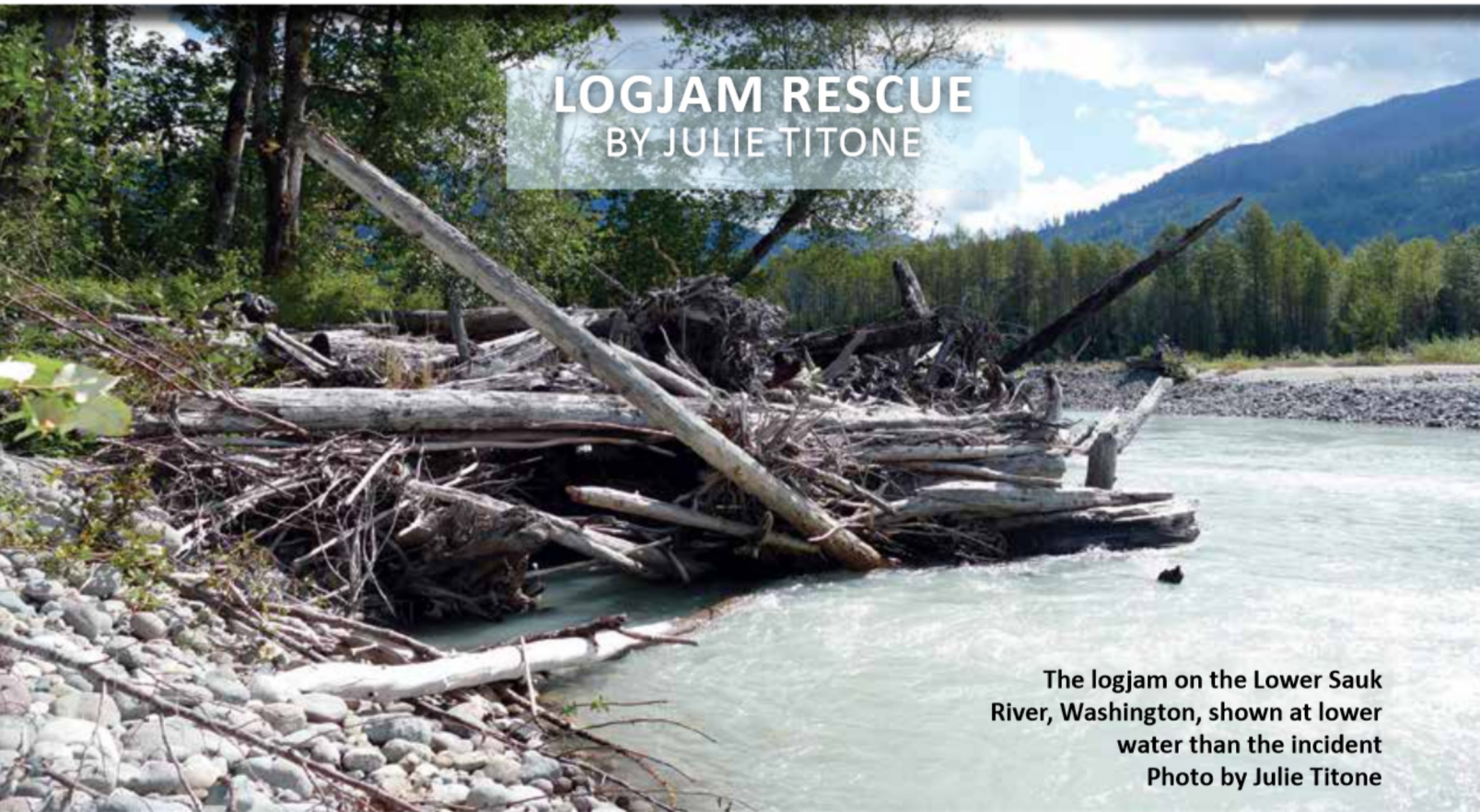


LOGJAM RESCUE BY JULIE TITONE



The logjam on the Lower Sauk River, Washington, shown at lower water than the incident
Photo by Julie Titone

WHERE WOULD YOU prefer to die? I'm a longtime canoeist, so the question brings to my mind a place like Washington's Sauk River. I imagine the sound of rushing water, and final breaths of clean, cool air. I let go of life quietly, beneath snow-capped mountains, on the riverbank – definitely on the riverbank.

But even though it could happen on a river, never would my end-of-life preference involve drowning, which was a real possibility one sunny June afternoon on the lower Sauk.

My new inflatable kayak had slammed into a house-sized logjam, leaving my torso pinned against a slick, centuries-old log. The current tugged at my legs, intent on pulling me into a complex underwater trap. It was a paddler's worst-case scenario.

A moment before, kayaker David Hablewitz had passed me. But he stayed river right

while the main current carried me toward river left.

"Watch out for the logjam!" he shouted. But I was either too far into the current or too inexperienced with the inflatable to stay out of harm's way. Before I knew it, my boat was rushing toward a tangle of timber and brush. Then I was up against it. If the logjam had been a house, I could have been looking into a second-floor window.

The kayak slipped out from under me and boogied downstream. My left hand clawed at the slick top of the log and my right hand grabbed, with a better hold, the stub of a branch. I was pinned to a textbook "strainer."

Along with my fear of the trap, I felt dismay for not avoiding it. During 25 years of paddling canoes, I'd always steered clear of this hazard. But when it came to blow-up boats, I was a newbie. My only experience in a so-called rubber duckie

had been during a commercial rafting trip 20 years earlier, and it didn't take long to figure out that inflatables aren't so easy to maneuver. I'd taken the most daunting unplanned swim of my life that day. But since then, the best brands of duckies have been so improved that they deserve a better nickname. Inflatables, AKA IKs, usually bounce safely through waves, so I decided to try again. With retirement on the near horizon, I thought that adding an inflatable to my paddle boat collection might extend my years of enjoying Class II-plus rivers.

"Help me!" I yelled. "Somebody, help me!"

I knew no one could hear me above the rush of water.

I assumed David would circle back when I didn't emerge past the logjam. But I didn't know how far he might have gotten, how long it would take him to reach me, or if I could hold on until he did. The other

SAFETY



Julie Titone's inflatable kayak on its maiden voyage on the Sauk River, June 2018.
Photo by Julie Titone

kayak and raft in our group were farther downstream. A few paddlers in the party already had gotten off the river, after the most exciting waves had petered out. We'd seen no one else on the river since launching at Clear Creek. I wish I could see a video or a picture of my predicament. Could I have worked my way along the log, hand over hand, and gotten to the end of the pile – found a place to put my feet, or a place to dive away from the danger? At the time I didn't even think of trying. I was afraid to let go of my precarious hold. My short legs swung uselessly. The best I could do was kick against the current.

Part of my former journalist's brain was writing the news report of my demise, picturing the heavy equipment that would retrieve my body, the first responders with their ropes and litter making the most of lingering summer-solstice daylight to carry out their sad mission. One of them would grimace and say, "Third river fatality this year."

How many minutes I hung there, I don't know. Five, maybe? Ten?

Suddenly David was looking down on me, his feet just above my head. He was surprised to see me. He'd fully expected me to be under the jumble of logs, not clinging to it.

"Take my wrist," he said. I grasped it with my right hand. With his help, I inched along the logjam. I finally pulled my chest high enough to rest; my arms were no longer bearing most of my weight. Oh, the surge of sweet relief. "I'm safe now," I said. But David urged me on, coaching me through getting my feet onto a submerged log and hoisting myself to the top.

What did I say? I hope, "Thank you! You saved my life!" I was beyond grateful. I do remember saying, "You got here quickly."

"I'm glad you think so," he responded. Clearly, it hadn't felt that way to him.

Then I expressed concern about the fate of my expensive new paddle. David looked puzzled. He must have thought I was nuts—given that I'd just narrowly escaped death—to be thinking about something so replaceable.

He walked over the logjam, back toward its downstream end where he'd parked his kayak. I followed, at first scooting along on my derriere, afraid of losing my balance if I stood. I didn't want to escape drowning only to break a leg.

When I caught up with David, he was looking down at my inflatable and the paddle that floated beside it. A strap in the boat had caught on a branch. He managed to work the boat free, then held it while I climbed down into it. He told me to paddle to a midstream island. I parked there while he retrieved his red kayak. Meanwhile, I heard three whistle blows from a companion downstream. I didn't know the signal to tell the others "all is well," so there was no need to work their way upstream to help, so I just blew three times back. And got three more blows in return.

Someone asked me later how cold the water was that day. After all, the Sauk is fed by snow in the North Cascades. But I wasn't aware of the water temperature. I was wearing a drysuit with fleece tights underneath. The air temperature was in the 70s. Blue sky framed Whitehorse Mountain. It was a beautiful day for anything but buying the farm.

I'd gotten my equipment right: the immersion suit, helmet, PFD, whistle, spare paddle. And I'd gone out with experienced paddlers. The first responders I had imagined would not have been able

Opposite: Julie Titone smiles for a selfie shortly before her altercation with the logjam.

Photo by Julie Titone

to intone for reporters, “Boaters should always wear life vests.”

What I’d gotten wrong was getting swept into the main current. Paying too much attention to the scenery, and not enough to what lay ahead. And, maybe, taking a new craft for the first time down that stretch of river past Darrington, where American Whitewater cautions about logjams. Up until I ran smack-dab into one, I’d had no trouble avoiding them – even though I didn’t find that inflatable kayak easy to steer. Mostly, the inflatable bounced through the Class II waves. It was great fun, until it wasn’t. I might have stayed out of trouble by back-ferrying out of the current – a common maneuver in a canoe. It could be that I tried the technique. I don’t remember.

The incident gave me a mild case of post-traumatic stress. Hours later, back at home, my heart started racing. For a solid 24 hours, I couldn’t focus on much of anything. David had trouble sleeping, too.

Three weeks later, I took the inflatable kayak on a river less littered with logjams.

All went well, but of course I was hyper-vigilant – which is obviously what a paddler must be. Especially in a boat not easily steered with pries and sweeps.

When I think of my close call, I contemplate how anatomy is destiny. What if David weren’t fit and able to scramble across the logjam to help me? If I had longer arms, could I have pulled myself out? Though if my legs were longer, there would have been more surface for the current to grab and pull me under....

More pertinent, I think, is that human connection is destiny. David and I only met that day, when I decided to take a first outing with folks from the Washington Recreational River Runners. The two of us carpooled. We got acquainted on the drive to the river, and we debriefed on the drive home. He now holds a special place in the pantheon of paddling pals who have had my back over the years.

So I gained a friend and learned some lessons. What I still haven’t learned is an accepted number of whistles to signal “everything’s all right.” Boy Scouts are

told two blasts. A mushroom-picking friend says her hiking crowd uses one blast, and the American Canoe Association doesn’t seem to have any guidance on the matter. The best bet would be to agree on a signal before your party launches.

If I had died that day, it would have been a sad irony. The outing was a memorial, and we had just stopped so that two young people could fling the ashes of their father, Chris Herman, into the river. Chris was a beloved river rat with a fondness for yellow butterflies. As I was paddling to the takeout, a swallowtail flew alongside me, skimming the water until it rose into the trees.

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David Hablewitz on the
Sauk, June 2018.
Photo by Julie Titone



SAUK RESCUE

BY DAVID HABLEWITZ

YELLED “PADDLE! PADDLE! PADDLE!” as I watched Julie’s inflatable kayak wash sideways into the massive logjam, flip upstream, and dump her into the current. She disappeared under her boat and into the logjam.

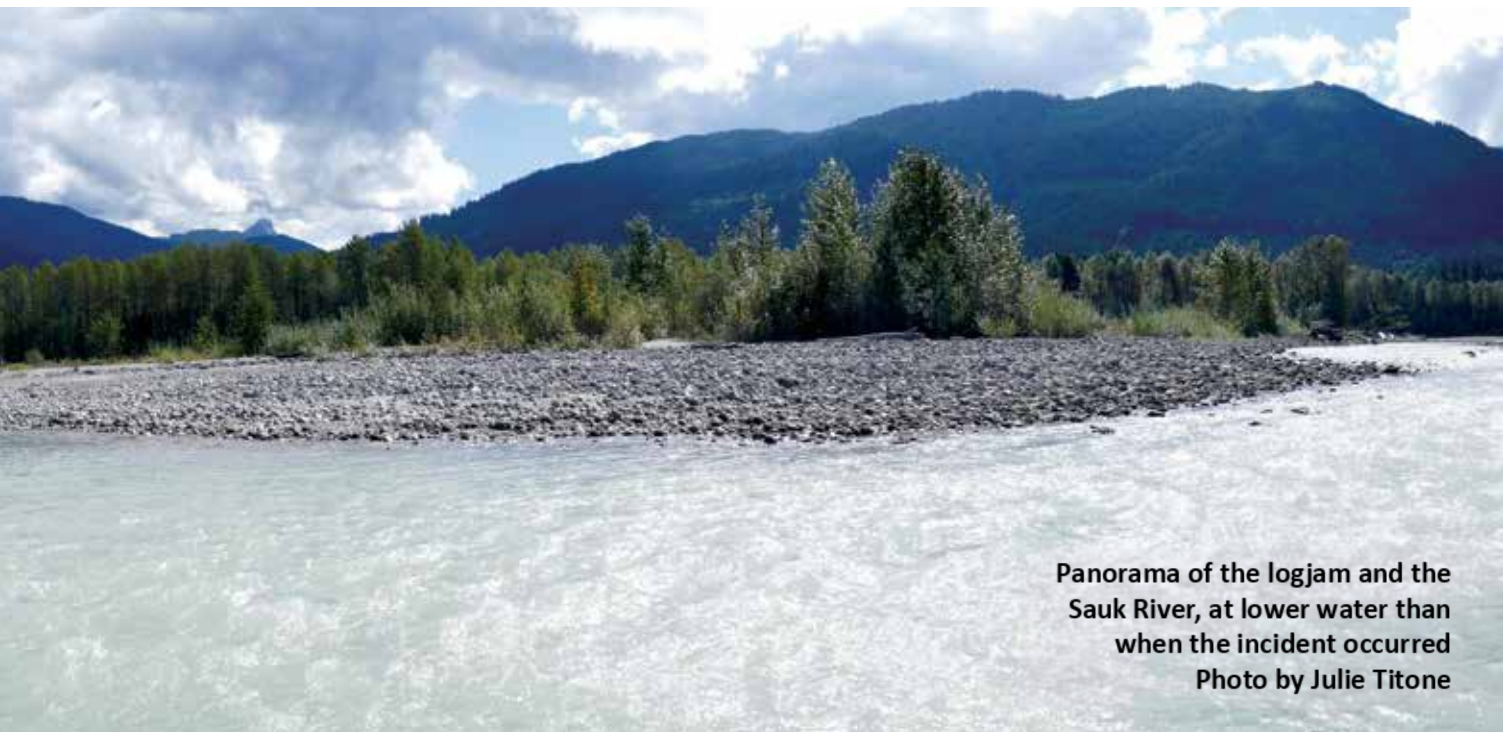
Such a terrible feeling pierced my heart as I feared what was happening to her underwater among the logs. The current was swift and there was no place I could climb out onto the logjam. It was stacked over 10 feet high and covered the left bank for hundreds of feet as the river made a broad, sweeping bend to the right. The tangled maze of enormous logs—some as much as three feet in diameter—reached 30 feet out into the river from the left bank. No one else was around to help. The rest of the paddling group had gone down one of the other channels that the river had cut through the gravel bars. I was alone and

Julie was flushed into this epic strainer. I thought, “Julie is under there! This is bad. This is REALLY bad!”

It was late June and we were making a very special river trip on the Sauk River, Washington. Louie and his sister Michelle had put this trip together to celebrate the life of their father, Chris, a whitewater fanatic who passed away from pancreatic cancer. We gathered to paddle one of his favorite rivers and release his ashes into the Sauk. The day was uneventful through the rapids on the Class II river. As we neared the end of the trip, the rapids were behind us. The final few miles were just swiftly flowing water that weaved channels around immense gravel bars as much as a quarter mile long and eight feet high, a product of the floods of spring snow melt.

At one split, the main current went right and the group took that branch. I looked back and noticed Julie was near the left bank, drifting into the left channel by herself. At this point she would not be able to make her way over to the main channel in her IK. Not wanting to leave her paddling alone, I scrambled to get over and go down the left channel with her. As I got around the gravel bar that split the current, the scene was revealed. The river curved back to the right. In the center of the channel, a boulder split the current. Immediately downstream was an epic log jam at least 10 feet high and hundreds of feet long, created at high water when the flow was many thousands of cfs higher. The current flowed straight through the logjam. I stayed far to the right.

Looking upstream I saw Julie was still way over to river left. Perhaps the subdued



Panorama of the logjam and the Sauk River, at lower water than when the incident occurred
Photo by Julie Titone

SAFETY

nature of the river for the past few miles, combined with what was a long day on the river, contributed to her complacency. I started yelling for Julie to paddle. But there was no chance she could paddle her boat against the current that was sweeping to the outside of the bend, directly into the logjam. She washed sideways into the structure, flipped, and disappeared.

My mind switched into “rescue mode” and my training took control of me.

I raced downstream, scanning the debris pile that engulfed the entire left bank as I paddled, searching for a place I could grab on and jump out of my kayak without getting caught myself. I found a spot maybe

100 yards downstream from the head of the logjam. I jumped out and started blowing three short whistle blasts over and over as I climbed up on top of the twisted pile of bark-stripped logs. Then with almost reckless abandon, I ran across the logs, weaving my way toward the head. I kept repeating to myself, “Not on my watch! Not on my watch!” I remembered how I used to joke with paddling friends, “Don’t do anything to get yourself on the six o’clock news.” This time it wasn’t funny.

As I reached the head of the logjam, I looked down over the precipice of logs. I expected to see nothing. My heart jumped when I saw Julie in the water 10 feet below me. She was facing downstream, her head

just above water. Her chest was against a log about 10 inches in diameter that was protruding from the pile and suspended just above the water; her arms were wrapped over the top of it. She was hanging on to keep from getting swept into and under the pile. I called her name so she knew I was there and kept talking in a reassuring voice as I climbed down.

“That was fast,” she responded in a calm voice. “I knew you would get here.”

I had her grab my wrist. From my lifeguarding experience, I know that wrist-grasping is much stronger than grasping hands. I couldn’t pull her up onto the log because of the force of the current. So we



At lower water, David Hablewitz revisits the Sauk River logjam where he rescued Julie Titone
Photo by Julie Titone



worked together to maneuver her under the log she was clinging to, then rolled her up onto it from the downstream side. Now she was facing upstream with her chest on top of the log. I kept giving instructions in a calm but commanding voice, helping lift and guide her through the branches and logs until she was able to get free. We climbed together to the top of the wood pile.

I assessed Julie's condition to ensure she was OK and not in shock, then went to retrieve her gear. Amazingly, one of the thigh straps of the inflatable kayak had snagged on a branch just a few feet from where I had found her. I was expecting her paddle to be gone, but it was hung up in the same branches, hiding under the capsized IK. What great fortune! I jumped in and paddled her boat to where my kayak was parked. Julie scrambled over the logjam to meet me there.

As we paddled away, Louie came running up on the island on river right. He had heard my whistle blowing. The entire event was out of sight from the group, obstructed by the island between the channels.

In events like this, everything seems to slow down as your mind captures every detail around you. But my Garmin GPS activity tracker verified it was only three and a half minutes from the time she flipped until the time I had her safely out of the water.

The day offers plenty of lessons. It makes me very thankful for the training and experience I have had. While the situation was bad, everything about the rescue went perfectly. As a lifeguard in Florida years ago, I made many rescues, but nothing was as complex or intense as this. And I have made many river rescues, but none in which the threat was quite as obviously imminent. It was all on me. Had I not been there, had I not made that conscious decision to join Julie going down the other channel, and had I not reacted quickly, the outcome would almost certainly have been different. Her calmness in the situation also made a big difference.

Finally, if you paddle the lower Sauk near Darrington, realize that it is a Class II river with potential Class V consequences.

