



Four Squadron jeeps halt on roadside awaiting orders that will be radioed by search planes overhead.

## Minute Men . . . In Jeeps!

Ready to serve at any hour when emergency demands, the 41-member Washoe Jeep Squadron of Reno is an invaluable component of the Civil Air Patrol. The Squadron's main mission is to help locate downed aircraft and airmen in the trackless westcentral Nevada and adjacent California desert regions, but its work does not stop there. Hauling feed to starving deer, relocating a pioneer trail or cleaning up a campsite are all in a day's work for members of this volunteer service organization.

By NELL MURBARGER  
Photographs courtesy  
Washoe Jeep Squadron

ON DECEMBER, 1951, Swedish Air Scientist Karl Ovgard took off in a glider from a point near Lone Pine, California. The winds were right and in moments the ill-fated craft soared out of sight. When the eminent airman failed to return after a reasonable length of time, the Civil Air Patrol flashed an alert to Reno asking for help of the Washoe Jeep Squadron in the search that it had ordered.

Before the crashed glider and dead

Thomas C. Wilson, squadron commander, does his own camp cooking when the patrol is out in the field.





Part of the squadron camped in Smoky Valley while on a rescue mission.

pilot were located, the Reno jeepsters participating in that mission logged 10,000 vehicle miles on a quest that covered Death Valley, Panamint Valley and the Amargosa Desert.

Although not ordinarily called upon to render service so far from its home base, activities of this remarkable jeep service group have included a wide range of emergencies quite apart from its primary function of searching for lost aircraft and rescuing crash survivors. During the eight years of its existence, the Squadron's 18 jeeps and 41 members have searched for missing children; rescued injured hikers, hunters and flood victims. Periods of heavy and prolonged snow found Squadron jeeps transporting emergency hay rations to starving deer herds; fish and game conservation work has been aided; historical trails retraced and marked; landmarks explored; and good outdoor sportsmanship practiced and promoted.

Many of these meritorious activities had come to my attention through news stories. Friends had mentioned other laudable but unheralded Squadron services, and editorials in Reno newspapers testified to the fact that this organization enjoyed the respect and approval of its home town. It was not until last summer that I had the opportunity to meet Thomas C. Wilson, founder, present commander and perennial mainstay of the Squadron.

Owner of Nevada's largest advertis-

ing agency—as well as director of this and chairman of that—Tom Wilson is one of the busiest men in Reno. But like other busy men, he seems to possess a magical formula by which he can “make” time for any interest or cause that lies close to his heart. With Tom Wilson, that means the Washoe Squadron.

My arrival at the Wilsons' attractive ranch-style home in the southwest outskirts of Reno found Tom and his wife relaxing on the lawn. Tom could have passed for any prosperous suburbanite anticipating a peaceful weekend of golf or other respite from the strain of office and business affairs. But for him and other members of the Squadron there is no assurance that a weekend or any other period of time will pass peacefully and uneventfully. Emergencies don't give a hang whose plans they disrupt!

Squadron members, like volunteer firemen, are on call around the clock. Even as we sat on the Wilsons' pleasantly cool lawn and talked of old trails, ghost towns and other topics of mutual interest, Tom's jeep was standing in the driveway like a Minute Man's horse—saddled and bridled, as it were, and ready to go.

Painted in the prescribed yellow and blue Squadron colors and bearing a large number on its top to afford identification from the air, the sturdy little vehicle was in A-1 mechanical condition, fully fueled and completely

outfitted. If an emergency had arisen during our visit, Tom and his jeep would have been rolling in a matter of moments. Elsewhere throughout the city, said Tom, 17 other yellow-and-blue jeeps also were prepared for any eventuality.

In view of the successful manner in which it functions and the commendable nature of its work, it is surprising to note that except for a similar but later organized group at Fallon, Nevada, the Washoe Jeep Squadron is the only one of its kind in the United States. True, there are numerous other worthwhile civilian jeep groups—some of them affiliated with sheriffs' offices and other official and non-official agencies—but the two Nevada squadrons are the only ones in the nation operating under the direct orders and auspices of the U. S. Air Force and its auxiliary, the Civil Air Patrol.

As a lieutenant colonel in CAP, Tom Wilson felt there was a definite need for admitting to membership in that organization not only working pilots, but men who had never been pilots or who no longer wished to fly. The services of such men would be valuable, and he felt that these individuals, in turn, would benefit from membership in CAP. Since CAP maintains land rescue teams whose services are coordinated with air-borne units, the Reno advertising executive conceived the idea of a volunteer jeep-mounted ground force to aid air search of rough terrain.

Tom's plan eventually was approved by the Washington, D. C., headquarters of the Civil Air Patrol, and in 1950 the Washoe Jeep Squadron was born.

Fourteen of the Squadron's charter members still are affiliated with the group. Although any adult male citizen of Washoe County is eligible for membership, there are certain basic requirements. Not only must a prospective member be in position to drop his work at any time to join a hastily recruited search party; he must be willing to have his past and present activities minutely investigated by the FBI. The candidate also must be trained, and agree to abide by all rules and regulations of both the Squadron and CAP. Any man meeting these requirements—whether he works for day wages or is a millionaire—becomes a squadron member upon payment of the \$6 annual CAP membership fee.

Ages of Squadron members range from 21 to past 70, and trades and professions currently represented include radio and telephone company executives, school teachers and students, former president of the Washoe County Medical Association, retired lawyer and judge, real estate broker,



motel and coffeeshop owners, mortician, civil engineer, construction foreman, roofing contractor, carpenter, accountant, gunsmith, truck driver and handyman.

Learning that a plane has been forced down in rough mountain or desert country within a 200-mile radius of Reno—or even farther away under extreme circumstances—the Civil Air Patrol or Air Force may summon the Squadron into service. Immediately upon receipt of the alert, the Squadron's operations' officer mobilizes every available member — telephoning each at his home, office or place of business.

Upon arriving at the pre-determined assembly point in the presumed vicinity of the crash, each jeep, by means of its assigned number and two-way radio hookup, is under constant orders from scouting CAP aircraft. These pilots direct every phase of the search.

One jeep crew may be dispatched to a sheepherder's camp in quest of a possible lead; another may be sent to a lone mining camp which the searching CAP plane has spotted on the other side of a ridge; a third jeep may be directed into a willow-screened wash to search for traces of the missing aircraft. And, of course, when the wreckage is located, it usually is the jeepsters who reach the scene first and render aid to survivors.

Although most searches are completed within two or three days, the longest sustained mission in which the Washoe Squadron participated—the search for Karl Ovgard — extended over an entire week.

Time and effort of Squadron members are given freely and without thought of remuneration. Only the expense of gasoline and lubricating oil consumed in the course of an officially-ordered search is reimbursed by

the Civil Air Patrol. The vehicles and other equipment used by the Squadron are supplied and maintained at the personal expense of each member. Each jeep must be painted in prescribed colors and have its official Squadron number displayed on its top in large black numerals; otherwise its body style may follow individual choice. Of the jeeps in current use by Squadron members, six are station wagons, five pickups, and seven standard jeeps. All are four-wheel-drive vehicles, and each is equipped with a two-way radio.

When on official duty each jeep carries, in addition to its driver, one or two observers or specialists assigned to that vehicle by the mission commander. Insofar as possible, the jeeps are paired off on assignments so one will be available to render aid in case of breakdown or bogging in sand or mud by the other. Since group travel

*Squadron members are briefed during recent search mission. From left, standing, Professor Shepherd of University of Nevada; high school teacher Oliver Morgan; Dr. S. W. Landis, who served as a flight surgeon in Korea; biologist S. S. Wheeler; and civil engineer Homer Bronnecke. Seated on ground are Dr. Wesley Hall, surgeon; and Squadron Commander Tom Wilson (back to camera).*



is not always feasible, however, each jeep carries adequate tools, water, fuel, food and equipment to operate independently.

To expedite emergency departures each vehicle must be kept loaded at all times with the mandatory gear, which includes a shovel, axe, rope, tow chain, tire chains, tools, five gallons of water, 10 extra gallons of gasoline, tent, tarpaulin, maps, first aid kit, ground signal panels, and three days food supply for two persons. Occupants of each jeep make their own food selection and do their own cooking, most of them carrying gasoline, Primus or charcoal stoves for this purpose. Besides the foregoing list, it is suggested that each jeep carry a saw, winch or heavy-duty jack, tent warmer, flares and spotlight.

Personal equipment required of each member includes a sleeping bag, canteen, knife, matches, compass, first aid and snake-bite kits, extra socks, heavy clothing, sun glasses, waterproof boots and pocket money. Suggested, but not mandatory, personal articles are field glasses, extra maps, camera, large knife, flashlight, Air Force fatigues and a yellow cap.

In addition to its search missions, conservation work and community service, the group meets monthly for a field training session which usually involves problems in navigation, rescue and first aid.

Of particular interest to me is the highly commendable work these men do in historical research. Besides exploring ghost towns and locating and marking pioneer landmarks and Indian writings, they have retraced early emigrant trails across Nevada.

Considerable controversy, for example, existed over the exact course of the Applegate Emigrant Trail from the point where it left the Humboldt River Trail, to Rabbitohole Springs, about 30 miles distant. Interested in this lost section of the famous route blazed in 1846 by Jesse and Lindsay Applegate, 10 members of the Squadron, riding in five jeeps and carrying full camping gear, left Reno in July, 1952, to explore the area. Using as their guide the journal of J. G. Bruff, written in 1849 and published a century later by Columbia University Press under the title, *Gold Rush*, the jeepsters established a base camp in the disputed section and began their careful search of the ground between the Humboldt River and Rabbitohole.

"We found Bruff's records to be extremely accurate," said Tom Wilson. "Driving up the same dry wash where Bruff had led his wagon train 103 years before, we came to our first

major enigma: Where had Bruff left the wash?"

After lengthy conjecture and reconnoitering, the party climbed to the summit of the Antelope Range for a better look, and there decided upon the larger of three gullies as the most feasible course for the trail to have taken.

"The gully bore faint traces of what could have been wagon tracks—but we knew any sheepender's wagon could have made those markings. Neither was there much chance of finding any iron or wooden relics to prove location of the trail, as such articles would have been washed away or buried by the heavy summer cloudbursts for which this area is noted.

"As we slowly worked our way down the wash, we found a place where the gully cut through a dike of shale rock, and we knew that here was our chance! If hundreds of iron wagon wheels had crossed this dike, it was certain that they would have left some mark.

"Falling to work with our shovels, we carefully cleared away the accumulated overburden and uncovered two ruts deeply worn into the solid rock! They were spaced slightly farther apart than our jeep tracks, were about nine inches wide and a foot deep, well-rounded on the bottom, and very smoothly worn. Since it would have required considerable wagon traffic to cut troughs of such depth, we knew for certain that we had found the old trail. Now that we had knowledge of exactly where the route crossed the Antelope Range, it was easy to follow the weathered ruts down the west slope of the mountains and on to Rabbitohole Springs.

"We learned later that the wagon ruts in the rock had been known to local prospectors, geologists and mining men, but evidently no one associated them with the Applegate cut-off, nor had the appropriate historical agencies been informed of their existence."

In addition to its official rescue work and unofficial historical research, occasionally the Squadron members take jaunts just for plain fun and relaxation.

"We look for gem and mineral specimens, and schedule a few hunting and fishing camping trips each year," said Tom. "We practice as well as preach conservation, and any of our men who made a habit of disregarding traffic safety or fish and game regulations soon would find themselves thoroughly unpopular with the others."

I asked Tom what he thought about the validity of the often heard complaint by some conservation groups

against the use of jeeps for mountain travel, contending that their terrific power causes them to dig up the ground, thereby despoiling the landscape and giving the forces of erosion a foothold.

"Only in extreme cases does a good jeep driver tear up the ground," he answered. "Most of the damage is done by immature drivers who are showing off. You won't find any of our people deliberately tearing up the ground—for one thing we think too much of our jeeps to mistreat them in such a manner.

"Personally, I think we have a fine group of men in our Squadron," said Tom Wilson. "We're affiliated with Desert Protective Council and try to live up to its precepts. We also strive to be good American citizens and good sportsmen. Wherever we go we clean springs, repair trails and burn litter left by campers and picnickers. This isn't an important phase of our program—we just like the good feeling that comes from leaving a place in better condition than we found it."

Despite the important and humanitarian service being performed by the Washoe Jeep Squadron, I have a feeling that this last mentioned phase of the Squadron's program—dismissed by Tom Wilson as "not important"—may be its most remarkable activity. If everyone would strive to leave each place in a little better condition than he found it, I suspect that most of the old world's ills would automatically be cured, and the law courts could close their doors.

#### ARTISTS McGREW, REED PLAN PALM DESERT SHOWS

California Artist R. Brownell McGrew is scheduled to exhibit his paintings at the Palm Desert, California, Art Gallery from March 1 to 23. The artist is recognized as one of the Southwest's foremost contemporary painters. "His skill," wrote one critic, "verges on the dazzling."

McGrew studied at the Los Angeles Art Institute under Ralph Holmes, and began painting the desert landscape in 1949.

Another prominent California artist, Marjorie Reed, plans a Palm Desert Gallery show during the month of April. Theme of Miss Reed's exhibit is the historical background of the Palm Springs area.

The admission-free Palm Desert Gallery is in the Desert Magazine Pueblo on Highway 111 mid-way between Palm Springs and Indio, and is open daily including Sundays during the winter season from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.