

"I NEVER HEARD A MAN HOLLER LIKE THAT. ... I COULD HEAR THE BONES CRUNCHING." — GARY CORLE

GRIZZLY ATTACK

BY KEN HORN

It was the most agonizing scream I ever heard," remembers Gary Corle. "Johnny was literally being torn to pieces."

"Johnny" is Pastor Johnny McCoy of North Pole (Alaska) First Baptist church. Corle is McCoy's close friend and a deacon in the church. For several years the pair had partnered on annual moose hunts near Delta Junction, Alaska. On Sept. 3, 2001, they embarked on another hunt together.

Within a day, that trip would become very different from the others, and McCoy would be fighting for his life.

On Sept. 4, the pair was scouting for signs of moose when they chanced into the territory of a sow grizzly bear and her two cubs.



GRIZZLY ATTACK

PREVENTING GRIZZLY BEAR ATTACKS

Here are a few things to remember when you are in grizzly country.

1. Be aware of your surroundings. Understand the potential exists to encounter a grizzly bear. Look for grizzly signs: scat (droppings), claw marks on trees, torn-up stumps, covered animal or food cache, well-worn trails, etc.
2. Listen for sounds that may indicate a grizzly, especially a sow with cubs. If you see cubs, be aware the sow is nearby.
3. Have a bell on a backpack, or talk loudly and make noise in dense vegetation when hiking in grizzly country.
4. Never bring and/or store food in your tent.
5. Carry a good bear spray and know how and when to use it.
6. If a bear is encountered:
 - a. Stop immediately, and look for an escape route. Back away slowly and speak in a calm voice. Never run!
 - b. If attacked, drop to the ground facedown, and curl in a fetal position. Lock fingers behind neck and do not fight back on a grizzly bear attack. This will only continue to provoke the bear. Keep backpack on, as it can be a buffer between you and the bear.
 - c. Do not move until bear is out of sight; moving too soon will incite another attack.

— Dennis Huenefeld, pastor and outdoorsman, North Pole, Alaska



Johnny McCoy needed more than 1,000 stitches.

The bear saw them first and was barreling toward Corle when McCoy first saw her. He had no time to warn his friend. By the time McCoy raised his rifle, the bear was on Corle and slammed him face-first into the brush. McCoy couldn't shoot the bear for fear of hitting Corle as well.

This is it, Corle thought, but the bear's snapping jaws were blocked by his backpack. Trapped on his stomach, Corle jabbed his rifle over his shoulder into the bear's fur and fired.

Corle thought the bullet had ended the attack, but he was wrong.

Scant seconds later he heard McCoy screaming.

"I never heard a man holler like that," Corle says. "They were 10 yards away. I could hear the bones crunching and the flesh ripping off the bones."

Now Corle faced the same quandary McCoy had — he was unable to fire for fear of hitting his friend.

Feverishly McCoy shoved his rifle into the bear's mouth and pulled the trigger.

Click.

The gun misfired.

The beast slapped it away and renewed her onslaught, sinking her teeth into McCoy's arms, hands, shoulder and head, tossing him around like a plaything.

Seconds — and an eternity — later, the bear was mysteriously gone, and McCoy lay in a crumpled heap, blood flowing freely from multiple wounds.

"He was bleeding everywhere," Corle says. "I thought he would bleed to death."



Ken Horn photo

Pastor Johnny McCoy continues to minister today.

McCoy was in agony. His scalp had been peeled back, an ear hung below his chin, and an eyeball drooped from its socket.

Corle did his best to bind McCoy's injuries and staunch the flow of blood. He thought his friend would die. When he spotted the cubs in a nearby tree he knew they had to get away ... fast.

Their camp lay 2½ miles away, but it seemed more like 200. Corle gently helped McCoy to his feet. Step by agonizing step, McCoy stumbled blindly behind Corle, touching his backpack, as Corle guided him and kept watch for the grizzly. Praying through every pain-wracked step, they called out to the only Source that could help them.

Somehow, they finally reached their camp. But even here there was a problem. Corle's good-natured rules for hunting trips included no alarm clocks or cell phones, and the plane wasn't due to pick them up for nearly two weeks. Here McCoy confessed he'd broken his friend's rule; at the last moment he had packed a cell phone. Elated, Corle frantically called 911.

Two hours later an Army helicopter with a rescue team appeared, stabilized

McCoy and rushed him to Memorial Hospital in Fairbanks.

That last-minute decision to pack a cell phone "literally saved my life," McCoy says.

Renowned plastic surgeon Dr. William Wenner had pieced together a number of bear-attack victims in his career. There would be no better surgeon than Dr. Wenner to treat McCoy. And Wenner was unexpectedly in the hospital when McCoy was wheeled in.

After six hours on the operating table, McCoy's wounds were closed with more than 1,000 stitches across his face, head and neck. His arms and hands spent several weeks in casts and bandages.

Did McCoy question God?

"I've never asked God, 'Why did You allow this to happen?'" he says. "I just believe God had something in store, and it was up to me what I was going to do with it."

What God did was put McCoy back in the pulpit and expand his ministry exponentially. Corle and McCoy have traveled frequently, as far away as Australia, sharing the goodness of God in the toughest of situations.

McCoy says he still has nightmares sometimes.

"You don't know how many times I've killed that bear," he jokes. "I mean she's really dead by now."

McCoy realized the memories that cause the nightmares would never leave. "So I just asked God to remove the pain ... and to this day, they're not painful. God is the One who got me through this."

And McCoy's message today, wherever he shares his testimony, is that God will get you through any tragedy in your own life, no matter how great it is. **tpe**



Visit Editor Ken Horn's blog, *Snapshots*, at khorn.agblogger.org, for snapshots of life from a biblical perspective. This week look for more on Johnny McCoy and Alaska, including more of Ken's photography of the 50th state.

KEN HORN is the editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.