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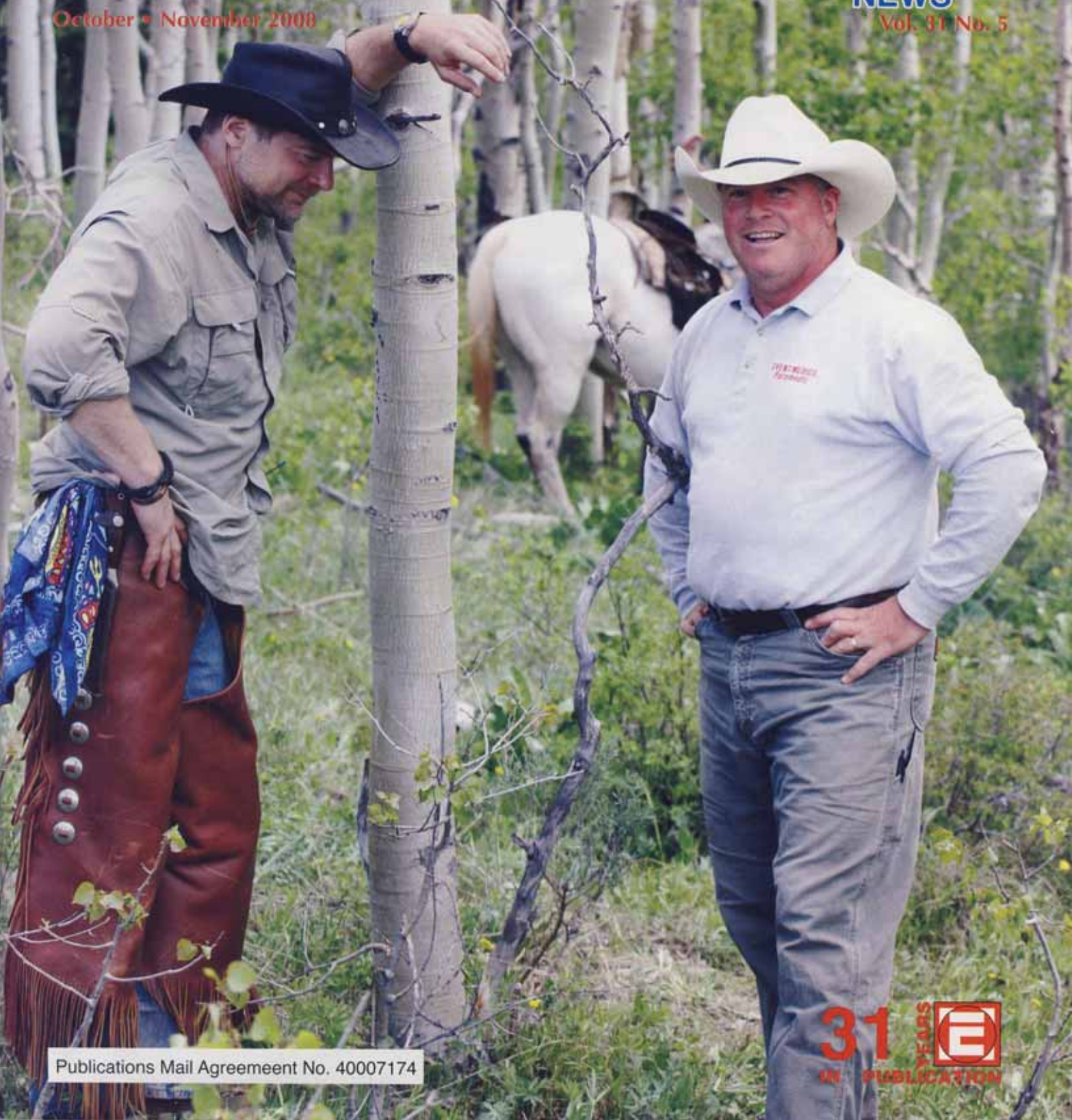
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Surviving Survivorman

Star of the Discovery Channel's daring adventure show describes his relationship with the Ottawa paramedic chosen for his TV team

By Les Stroud



Photo courtesy Barry Clark

As the production team for *Survivorman* arrives at the airport, ready to be flown to some far away place to produce another show, the scene is often the following: I'm edgy, the stills photographer is busy trying to get us a better deal, the camera man is excited, but trying to deal with a ton of equipment in pelican cases.

And then there's Barry, the paramedic (nicknamed Baramedic)—calm, cool, collected and well organized due to his fanatical obsession with getting to every airport five hours early for any flight.

At some point along the way, the networks that broadcast *Survivorman* were convinced by insurance companies and lawyers—after the extremely unfortunate death of Steve Irwin—that I needed to have an official risk assessment done for the show. That is, for the locations I venture into spending seven days alone surviving off the land.

The whole concept was a tough one for me to swallow, because giving risk assessments is exactly what I do. So I found my-

self sending information off to some agency based in New Zealand, so they could tell me whether or not I would be safe in Colorado or South Africa. All the answers for each and every location came back as I had expected. So my production team and I ignored them all, because they were ignorant of the realities and mostly paranoid. There was however, one recommendation for the series overall that I was happy to receive and it gave me the opportunity to have the network approve of putting it in the budget: Bring along an experienced paramedic.

We couldn't afford it before, but now the insurance companies were forcing the issue and I was glad to see it. If you haven't seen the show, it goes something like this: I venture out to remote locations in various countries around the world. I am left alone to survive without food, with very little, if any, gear or water and no camera crew.

I have been able to travel down this path and make these kinds of films because my background is filled with many years of learning and teaching wilderness survival, along with working in film and television.

I knocked off 11 such shows pretty much alone with no safety backup, which would have been a big problem if I had ever truly run into trouble.

Finding a paramedic for this kind of show wasn't going to be easy. The person had to be willing to travel long distances and be away from home for up to three weeks at a time. Once on location, they had to be personable enough to be in close quarters with the rest of the team for long stretches of time. I may be off in the jungle trying to survive alone but my field producer, stills photographer, second unit camera person and paramedic would all be huddled together in a lodge, hotel, cabin or tent, depending on where we were for that show.

A number of organizations were contacted while we searched for paramedics, including the Professional Paramedic Association of Ottawa. We poured over resumes looking for someone with the right qualifications and experience. As we were getting closer to the first shoot—in fact, I was already on the way to the airport—we still hadn't chosen our paramedic. One individual, an Ottawa paramedic named Barry Clark, seemed to come out of nowhere on the last day. We communicated with him a week or two earlier but had been caught up in sifting through all the other resumes. Then, with my bags already packed, Barry called up without having any indication from us that we would hire him and proceeded to fill us in on everything we would need to know to be safe in the Amazon jungle—my first location. We hired him on the spot.


Barry had to be clear on one important parameter: I had to be left alone. So safety checks would be verbal and by radio, not in person, which frustrates his better sense of safety to no end.

Barry has all of what I need to be the paramedic on a show like *Survivorman*: common sense; he doesn't stress out or get flustered easily; and although his big size makes him stick out like a sore thumb, he still somehow manages to assimilate easily and in a wonderfully non-intrusive way with the local culture. The best part is that he gives me exactly what I need and want in a paramedic—an unyielding dedication to my personal safety. When my job as host and producer of


the show has me sleeping on the ground in the Amazon jungle, Kalahari Desert, on the top of a mountain or in the middle of Pau Pa New Guinea, this is a good thing.

Preparing for the shoot doesn't only mean grabbing his big red medic bag and packing his rain gear. He needs to know


what all the potential dangers are to me and my team's health and safety while on location. Diseases like yellow fever and malaria have to be considered. Anti-venom for numerous different snake species needs to be found. Are we dealing with neurotoxins or hemotoxins? >




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> Are we all going to suffer from foot fungus due to six hours of daily rain or are we going to be fried to a crisp in the desert sun?

Once on location, Barry kicks into gear discovering what infrastructure is available to us in the middle of the jungle, which is essentially none. When there is safety backup available in a given location, Barry lines up all the dominoes so if the worst should happen, he can start the process of hopefully saving my life. He is quite literally the only team member I don't have to give information to in order to make the shoot happen. He knows what he needs to know or he finds it out. Then he tells me whether he is or isn't comfortable with what will happen should we have an emergency.

For me, the fun part is giving him a run for his money. Of course the truth is, that I don't ever want to lose life or limb for the sake of a TV show but the smartass in me likes to try to make Barry nervous. In reality of course, if all is going well and Barry is on the job, he should essentially be bored. I always say if I can bore Barry I've had a safe shoot.

A very unexpected and welcome side benefit to having Barry along has been ex-

Above: Ottawa Paramedic Barry Clark on the set of *Survivorman* as the team paramedic. (Photo courtesy Barry Clark); Below: Barry tends to an unexpected incident while on set, proving he's prepared for anything. (Photo courtesy Laura Bombier, www.laurabombier.com)

perienced by outsiders. For some reason, shoot after shoot, we would all be fine. But then an accident would happen somewhere else within the vicinity. Take the Amazon jungle, for example.

It was somewhere around day four and I was hunkered down in the pouring rain trying to sift tiny crustaceans out of the mud in a little jungle stream. >





Left: Paramedic Barry Clark on the set of *Survivorman* in Africa. Right: An African ambulance. Barry always does research into what local resources are available where ever the show is.

Photos courtesy Barry Clark

> Huge spiders loomed inches above my head while I kept an eye out for more poisonous creatures than I care to remember. Suddenly I heard a loud boom. I had no idea what it was. A few days later, after I had survived my seven days, I was told of how a small plane had tried to land on the tiny grass airstrip in the middle of the jungle. It had crashed and Barry was there to provide basic life support to the pilot who was still alive after suffering a bilateral fractured radius and ulna as well as a chip fracture of T1 and T2 and a minor closed head injury.

On the very next shoot I spent a spooky night in the middle of lion territory listening to them growl while they took down and ate an antelope. I would learn later that on that day a Land Rover with six people flipped over on a steep road and it was Barry who was first on location to look after the multiple (some critical) injuries. In that instance, Barry showed another side of his skills that has come in handy

“I was nauseated, volume depleted, extremely hot and dizzy with a pounding headache and had trouble concentrating.”

over the last couple of years of shooting *Survivorman*—the part of him that is the caregiver. He is a great listener and is able to defuse a potentially volatile or panicky situation that would likely exacerbate the emergency department.

Perhaps the closest I have come to calling in Barry for an emergency was in the Kalahari. The temperatures reached 141°F in the sun and 101°F in the shade. All day, the only water I was able to drink was as hot as coffee. At night, huddled in the front seat of the Jeep, I noticed I was not cooling down. In fact, I seemed to be getting hotter. Everything about my condition was indicating heat stroke. I was nauseated, volume depleted, extremely hot and dizzy with a pounding headache and had trouble concentrating. I pulled out the two-way radio and hung it beside me vowing to call him in right away if I started to feel like I was going to lose consciousness.

It took me five long hours of dabbing a damp bandana on my carotid arteries and wrists to slowly bring my temperature down.

The only assurance I had that I would make it through this potentially deadly situation was the knowledge that I had a paramedic standing by, sleeping with his radio by his head. And knowing Barry, he was snoring loudly. **E**

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