certified public accountant and a former Boy Scout.

"He went out for help, but wasn't familiar with the territory."

The men drove up into the mountains Monday and planned to hike to Velma Lakes, starting what was supposed to be a five-mile jaunt from Eagle Falls.

For whatever reason, they stopped about two miles short of their destination and set up camp about 100 yards from the trail.

"They set up their tents, and it looks like they were preparing for their meal. Then something went wrong," said Lovell, the sheriff's spokesman.

"It's such a shock," said Kirby Hylton, who described his father as an avid outdoorsman.

He said he spoke to his father earlier this month, talking about the usual things that fathers and sons do. "He was in fine health," the younger Hylton said.

The Sheriff's Department Search and Rescue Unit, accompanied by crews from the U.S. Forest Service, California state parks and state Office of Emergency Services, combed the woods to locate the missing men, while a California Highway Patrol helicopter searched from above.

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"There was some kind of medical emergency, maybe a heart attack, maybe a stroke — who knows?" said Lt. Les Lovell of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department.

This much is known: "Mr. Hylton suffered some kind of medical emergency, and Mr. Smith tried to help," Lovell said.

Authorities surmised that Smith attempted cardiopulmonary resuscitation after dragging his companion to level ground.

With no other choice, Smith set out in the darkness to seek help.

Smith slipped off his sandals, laced up his hiking boots and hurriedly set out with a small flashlight clipped to his belt, Lovell said.

"There was no moon out that night," Lovell said, adding that the terrain can be a challenge even in daylight, particularly for a pair of elderly hikers.

"There's lots of loose rock out
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