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U.S.

Albert Taylor, Tracker Whose Work Helped Children, Dies at 88

By JOHN SCHWARTZ SEPT. 18, 2013

Albert Taylor, a former United States Border Patrol agent who came to be regarded as a legend in the art of tracking in the wild — sensing in shifting sand or broken twigs the sparest of signals that someone had passed that way — died on Sept. 9 in Alpine, Calif. He was 88.

He had Alzheimer's disease, his son Kenneth said in confirming the death.

Mr. Taylor, who was known as Ab, honed his skill at tracking people in the rugged backcountry of Southern California during nearly three decades with the Border Patrol. He played a key role in developing a national program to teach children what to do if they become lost.

“Thousands of tracking students owe their individual and corporate understanding, knowledge and tracking skill to this one dynamic man,” Joel Hardin, a leading professional tracker in Idaho, wrote in an online tribute.

Tracking people across wilderness, whether a fleeing fugitive or a lost child, is a “weird, mystical art” that blends intense attention and intuition, said Paul Saffo, a consultant and analyst in Silicon Valley who is involved in search and rescue

efforts in the Bay Area. But Mr. Taylor, he said, became “an absolute legend” by pioneering a systematic approach to tracking that could be taught.

In 1990 Mr. Taylor published “Fundamentals of Mantracking,” which he wrote with Donald C. Cooper. The book described his methodical approach of using well-trained searchers.

“In searching,” the authors wrote, “more people is seldom better. Sheer numbers do not guarantee success. Neither do millions of dollars or sophisticated equipment.”

In fact, the book warns, “The large, untrained, disorganized groups, all too characteristic of searches done in this country, cost far more lives than they save.”

Perhaps his most important contribution to the field resulted from failure. In February 1981, a 9-year-old boy named Jimmy Beveridge was separated from his two brothers on a nature trail on Palomar Mountain, northeast of San Diego. Mr. Taylor was among some 400 searchers who combed the area for the boy for four days before finding the body. Jimmy had died of hypothermia.

Mr. Taylor said it was the first time in 31 years of tracking that he had not found a missing child. “It changed his life,” Kenneth Taylor said.

Mr. Taylor was part of a team that developed Hug-a-Tree and Survive, a program that teaches children how to stay safe if they become lost and increase their chances of being found.

Along with wilderness survival training, children are taught to “find a spot where you’re comfortable and stay put,” said Howard Paul, a board member of the National Association for Search and Rescue, which now manages the program.

“Let the searchers come to you,” he said.

The message is important, Mr. Paul said, because a lost child runs the risk of leaving an area that has not yet been searched and wandering into an area that had already been searched. The program’s first presentation, a slide show, featured one

of Mr. Taylor's grandchildren.

Jacque Beveridge, Jimmy's mother, said in an interview that Mr. Taylor had been instrumental in popularizing the program among search-and-rescue organizations around the country. "It was Ab's name and reputation that helped catapult the program," she said.

Albert Snow Taylor was born on Nov. 24, 1924, in San Angelo, Tex. According to family lore, he was too young to enlist in the military in World War II but was so eager to join the effort that he quit high school and traveled to Britain to work for Boeing, repairing B-17s that had returned from bombing runs. When he was eligible to enlist, he came back to the United States and served in the Navy aboard the aircraft carrier Hancock. He joined the Border Patrol in 1949.

In an interview, Mr. Hardin, who was trained by Mr. Taylor during their Border Patrol days, called him a "hell-on-wheels individual, if you will." Mr. Taylor, he said, could get agents to work around the clock for days on end in an investigation.

"He could figure out how to get the job done when nobody else could," Mr. Hardin said.

After retiring from government service in the late 1970s, Mr. Taylor was a technical adviser to "Borderline," a 1980 film loosely based on his Border Patrol career, featuring Charles Bronson, Bruno Kirby and Ed Harris; Mr. Taylor had a small role as a border patrolman.

He was married three times. Besides his son Kenneth, he is survived by his wife, the former Lillian Beam; two other children from his first marriage, Stuart and Patti; three stepchildren, Rick, Kenny and Kevin Beam; two sisters, Barbara Tolch and Marjorie Grubb; 14 grandchildren; and 16 great-grandchildren.

By the 1990s, Mr. Taylor and Lillian Taylor were traveling six months a year in a motor home, leading tracking seminars and presenting Hug-a-Tree programs around the country.

Robert J. Koester, a researcher at Kingston University in London, who maintains a large database of search and rescue incidents, said, “Several areas around the country where Hug-a-Tree has been taught have reported a drop in the number of lost-children search incidents.”

Mr. Taylor “reawakened” search-and-rescue groups to practical tracking methods, Mr. Koester said, adding, “I’m sure his saves number in the thousands.”

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