



CANYON CLASSROOM:

The training of
a National Park Ranger

By James H. Winchester

Rangers in the United States National Parks spend almost as much time now in the shadow of skyscrapers as they do in the wilderness. Since World War II, the National Park System has added 53 additional areas totaling 54 million acres to its recreational territories. Much of this new recreational and historical domain is only a one-day, or less, excursion from major urban regions.

Americans yearning to answer the traditional "call of the wild" can now do so almost as easily as families once took visits to city parks and zoos on summer Sunday afternoons.

With this new emphasis, National Park Rangers are now skilled in more than ecology and environment. They are still well-trained, of course, to hike off into the wild to protect animals, fight forest fires or make daring mountain rescues, but cars, crime and crowds are of equal, if not more, concern.

Today's National Park Rangers, like over 80 percent of the nearly 300-million people expected to visit National Park areas in 1981, come mostly from urban areas. Only a few years ago almost all of them were from western mountain regions. Nearly all are now college graduates, too, with degrees in art, sociology, history and psychology exceeding those in forestry and conservation. Many are women and minorities.

The first step in the making of a modern Ranger is nearly two months at the Grand Canyon in Arizona, where the National Park Service has its basic training school, named after Horace Marden Albright, one of the founders of the National Park Service, who became its second director in 1929.

The school, a combination campus and camp, demands intellectual discipline, coupled with



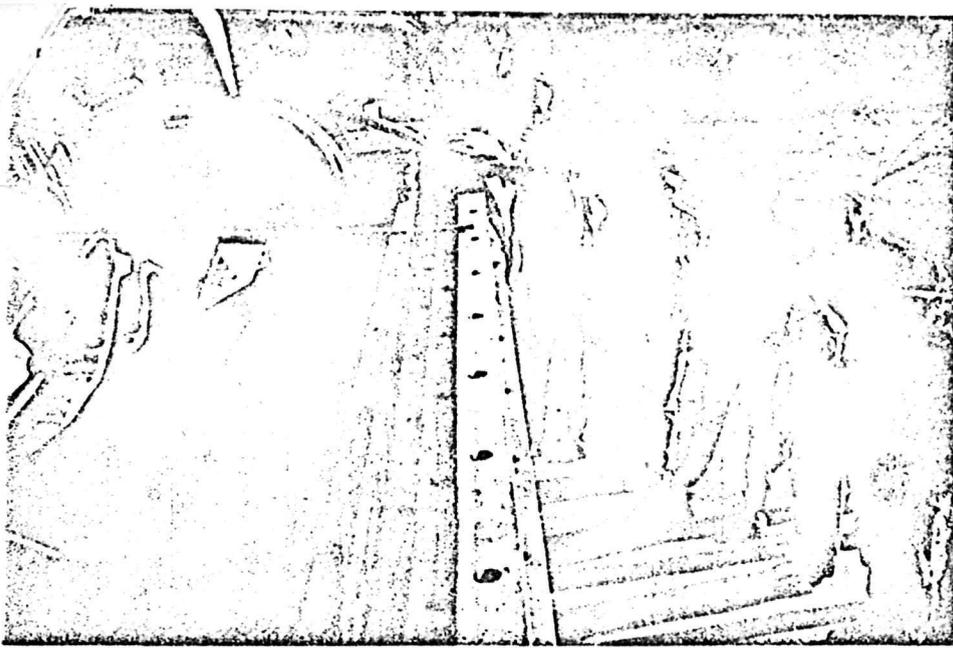
In a simulated rescue, a group of Ranger trainees struggle to get their victim (another ranger volunteer) down the steep sides of a canyon.

the ruggedness of military basic training. The schedule is back-breaking, covering everything from computer-age administration and planning to better ways to meet and treat the public.

Ranger trainees start each day with an hour of jogging through the woods, with another 90 minutes of demanding calisthenics and physical exercise before dinner. To graduate, candidates must pass the same rigid

fitness tests given Air Force jet pilots and members of the Los Angeles Fire Department.

Practical training is mixed with hundreds of hours of classroom study. There is hard homework every night, with two or three long, stiff-graded written reports each week. Typical assignments: "Take a position for or against truth, and prove the validity of your view," or "As a Chief Ranger, how would



Park Rangers learn structural fire techniques at a class taught from the running board of one of the Grand Canyon's two fire engines.



Displaying rock climbing equipment used for ascension, the instructor advises, "Leave the dramatic stuff for the guys on TV. We climb carefully here."

you handle complaints to Congressmen or local political pressure groups?"

In another class, the student Rangers are asked to conceive new approaches to improve visitor appreciation and enjoyment. One idea: Hold talks and get-togethers for the elderly in the afternoon, and not in the cooler, damper air which often

affects their rheumatism or arthritis. For young people: At evening campfire sessions, sing songs like "Rocky Mountain High" and "Country Road" instead of "I've Been Working on the Railroad" or "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." Says an instructor: "We want them to develop the ability to examine unorthodox approaches to problems and escape stereotyped thinking."

In their forest-green uniforms and distinctive stiff-brimmed Stetson hats, Rangers are ready symbols of the National Park Service to the public. Most meetings are on a person-to-person basis, and ways to improve attitudes and actions to create a better image take up over half of the time at the Academy. One of the first things taught is that 70 percent of all communication is non-verbal. "Don't just say 'Welcome!' while in a rigid stance," Albright Academy trainees are told. "Use your hands for gestures. Employ a lot of eye contact, and if you are very tall stand back so that those you are talking to don't have to look up at you."

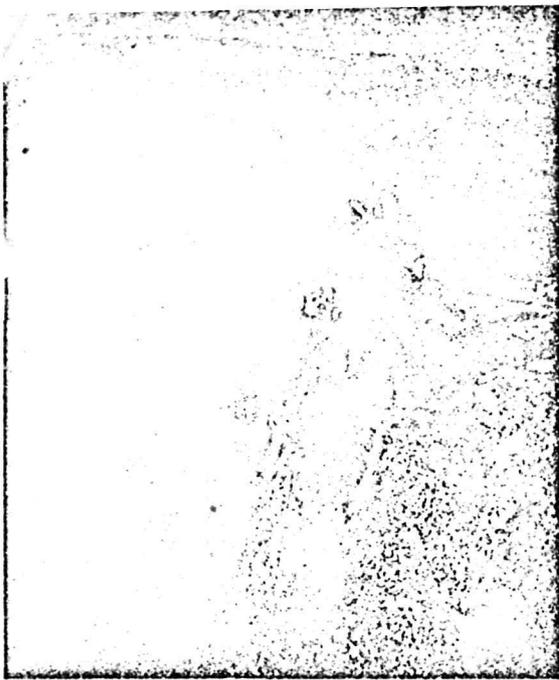
A set jaw or furrowed brow is regarded by most National Park visitors as threatening. Shaking a finger at them is as bad as screaming or scowling. To help the new Rangers be more human, many little things are stressed. "If you are telling visitors they can't do something, never make it a flat-out 'No!'" is one emphasis. "They are upset because they can't camp in a restricted area, so you say, 'Gosh, I'm mad, too, but those are the regulations. Come on now, let's see if we can work something out.' Avoid at all costs any attitude that you are right and the visitor can't do anything about it. Always explain the reason. Don't think 'I.' Think 'You.'"

In preparing printed materials or interpretive talks, the Ranger students are taught: "Explain more than you show." Live verbs, such as "General Grant *believed*," instead of "General Grant *was of the opinion*," get better visitor acceptance.

The Rangers are urged to listen more to park visitors, and develop a sensitivity to minorities and those with different life styles. In one class, students were paired off to talk to each other. At the end of the exercise they wrote down what they heard, or *thought* they heard, in the conversation. Most were astounded to find they had missed most of what was said. The lesson: You cannot determine a person's needs and values through your own preconceived ideas about them.

Everything isn't change in the National Park Service by any means, and the Albright classes are exposed to realistic day-to-day problems on a four-day field trip to several areas in surrounding western states.

At Nevada's Lake Mead National Recreation Area, students saw first-hand the difficulties created by boaters dumping sewage wastes into the backed-up waters of the Colorado



A Grand Canyon Park Ranger begins a rappel as he instructs ranger trainees in technique.



Volunteer "victims" are strapped papoose style into a portable litter. They wear a protective helmet and facemask to keep out dust.

River. Some went along on Park police patrols needed to control visitors from nearby Las Vegas who come out in the middle of the night for swimming parties. In Utah, the horrors created each summer when over a million visitors crowd their cars into a narrow, six-mile-long canyon at Zion National Park were fully detailed.

Basic map reading and com-

pass use is taught in the classroom, and then tested on four-day group wilderness hikes. At check points, new directions are waiting in envelopes. In all, before reaching the night's camping spot, each team makes three or four complicated route changes.

Over the next three days the backpackers make their way along 30 miles of primitive paths, some with 35-degree slopes, down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, and then back up the steep walls to the Academy. In an area filled with rattlesnakes, big horn sheep, wild burros and deadly tarantulas, they exist on their own, carrying limited drinking water and eating mostly dried food. Said one of the students: "This is what I once thought being a Ranger was all about!"

The class practices mountaineering and basic rescue work, an alien world to most of them, at a remote edge of the Grand Canyon. It was cold and raw, as wet snow mixed with heavy hail. In the high wind and slippery footing, the students, including all the women, had to drop down alone on the end of a rope to a ledge 150 feet below, with nothing below their dangling feet but almost a mile of empty space. Instructors demonstrated proper knots and scaling techniques first, and kept a careful eye on everything, but everyone made the actual descent on their own.

Later, acting as the victim of a fall, a student was "rescued" several times from a narrow shelf 200 feet down the canyon wall, with classmates using ropes to lift him back to the top on a litter.

As part of an intensive visitor protection course, a mock campground filled with deliberately-created unsafe conditions is set up near the Academy. After inspecting the site, the students pinpoint the dangers, which range from food stored in ways

to attract animals to the improper handling of volatile propane gas in trailers. They then define what approaches they would use to cut down accidents.

Getting into the Albright Academy isn't easy. Fewer than 100 new Rangers are trained each year, and for every opening there are over 3,000 applications. Good health, a college degree, and an almost perfect score in the competitive Civil Service Entrance Examination are essential. Veterans get preference, but even they have to have previous National Park Service experience. As of last year, only technicians, such as maintenance men or urban park policemen wanting to become full-time Rangers, or those who have worked for several summers as seasonal or part-time employees are now considered.

"We found applicants accepted directly were often too idealistic," reports the director of the Albright Academy. "When they discovered there is more to the job than blue-sky concepts or going off alone to commune with nature, they became disillusioned and quit. By selecting only those who already know and accept what they are getting into, we have reduced our drop-out rate dramatically."

After Albright Academy training, where only two or three out of each 40-member class now fail to make the grade or drop out, new Rangers attend several other schools during their first two years with the National Park Service. Fire-fighting courses are at the Rocky Mountain National Park. Postgraduate classes in the interpretation of history and archaeology, among other things, are taught at another National Park Service Academy at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. The U.S. Navy's Emergency Medical Technical School at Camp Lejuene, N.C., provides training in advanced first aid.

Police functions are taught to Rangers at the Federal Law Enforcement School, near Washington, D.C., where both men and women have to score 70 points out of a possible 100 in rapid-fire and shooting-from-the-hip for weapons qualification. "Our policy is different from that of regular police," reports a teacher at the Albright Academy. "The only time a Ranger can fire his gun is to save his own life or that of another person."

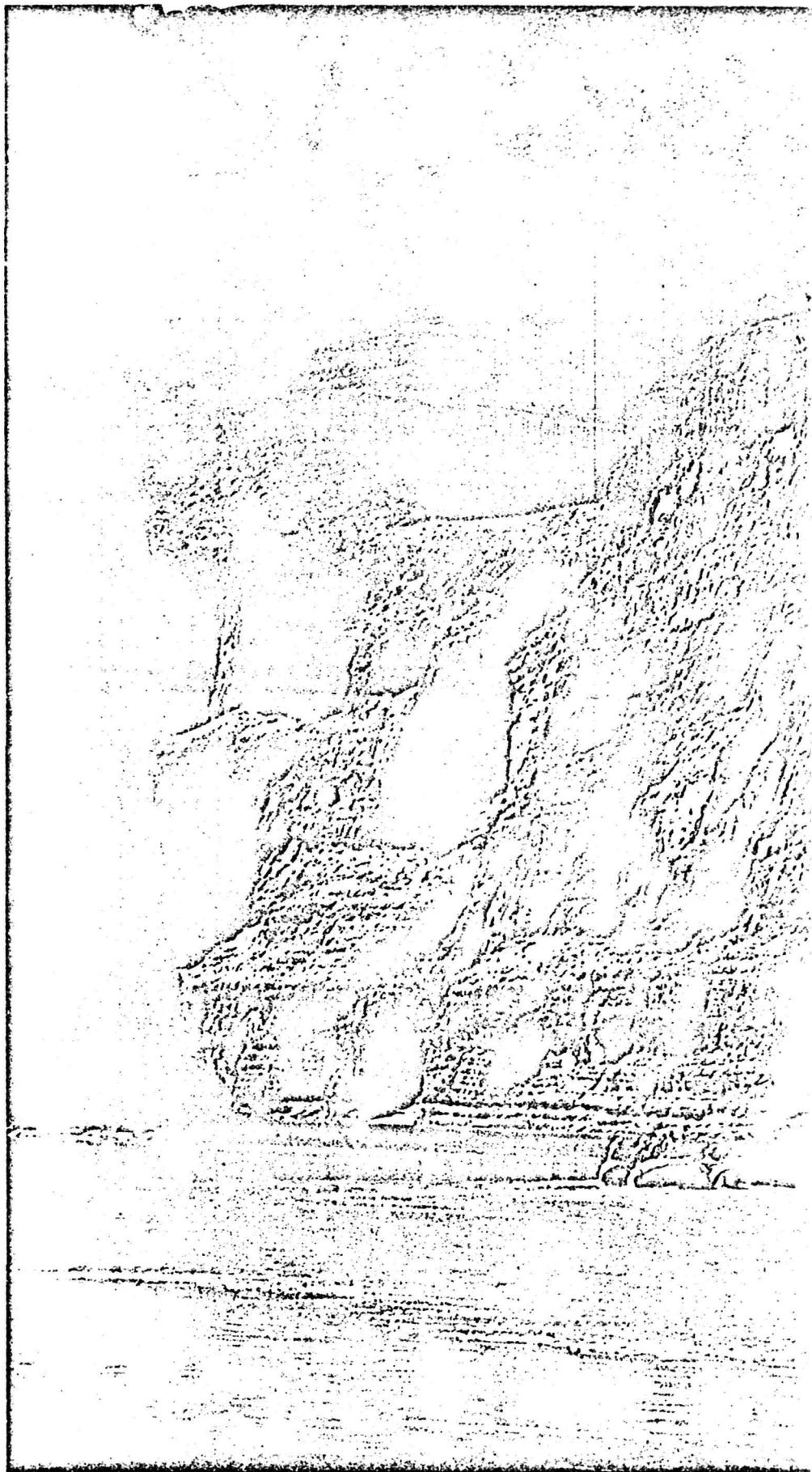
Throughout training, much of the emphasis to the fledgling Rangers is on the new approach to handling visitors. At the Minuteman National Historic Park near Boston, for example, visitors take part as concerned citizens in a 1774 New England Town Meeting. "We are not trying to recreate history," the Park's Chief Ranger explains. "Rather, we want modern people to *relate* to it by actually joining in the political process that drew revolution out of everyday life."

One of the prime lessons taught at the Albright Academy to the new Rangers is to get visitors involved through their own actions and participation. In talks, interpretation is replacing mere information, with a concentration on *why* something occurred, rather than just *what* happened.

With these and other departures from the old, the National Parks, staffed by graduates of the Albright Academy, are continuing to expand their quality environment, emotional experiences and meaningful relevance as America's greatest holiday bargain.

(James H. Winchester, retired roving editor for Reader's Digest, spent three weeks with National Park Ranger trainees in the Grand Canyon.)

Photos by David Muench, Sherry Robinson



Park Ranger training is not all work, as these rafters discover in their off-hours.

*Article from a magazine named "Rainbow"
Glendale Federal Savings*