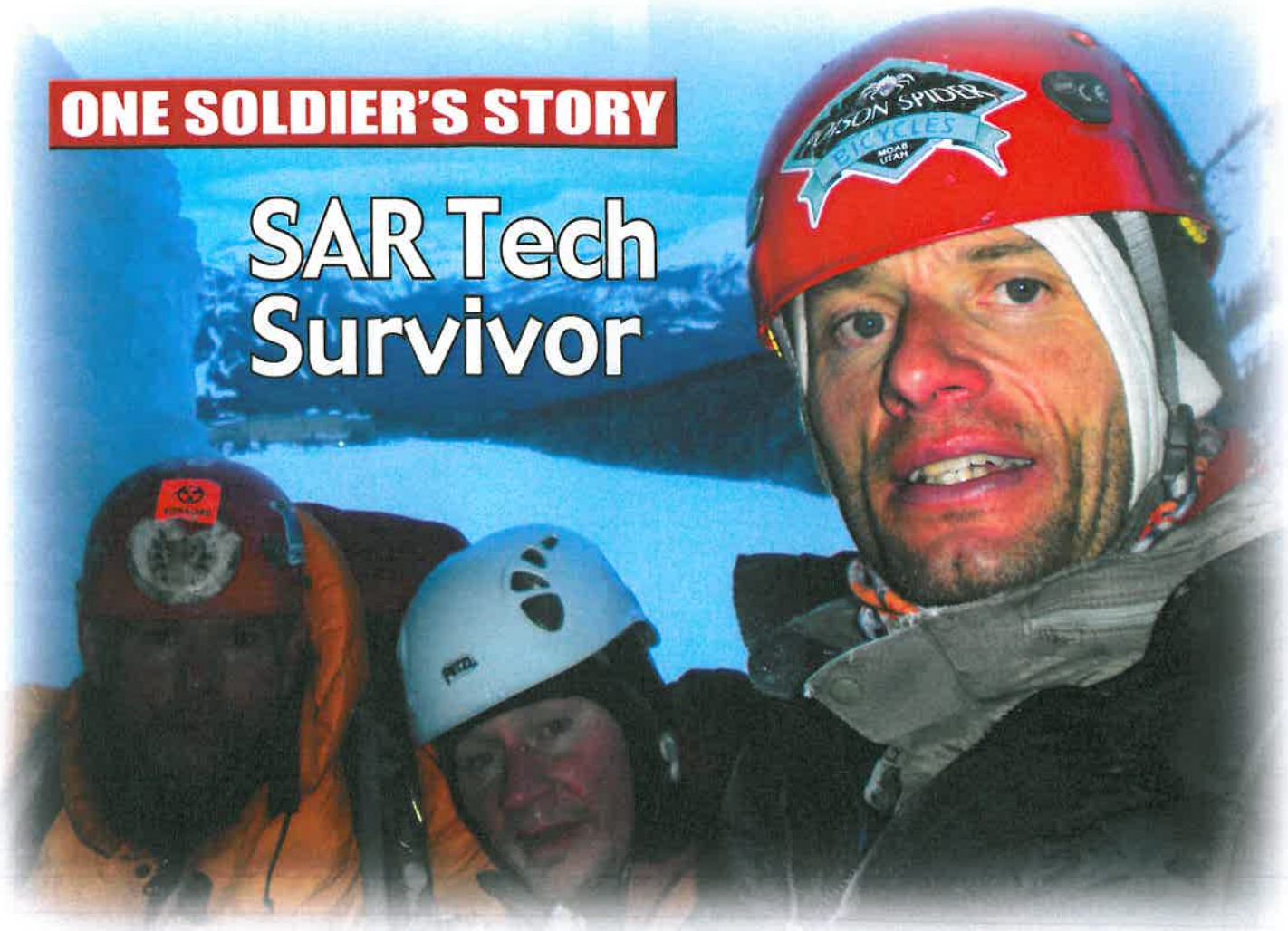


## ONE SOLDIER'S STORY

# SAR Tech Survivor



*text by Jessica Campbell • photos courtesy Mark Salesse*

**M**ark Salesse is working his dream job. He says wishes he could live to be 200 years old, all to buy him more time as a search and rescue technician (SAR Tech) for the Canadian military. But it was his job that almost killed him.

Friday, March 4, 2011 marks the day Salesse fell about 85 feet while ice climbing in Ouray, Colorado. Salesse and his other SAR Tech crew members were in Ouray participating in the week-long Rigging for Rescue Waterfall Workshop.

Training, such as the Rigging for Rescue Waterfall Workshop, is standard for SAR Techs. They have to constantly brush up on their skills and training methods because their forms of search and rescue are so extreme.

SAR Techs are equipped with techniques to rescue from hundreds of feet in the air, to 100 feet underwater. A SAR Tech's rescue methods vary from parachuting out of planes, to rock climbing and deep-sea scuba diving, to name a few.

Salesse was injured the last night of his ice climbing training in Ouray. He and three other SAR Techs decided to try to squeeze in one last climb before having to pack up and head out of town.

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*SAR Tech Mark Salesse (far right) and fellow climbers pose in Ouray, Colorado, a popular location for ice climbing. In March 2011, Salesse was there with other SAR Techs to participate in a week-long ice climbing workshop. This photograph was taken before Mark suffered an 85-foot fall into a canyon.*



Like a flip of a coin, Salesse and his climbing partner, Giles Bagley, tossed a carabiner to determine who would lead the climb. “I won the toss,” says Salesse. “So up I went.”

One major rule to ice climbing, says Salesse, is to always test the strength of the ice axes while ascending. This means that you should never assume the ice axe is planted firmly enough into the ice to hold your body weight: “Give it a good hard yank to know it’s not going anywhere.”

Salesse followed this rule of thumb throughout his entire climb. “The whole way up, everything was tested before I moved on it. I felt solid the whole way.”

When ice climbing, the person that leads the climb, like Salesse on that day, fastens anchors or ice screws in the ice throughout their climb. Their climbing ropes, which are attached to their harnesses, are led through the anchors. The screws should be able to bear enough weight to catch the climber if he or she falls before putting in his or her next anchor.

But this wasn’t the case for Salesse.

At about 85 feet high, Salesse needed to put his next screw into the ice. He planted his left ice axe: “It wasn’t going anywhere; it could have held a Volkswagen.”

But as Salesse went to plant his next ice axe, he says he felt something shift. He turned and looked at his left hand and realized his ice axe was detaching from the wall. Within

*This is a picture of SAR Tech Mark Salesse (left) as he started his fateful climb up this imposing 130-foot ice face on March 4, 2011. An experienced search and rescue technician, Salesse was participating in the Rigging for Rescue Waterfall Workshop in Ouray, Colorado. This is one of the world’s premier ice climbing destinations and is home to the Ouray Ice Park, which hosts over 150 ice climbs in a narrow gorge just minutes walking distance from town. Waterfall ice is one of the most unique mediums rescue respondents will ever have to face. It can be brittle, plastic-like, soupy, and bullet hard — all on the same day.*

two seconds, remembers Salesse, he began to fall backwards.

Those two seconds felt endless to Salesse: “I had a huge internal conversation with myself. I was thinking this could not be happening. I was in denial.”

Falling with his face to the sky, Salesse says thoughts continued to flash through his mind.

“I remember thinking to myself there is no way the ice screw was going to hold this fall,” says Salesse. “So I was hoping it was just going to be quick and painless.”

Salesse was right. The force of his fall pulled the screw out of the wall. He had nothing to keep him from hitting the ground.

At about an 80-foot drop, Salesse landed on a snow covered bolder that stuck out from the ice wall.

“Before I could put two more thoughts together, the rock came blowing through my pelvis.”

After the blow, he continued to fall a few more feet,



SAR Tech Mark Salessé is attended to after his fall on March 4, 2011, by the Ouray Mountain Rescue Team. Thanks to their skills and quick response, Salessé was taken out of the 130-foot deep canyon in just 75 minutes.

where he came skidding to a halt on the icy canyon floor. Conscious. His climbing partner asked, "Mark are you alright?" His reply, "No."

"I had never felt pain like that before and I didn't know what the outcome was going to be," says Salessé.

Salessé's pelvis was shattered — broken in four places. He was having trouble breathing due to damaged cartilage to his rib cage.

Within an hour and 15 minutes, the Ouray Mountain Rescue Team got Salessé out of the 130-foot deep canyon. The rescue team, says Salessé, was immaculate: "That exact team is the team I would have wanted there."

Today, Salessé spends his days recovering at the Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre in Ottawa. Salessé wanted to recover at this health centre, he says, because it is where other injured army personnel are often sent to recover.

A crowd gathers on the bridge above the 130-foot gorge in which SAR Tech Mark Salessé fell 85 feet. The fall shattered his pelvis in four places.



SAR Tech Mark Salessé was lifted out of the canyon in a basket after his devastating 85-foot fall down the sheer waterfall ice wall.

"I figured rather than try to reinvent the wheel in the East Coast somewhere, I would just go somewhere that is already set up for this sort of thing," says Salessé. "I just wanted to hit the easy button."

Sitting on his hospital bed in Ottawa, Salessé indicated on his x-rays the areas where his pelvis was broken. He now has three metal plates and a screw in his pelvis to help the bones heal. He has been advised by his doctors to avoid putting weight on his right leg for three months. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, exactly three months after having the metal plates put in his pelvis, he started walking. Four days after walking, he was cycling again.

"No pain so far," writes Salessé in a follow-up email. "I should have it solved in a month."

To help his recovery, he undergoes physiotherapy and works out three times a week. "My progress is on schedule," says Salessé. "I'm not even taking any pain meds."

Salessé is pleased with the army's response to his injury. To the left of his hospital bed is a stack of Ensure protein shakes. The protein shakes along with clothing and access to transportation have been provided to Salessé by the military.

He says he is lucky to have only minor complaints. "I'm only allowed to shower here twice a week," says Salessé with a smile. "But I can't even be in the position to complain when I thought I'd never breathe the air again."

Salessé hopes to make his way home in July. He and his co-workers are stationed in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Newfoundland. He will continue his rehab in Goose Bay.

Once he has fully recovered, Salessé says he will return to his position as a SAR Tech. He hasn't been discouraged by his experience, to say the least.

"I'm definitely going back out," says Salessé. "I think the only thing that will hold me back is something physical. It's just a part of the trade. It's hard-wired into our DNA." ❄️