

# EIGHT ABOVE

**A Howl for Help**  
Stranded at 7500 feet on a snowy Montana mountain, eight Alaskan malamutes needed assistance to survive - and find new homes

By Liz Copp, Edited by Karina Burger

Photos courtesy of Katy Flanagan and Fredell Qualls



Rescuers found five dogs chained to trees; but the three loose dogs created special challenges!

## VOLUNTEERS HONORED FOR MOUNTAIN MALAMUTE RESCUE

At the 2010 AMCA Nationals, Moonsong Malamute Rescue volunteers Katy Flanagan, Niki Tischhauser, Liz Copp and Fredell Qualls received the Christenson Award for saving eight malamutes, trapped when their owner died

### Editor's Note

#### I'd Ski Up A Mountain For Malamutes

*Sounds like a theoretical statement, doesn't it? The kind of thing you might see on a bumper sticker, or a T-shirt; it would make you smile that someone was that passionate about their breed. Would you think that they really meant it?*

*Hearing about the Eight Above rescue at the 2010 Alaskan Malamute Club of America Awards Banquet in Denver inspired me, as I hope it does you. Thank you to our Newsletter Editor Dru Anne Martin for allowing me the privilege of reporting this story, to Lynne Anderson for her encouragement, and to our four valiant rescuers for sharing their experiences and photographs. These ladies are in the process of applying for AMCA membership, and I hope you join me in welcoming them!*

#### We're Not in Hollywood Anymore

The eight stranded malamutes' narrative is similar to the movie *Eight Below*, where a team of sled dogs are stranded at the South Pole. In Hollywood, humor, tragedy, and adventure are blended into a neat two hour package. The story concludes with a rescue and everyone, dogs included, lives happily ever after. Reality, however, is never packaged as neatly, or with easy conclusions.

The "ghost town" of Rimini, Montana was once a bustling mining town; now only a handful of full-time residents and summer vacationers remain. Darwin Lumbattis purchased high mountain acreage near the end of Rimini Road, reportedly to raise numerous Alaskan Malamutes after receiving complaints in Butte, Montana about his dogs. In the



#### We Honor You

AMCA member Lynne Anderson presents the Christenson Award to rescuers Katy Flanagan and Niki Tischhauser

winter the roads to his travel trailer are made impassable by deep drifts of snow and access is only possible by snowmobiles, cross-country skis, or snow shoes.

On March 16, 2010, Lumbattis, 74, died at his mountain retreat. Eight senior Alaskan Malamutes were left behind, stranded at 7500 feet with no care strategy in place. A distant neighbor fed the Malamutes by snowmobile and with Lumbattis' out-of-state son, searched for a solution to move them to safety. Together the two men contacted Moonson Malamute Rescue (MMR) with the hope that the organization might offer advice or solutions on what to do with the eight dogs trapped on the mountain. Based in Idaho, MMR assists in neighboring states such as Montana where no Malamute rescue organization exists.

## Planning the Rescue

MMR gathered volunteers from Idaho and Wyoming to meet in Montana in hopes of extracting the "Eight Above" malamutes from their precarious situation. On location volunteers included: Katy Flanagan, Boise, Idaho; Niki Tischhauser, Tetonia, Idaho; Fredell (Freddie) Qualls, Cody, Wyoming; and Liz Copp, Twin Falls, Idaho. Lumbattis' son Tim and neighbor Rod also joined the rescue effort.

The team learned that five dogs were chained to trees while three dogs roamed the property. Their only access to water was to eat snow, and their only sustenance was kibble left by Rod via snowmobile. Volunteers knew they needed to relocate the dogs before the spring thaws, since the dogs depended on snow as a water source. And yet, an early spring rescue also posed great difficulty due to the blizzards common to the area. Any spring storm could prevent the rescue from proceeding.

## Mountain Climbing

The team convened in Helena, Montana on April 9, 2010 and began the Eight Above Rescue Operation; fortunately, the skies were clear. They locked their vehicles into four-wheel drive, and drove until Rimini road disappeared under snow drifts.

Equipment littered the ground around several vehicles at the "base camp" as volunteers sorted through the items they thought they might need, given the unknown health of the Eight Above malamutes - and the three miles of mountainous terrain they still needed to cover to reach the dogs. Two snowmobiles hauled most of the equipment, including two live traps, up the mountain. Three of the volunteers: Katy with her malamute Tasha; Niki; and Liz tackled the trail with cross-country skis. Freddie rode with the live traps to the site, and started setting the traps in hopes of capturing the loose dogs.

The team believed it would take a short hour to reach the dogs and begin the extraction; however, the terrain was far steeper than anticipated. The three cross-country skiers set a steady pace, but made slow progress in their upward climb. Eventually two of the skiers were shuttled via snowmobile up to the site.

## Capturing Loose Dogs 101

It was close to 3 pm when the entire team was assembled at Lumbattis' mountain property. Five dogs were chained to trees near dilapidated plywood dog houses. Each dog had beaten a path around their tree the length of their chain. While some dogs barked at the volunteers, others would not even peer out of the dog houses where they hid. The dog houses did not contain any winter bedding, such as straw, and the only water available was from the surrounding snow. Frozen urine and feces ringed each dog house. Although nervous, eventually all of the malamutes warmed to the volunteers.

The team decided to capture the three loose dogs before moving any dogs off the mountain, in fear that these dogs might abandon the site and perish otherwise. A baited live trap was set; the odor of green tripe wafted through the forest. Nervous tension crackled on the chilly mountain air. Would the trap work? How long? What if?

Amazingly, Rod was able to approach and leash Tank, a loose red and white male. Then Dolly, an unchained, sweet older gal, wandered out of her dog house - to be cornered by Freddie and Katy in deep, powdery

snow. The two volunteers leashed Dolly and then secured her to an unoccupied dog house. Dolly appeared to be fragile and it was decided she would need to be crated for transport down the mountain. Unfortunately, that meant leaving the tenacious little survivor on the mountain another night.

Meanwhile, Sweet Pea, the last free-range malamute, cautiously approached the trap and started to step forward. The wind caught the band of fabric covering the trap's lever and flipped it toward her. The dog bolted. A feeling of defeat washed through the team as the afternoon waned toward evening.

Rod rallied the team with an idea to capture the flighty malamute by herding her into deeper snow to restrict her movement, as had been done to catch Dolly. The rescuers formed a loose line around her, cutting her off from the packed trails, while Katy and Niki moved closer, driving her into the deep snow. Sweet Pea dove into the snow and floundered, allowing Katy and Niki to tether and lead her to stable ground. A spontaneous cheer erupted from the team; all the loose dogs were now caught!

## What Goes Up, Must Come Down

It was impossible to ski down the steep trail without risking injury to the dogs or volunteers. Captured dogs Tank and Sweet Pea were chosen to go out first, accompanied by rescuers on snow shoes. The other six Eight Above malamutes would wait for the next day.

Before Tank and Sweet Pea could hike out, giant ice balls had to be removed from their feet. Attached to long hair surrounding the malamutes' pads, the ice balls made walking painful. Niki and Liz carefully muzzled each dog and cut the ice away. Both Tank and Sweet Pea were patient and allowed the impromptu grooming without fuss.

Freddie and Liz began their three-mile snowshoe journey down the steep mountainside, leading the two dogs, who tried several times to turn back to their mountain home. Treats and affection won them over, and soon they trotted alongside their rescuers.

That both Sweet Pea and Tank are senior malamutes became clear as the volunteers and dogs navigated several of the vertical snowy slopes on the trail. The pace was slowed and mini-breaks were taken to revitalize both dogs. Dusk cloaked the tree line and the forest began to whisper its creaky winter ballad. Freddie and Liz needed to reach the junction point where the trail intersected with the snow-machine road. Time was counted by the number of steps the dogs could take before they needed to rest. Both dogs slowed further, but still plodded alongside their rescuers.

Nearly 2.5 hours later the dogs and their handlers reached the junction and radioed to base camp to bring them a crate and sled. Sweet Pea was loaded into the crate, to complete her journey riding on the sled.

Just as the first stars winked down on Rimini, the volunteers caught sight of base camp. Cheers broke the stillness and a mini celebration ensued. After watering both dogs, the team loaded them into side-by-side crates for the drive back to Helena. Planning for the rescue of the remaining six dogs

continued, even as exhaustion crept over all the participants.

### Got Health?

At 8:30 am Saturday morning, Tank and Sweet Pea arrived at a veterinary clinic in Helena, for prearranged reduced-price veterinary care. Expecting all eight malamutes, the veterinarians examined Tank and Sweet Pea but explained they could not continue at the reduced price after their normal closing time of 12 pm. Most veterinary clinics in Helena close at noon on weekends and charge after-hours emergency fees. It was imperative to have all the dogs vetted so that they could be cared for by Guardian Kennels in Montana City - and six of them were still stranded up on the mountain.

Two hours and several phone calls later, Dr. Thomi at Companion Animal Hospital in Helena rose to the challenge and generously offered to help out whenever the remaining six dogs could be brought to him, and also to vet the dogs at a discounted fee.



Bear had to be extracted from two dog houses by removing the roofs!

## BREAKING THE ICE



### She'll Be Coming Down the Mountain When She Comes

Top: Sweet Pea patiently waits while Niki and Liz remove huge ice balls from her long haired paws.

Middle: Sweet Pea, Liz and Tank hike down.

Bottom: Pumpkin and Niki make the trek to safety.

## Two Down, Six to Go

With a revised plan in place for veterinary care, the troupe sprang into action and headed back up the mountain with a new helper, Kevin, a neighbor of Lumbattis. Traveling on snowshoes and snowmobiles, they quickly reached the dogs. Niki and Liz loaded Dolly, who appeared to be weak in her hind quarters, into a crate which was bungeed to a sled. The sled was then secured to Rod's snowmobile. Rod drove slowly and carefully down the mountain, delivering Dolly to base camp.

After spraying Pumpkin and Brando's feet with PAM to prevent ice balls from forming, Niki and Liz snowshoed down the mountain with the dogs, following the same trail the volunteers took the day before.

Meanwhile, Tim snow-machined in with another crate secured to a dog sled. Sunshine then enjoyed a safe ride down the mountain.

That left just two dogs, Bear and Honey, to be rescued. Katy was able to attach a lead to Honey and then worked with Kevin to try to entice Bear off the mountain.

Bear was so uncomfortable with all the commotion he could not be persuaded to exit his dog house. Katy and Kevin lifted the roof off, and managed to attach a lead. When they moved Bear away from "his" dog house, he ducked into a neighboring one! Kevin finally coaxed Bear out, but just as they were ready to set off down the mountain, Bear made a break for cover in yet another dog house! To make the comical situation worse, Bear's collar and lead slipped off his head when Kevin was trying to maneuver him back out. Katy blocked the entrance so Bear would not escape, while Kevin tried to remove the roof. Frightened by the banging on the roof, Bear decided to poke his head out - just far enough for Katy to sneak a slip lead on him. The two volunteers were then able to place a regular collar and lead on Bear. The last two dogs finally began their descent from the mountain - with Bear stubbornly insisting on hiking out last! After surviving 25 days stranded on the mountain, the dogs were now safe.

## Your Other Family Doctor

With all the Eight Above malamutes down from the mountain heights, the team headed to Companion Animal Hospital. Dr. Thomi and his assistant were professional and kind to both the dogs and the volunteers. Dr. Thomi thoroughly examined and vaccinated each dog, and made recommendations for follow-up care. He estimated the dogs were all between 8 and 13 years old.

All of the Eight Above malamutes had dry, crusty noses from exposure to the elements and were in desperate need of grooming. The team was particularly worried about Dolly's health, but Dr. Thomi declared her fit for a long retirement in a new home. Overall, the pack was in excellent health considering their hardships, which gave the team another reason to celebrate!

After several hours at the vet clinic, the rescue team and all eight dogs packed up for the last leg of their adventure - driving to Guardian Kennels in Montana City.

## Safe and Sound

Guardian Kennels had generously offered to work with MMR and their parent organization, the Alaskan Malamute Assistance League (AMAL) to provide a temporary home for the Eight Above malamutes. Road-weary, the expedition arrived at Guardian Kennels around 10 pm to be greeted with enthusiasm, laughter and many helping hands.

Placed in pairs in exercise runs, the malamutes stretched their legs and happily explored their yards, unhindered by chains. The beautiful, secure facility demonstrated the knowledge and pride of those working at Guardian Kennels, as well as their obvious love of dogs. The rescue team left at 12:30 am for some much needed sleep, confident that the Eight Above were in excellent hands.

## Until We Meet Again

The rescuers visited the dogs on their way home to say their temporary goodbyes. Dolly, Tank, Sweet Pea, Honey, Bear, Brando, Pumpkin, and Sunshine each roamed with a buddy in

large exercise yards. Every dog's demeanor and energy level had increased with just one night's care. Treats and praise were readily accepted by the dogs as Katy took new photos of the pack. With many hugs and "thank yous" to the Guardian Kennel staff, the team found their vital role as first responders in the mission at a close. The mission now became to find special families to give these amazing malamutes, who suffered so much, new loving forever homes.

In the movie *Eight Below*, weather and a lack of human planning stranded the pack of dogs, which is also true of the Eight Above pack. If the Eight Above can teach pet owners a moral, it is to plan for life-time pet care in the event of your death - because real life is no Hollywood story!

## Where Are They Now?

At the time of this story, three of the Eight Above malamutes - Sweet Pea, Sunshine and Bear - are happily living in loving homes with their new owners.

Three of the malamutes - Dolly, Honey and Tank - have crossed the Rainbow Bridge. Dolly was adopted by rescuer Freddie Qualls and lived out her last days in pampered love and comfort. Honey also found an owner to love before failing health made it necessary to say goodbye to this sweet dog. And Tank lived with his buddy Sunshine in a great foster home, until health problems and his advanced age caught up to him.

The last two dogs, Pumpkin and Brando are now living in foster homes; Pumpkin in Oregon and Brando in Washington.

For the full story and more photos of the Eight Above Rescue Operation, see [www.moonsongmals.org](http://www.moonsongmals.org).



# YOU TAKE THE HIGH ROAD



## And I'll Take the Low Road

Top: Brando assists Liz down the mountain - by pulling hard!

Middle: Last - but not least! Honey (foreground) and the reluctant Bear, led by Kevin, were the last dogs rescued.

Bottom: Freddie and Rod comfort Dolly after her ride down the mountain.

## Meet the Rescuers

**Author Liz Copp** is finishing her senior university studies in English Education at ISU. She has been involved in malamute rescue for two years and all breed rescue for four years. Her pack, husband, and foster dogs enjoy hiking and backpacking to explore Idaho's wilderness. She and her dogs also compete in amateur agility and obedience trials. To read more adventures in malamute fostering, go to <http://theroadlesstraveledrescue.blogspot.com/> or contact [liz@moonsongmals.org](mailto:liz@moonsongmals.org).

**Katy Flanagan** and her husband have had malamutes for 40 years and took their dogs on ski sled expeditions in Alaska, as well as backpacking and river running in the Western wilds. Her first rescue dog adopted her 10 years ago; and she has volunteered with Moonsong Malamute Rescue since 2006, recently becoming President of the organization. She'd love to hear from you at [kt@moonsongmals.org](mailto:kt@moonsongmals.org).

**Fredell Qualls** (aka Freddie) became involved with rescue after locating and adopting a rescue malamute of her own through Moonsong Malamute Rescue. A Wyoming native, her goal is to summit the tops of all the mountain peaks in the vicinity of her home, accompanied by her rescue mals, of course. She and her husband John are caregivers to her 97 year young mother, a mule and two malamutes. For more information on Alaskan Malamute rescue contact her at [rescue@moonsongmals.org](mailto:rescue@moonsongmals.org).

**Niki Tischhauser's** rescue experience began in April 2010, when she pulled, fostered and adopted a beautiful Siberian Husky to a wonderful young couple, working through Moonsong Malamute Rescue. Realizing the tremendous need for foster and adoptive homes, she volunteered with MMR and is now their Secretary and on the Board of Directors, helping move this wonderful organization to a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. One of her three malamutes, Daisy Mae, starred in the 2010 AMCA National Specialty Rescue Showcase in Denver.

## Remembering Betty and Chris

*Lynne Anderson tells us about the Christenson Memorial Award*

Nothing about Betty Christenson was typical. She was unique and special. And although she adopted her first rescue from me, it was I who learned from her, and I hope some day I'll be half as good a person as she was. Ditto her husband, Chris, for whom the Christenson Award is a memorial tribute.

Betty had been rejected by a lot of rescues when I met her. Why? Because she didn't have a fence and she didn't plan to get one. What a start! She dutifully filled out our application and then sent me her own application - a photo album filled with pictures of their dog who had recently died of old age and a straightforward plea to consider her. There were references galore and a simple statement that she and her husband walked several times a day - rain or shine - as a part of Chris' cardiac rehabilitation program. Before they retired, the Christensons owned a theatre. Their dog accompanied them to work. Their adopted dog would never be unattended. "Meet me. Give me a chance," Betty said. And that was the first lesson she taught me - to probe, to question, to verify, to give people and dogs a chance.

Betty lived this philosophy and she showed it by taking a willful Mal female and turning her into an adored companion. And then she started to rescue. She took in some pretty unpromising dogs - gave them a chance - and they flourished. When there weren't enough volunteers in her area, Betty found helpers. She learned. She taught. Everyone got a chance. She built a

rescue in North Texas and then she broadened her scope. All the while Chris was at her side. He was the quiet presence, walking dogs, fixing coffee when there was a meeting, providing the calm in the storm that was Betty.

Chris died of a heart attack while he and Betty were exercising dogs. Betty said, "He never let go of the leash." That was Chris - steady, strong, modest, tireless, kind.

I think Chris' spirit was always there for Betty. It enabled her to face her own health issues and to hold the leash of the newly incorporated rescue that she headed. As her health deteriorated, Betty pleaded that her dogs be allowed to remain with her, and the volunteers she built into a rescue fulfilled that request - setting up schedules for dog care for Betty's rescues. Betty's dogs stayed with her to the end.

The Christenson Award was established by Drs. Norm and Diane Pomerance in memory of Chris. It is presented at the banquet that concludes the Alaskan Malamute Club of America National Specialty. The aim of this award is to recognize those who always work, but are seldom in the limelight. If one heads a rescue, there are other recognitions for outstanding service, but the Christenson Award is for all of you out there who transport, home check, foster, phone, groom, manage websites, and, in general, quietly serve your affiliate rescue. Without our unsung heroes, we could not save the dogs who mean so much to all of us.