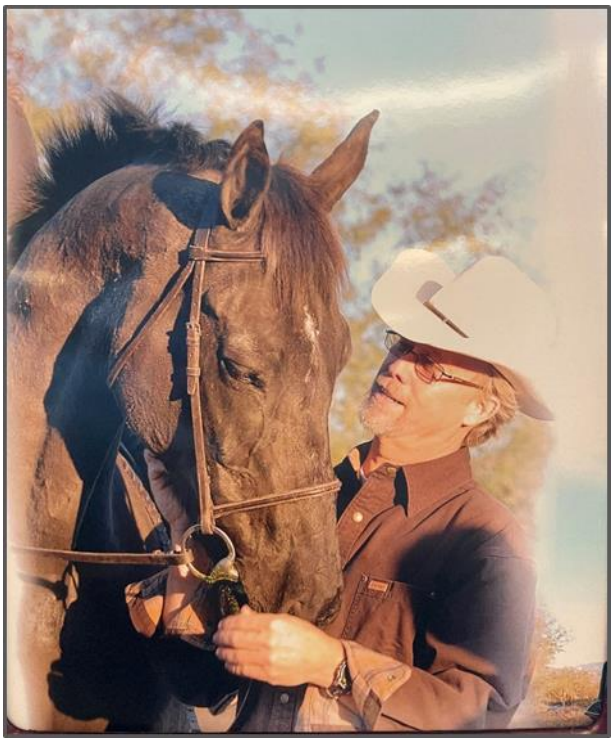
Personal Insights from the Old Pueblo Group

Sharing our world with you.

One Horsepower

My life in the saddle – George F. Herget Jr.

For those of you who don't know me I have a few horses. I like to ride, and occasionally I do Search and Rescue. The following maybe the reason why.



George with Ebony

My passion for horses started a long time ago when my family pulled over for a roadside petting zoo. This was your typical Americana experience, with colorful signs directing us to this unique opportunity alongside the highway, goats, pigs and all. It was my first time being so close to such a sizeable animal, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. His name was Alexander, an old but gentle Palomino gelding. His presence was soft and inviting. He exuded a certain calmness and allowed me into his space. To him I was just another kid like the countless ones that came before me to pet him. But as I stood close to him, I saw it in his eyes. It was something profound yet comfortable. It was powerful. That's all it took, I was hooked! The year was 1962 and I was a mere five year old boy.

As anticipated, my immediate desires to obtain a horse was met with much push back from my parents who had zero experience with horses. However, I persisted in following my passion and it wasn't until many years later that I finally was able to get my very own. With those early horses I learned to ride, care for their many quirks and more importantly I did all I could to understand these amazing animals. I always tell my coworkers and friends that horses are like "big loveable dogs."

Over time my skills improved, my ability honed, and I began to truly feel connected to my horses. Naturally, my rides became longer, and my adventures increased to the point that I found myself riding more and more challenging Arizona terrain. The confidence required to transit some of the most rugged areas in the US is high and being out in the desert really developed my respect for how truly hostile our local terrain in southern Arizona can be and how many people forget this crucial fact.

Fast forward to the fall of 1999. I decided to put this passion of mine to good use when I was sworn in as a member of the Pima County Sheriffs Mounted Search and Rescue. It was at this crossroads of horsemanship and my desire to help others that made this decision a no brainer. Since that day I have been involved with horses and rescue ever since. The old timers will tell you "if you haven't been thrown, stepped on, kicked or

bitten, you just have not been around horses long enough." I sadly can relate to it all and I love them just the same.

It was over the next 12 years of working with Pima County Sheriff's department that led me to my next endeavor. Wanting to connect with fellow like-minded people with a deep desire to help others, I felt the mission of the Mounted Search and Rescue could be bigger and more impactful. I considered the future of this valuable service and its growing need and so in 2011 I decided, along with my other Field Qualified members, to create a new regionally focused search and rescue organization known as Southern Arizona Mounted Search and Rescue, or SAMSAR for short.

SAMSAR became home to an exclusive group of men and women to whom I trust my life. They are recognized experts in field survival and emergency services while also being equally capable on the back of a horse. As head of this new search and rescue organization, I developed close relationships with many local and regional law enforcement entities as we grew our footprint and reputation as a premier Search and Rescue organization. Our scope of services covered everything from lost hikers and families, children in distress as well as animals in similar situations who get lost, injured or stranded.

I have been involved in hundreds of rescues throughout the years, but there is one particular emergency that has really stuck with me all this time. One late night I received a call from the Sheriff's office requesting help for an older horse that had collapsed and was unable to get back up on his feet. He had been down for a few hours and time was not on his side. In some cases, horses that go down can go through respiratory distress considering the weight mass on the chest cavity. In addition, legs can lose blood circulation thus making it more difficult to get back up as time goes on. All of these concerns were present when I arrived on scene. The circumstances were not good and I had never been put to task like this in such an emotionally charged atmosphere. With my years of Search and Rescue under my belt I had an idea about ropes, webbing, knew a few good knots and a lot about horses. His name was Ebony, a 31 year old with very little gas left in the tank.

I explained my idea to the deputy working alongside me and requested some assistance from the crowd of people who had gathered. When the tow truck arrived I explained my process and through some well-coordinated teamwork, we attempted to lift his lifeless body. It took for what seemed an eternity for Ebony to find his feet. He struggled tremendously initially and, after some time, finally stood tall. Like seventeen hands tall! His presence demanded respect and the on lookers cheered and cried as he found his poise. I was in awe at the beauty and determination this tired old horse exuded.

I removed my makeshift harness and as the deputy was gathering the equipment I took a moment to admire this fellow. I had one hand by the cheek and the other atop his muzzle when there was a moment that he looked down at me. We stared at each other for a few seconds. Nothing needed to be said as his eyes shared his appreciation for my efforts.

Early the next morning I was driving up to Mt. Lemmon to perform in a technical rescue skills test with the Mountain Rescue Association (MRA). I thought a lot about the night before and the emotions I felt working with Ebony and decided I needed to find a way to help my equine teammates. A few weeks went by and I was asked to be reunited with Ebony and his owner. The picture taken that day of us speaks volumes to the compassion and connections some of us lucky ones have with horses.

Ultimately this experience led to additional training, studying and testing, and eventually a Certification in Large Animal Technical Rescue. Over the years I have taught classes and held clinics, and frequently work with local Veterinarians. I have had several of these call outs now, most turned out well and a few did not. The lesson from those that did not have a positive end result is that sometimes it's just not meant to be. Horses are truly incredible creatures. I will always believe they give us more than they take. If you look closely and open yourself, you can see it in their eyes.