

Bay Area brother-sister survive night in backcountry

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By Kathryn Reed

Two Bay Area residents are recovering from frostbite and hypothermia after being rescued near Bear River Reservoir in Eldorado National Forest on Saturday night.

“We are just lucky to be alive,” Sally Shanks told *Lake Tahoe News* on Jan. 13 from her bed at Barton Memorial Hospital. But she admits she and her brother would not have survived another night outside. Temperatures have been subzero for the past few nights.

El Dorado County rescue crews got the missing persons report Santa Clara County officials. John Hearne, 70, of Los Altos and Shanks, 66, of Walnut Creek had planned a day snowmobile trip, but failed to return home Friday night.

The experienced snowmobilers were dressed for the elements, but were not prepared to spend the night in the wilderness. What slowed search and rescue crews is the two did not tell anyone where they would be parking and where exactly they would be snowmobiling.

Shanks said she has been snowmobiling for 40 years, and they both know the area well. It was after they had gone in on 29 miles of groomed trails that they decided to follow the sign that said 4 miles to their truck. But that route had them going through deep powder they were not expecting. That’s when their sleds got stuck.

“When we saw we could not make it we built a shelter and hunkered down for the night,” Shanks said. “My brother and I

are pretty hearty and resilient. We made a smart decision Friday night to camp rather than go where we knew couldn't go."

They dug out under a downed log, put pine branches up as walls and packed that with snow.

Sheriff's Deputy Damian Frisby told *Lake Tahoe News* the two also huddled together and did exercises to stay warm.

They had food and one bottle of water. But that bottle was solid ice. Shanks was able to break through the water at Tragedy Springs to fill the bottle. But that meant they were not starting to hydrate until Saturday afternoon.

Shanks' vehicle was found Jan. 12 at 11:43am at the old Iron Mountain Ski Resort at Iron Mountain Road and Highway 88 in El Dorado County. Deputies, along with search and rescue volunteers from El Dorado, Amador, and Alpine counties began searching the area, as did CHP helicopter H24.

CalStar out of Lake Tahoe Airport joined the search as darkness closed in because the helicopter pilot has night vision goggles. Two buried snowmobiles were located about 7pm northeast of the Bear River Reservoir.

Following their foot tracks, CalStar located the missing duo approximately 4 air miles away. The ground distance traveled by the two was estimated at 12 miles.

The CalStar crew loaded the two on board at 7:18pm, taking them to Barton Memorial Hospital. They remained in the South Lake Tahoe hospital Sunday afternoon.

Shanks isn't sure when they will be released. She said she should fully recover, but her brother has frostbite issues with some of his toes. He took his boots off Friday night, wrapped them in a vest and stuffed them in a backpack. He had to stuff his feet into frozen socks and boots the next

morning.

Shanks admits they were scared.

“We were getting tired and run down. We knew we needed to make wise choices. We conferred on every direction,” Shanks said as they walked along snowmobile tracks on Saturday.

She said she just kept thinking about finding the road, hitch hiking to the truck and having to endure a long drive home. She didn’t anticipate having to spend a few days in a hospital.

Mostly, though, she is thankful to the search and rescue teams, CalStar pilot and hospital staff for all they have done and continue to do.