

## A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS – SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT RISK MANAGEMENT

*The St. John's School Lake Temiskaming Canoe Tragedy (1978)*  
*The Strathcona Tweedsmuir School Rogers Pass Avalanche Tragedy (2003)*

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As a consultant working in the sport and recreation sector, these two school-based tragedies, occurring 25 years apart, have enlightened my thinking about what is important in risk management. The latter case also had a significant emotional impact on me, as it occurred at a time when my own children (twins) were exactly the same age as the students who perished on that school trip in Rogers Pass. This is the background to this tale....

St. John's School was an alternative school for boys in Toronto. The school also had counterparts in Manitoba and Alberta, but all have since shut down. Outdoor activities were a regular part of the school curriculum, and the school's philosophy was to build character through hardship and challenge. This particular outdoor trip was a 3-week canoe journey from Lake Temiskaming to James Bay. Twenty-seven boys ages 12 to 14 and four teachers embarked on a sunny June morning in four 22-foot war canoes. Early afternoon a storm struck and by day's end, 12 boys and one teacher had drowned.

The Coroner investigating this incident made the following findings:

- There were no route maps, nor had any of the teachers made this trip before. One teacher had no canoeing experience whatsoever, having arrived just days previously from the U.K.
- The group had no rescue equipment and no emergency procedures.
- Some boys could not swim – and the teachers did not know which boys could swim and which could not. One of the teachers could not swim either.
- No one had done any canoeing since the previous autumn.
- There had been no physical preparation or training for the trip, and no one had undergone any first aid, canoe rescue or lifesaving training.
- The new war canoes had been modified from their original design to accommodate more cargo – which altered the canoe's centre of gravity and balance.
- The trip started after an all night drive, early morning start and no hot food at breakfast or lunch.

Although the Coroner ultimately ruled that the deaths were an accident, the school was nonetheless criticized for its disregard of safety and cavalier attitude. The Coroner's Report concluded: *"We feel that for boys from 12 to 14 years of age, this entire expedition constituted an exaggerated and pointless challenge."*

Fast-forward 25 years to a sunny winter weekend in Rogers Pass. Fourteen Grade 10 students from Strathcona Tweedsmuir School (based in Okotoks, AB), two assistant leaders (one a teacher and one a volunteer), and one experienced and trained head guide (who was also the school's outdoor education teacher) were on a backcountry ski trip. The ski trip was a culminating activity in an outdoor education course. The students had been preparing for this trip since the previous September.

The avalanche rating at the location where they were skiing was 'considerable' – a medium rating that would not have deterred most recreational or commercial ski trekkers on that day. On the Sunday morning the group ventured across a snowfield, taking the normal precautions that they had studied and learned throughout their course. The group even had a quiz on avalanche safety that very morning. They followed avalanche protocol, traveling 50 feet apart and each member of the group was outfitted with a shovel, probe and operating beacon.

Shortly before noon that day, a large avalanche struck, burying 14 members of the group. With the help of two other skiers who were nearby, the unburied members of the group executed a perfect avalanche rescue. Seven of the buried members survived, but tragically seven students perished.

Surprisingly, neither of these cases resulted in lawsuits. However, due to the fact that they involved fatalities, they were both subjects of a Coroner's Inquest. As well, the St. John's School incident was the subject of a superb book titled *Deep Waters*, written by James Raffan in 2002. The Strathcona Tweedsmuir School incident was studied by an outdoor education consultant, Ross Cloutier, who submitted his report four months after the tragedy. This report is a public document, and as a result of it the School made a number of changes to its outdoor education programs.

These two incidents, 25 years apart, sit in stark contrast. The canoe tragedy reveals a negligence, liability and risk management nightmare: a textbook of what NOT to do. The avalanche tragedy reveals that, but for the decision to take a group of students into an area where there existed an avalanche hazard, Strathcona Tweedsmuir School did everything properly in planning and organizing for the trip, and with the exception of some communication breakdowns following the incident, the school is widely perceived as having fulfilled the reasonable standard of care expected by the law.

As we can see from the Tale of Two Schools, risk management is not always 'black and white'. In the case of St. John's school, it was very clear to any outside observer that the leaders and teachers at that school paid no attention to the potential risks that they faced on that canoe trip. A duty of care was clearly owed to the boys, and the standard of care attached to that duty was clearly breached. In fact, the entire enterprise gave the appearance of a complete lack of common sense.

In contrast, the Strathcona Tweedsmuir School case presented as a model of diligence, sound planning, capable preparation, and effective risk management. The leaders and teachers were qualified, they did everything that was expected of them, the students were physically prepared and had undergone extensive skills training. The group executed a perfect rescue once the avalanche struck. Yet seven Grade 10 students died.

Both these tales suggest that another important element in risk management is 'organizational culture'. St. John's School and Strathcona Tweedsmuir School were characterized by strong organizational cultures, although the representatives of the schools may not have explicitly recognized that this was a factor in how each school approached potentially risky activities.

In the case of St. John's School, there was a strong Christian ethic and a deeply held faith that adversity and challenge built character in boys and young men. Many of the families of boys who died in 1978 continued to send their other children to St. John's School, remarking that their children were thriving in the 'macho' environment created by the school. The founder of the school once said: *"We, at St. John's, believe it's better for a kid to die in the woods than to die in front of the television set"*.

At Strathcona Tweedsmuir School, there was an enduring culture of high achievement and a strong value placed on outdoor experiences. Although not explicitly acknowledged, recognized or questioned, over the years the School administration's tolerance for risk had crept ever upward, to the point where, in 2003, there was no hesitation to take minor students into a place that posed risks that could have catastrophic results.

The respective organizational attitudes shaped everyone at St. John's School and Strathcona Tweedsmuir School, and contributed significantly to the circumstances that led to these tragic deaths on Lake Temiskaming and in Rogers Pass. For me, as a person who works in the sport and recreation sector to help leaders manage risks, these two stories have shown me, without a doubt, that effective risk management is as much about thoughtful reflection and communication as it is about the usual risk management techniques of risk retention, reduction, transfer and avoidance.

I will pick up on this theme of the importance of organizational culture and organizational values, and the importance of reflection, in my next article on this web site.