Hell Or High Water

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A raft journey through the Grand Canyon was impossible.

In any one of a hundred different instances death awaited a wrong decision, when we had neither the knowledge nor experience for our choice; [it was] partly the marvelous chain of coincidences—or “miracles”—that led us through forty-seven days and nights, into and out of another world and back to civilization again.

These are the words of a pilot forced down over the notorious Hump in the Himalayas during World War II. He and his copilot, both with broken ankles, walked through an uncharted and formidable wilderness after their plane crashed into a mountain. Impossible! But it happened.

“Help, I can’t swim,” a sailor kept shouting as he knifed through the oil-slicked waters of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, stroking like an Olympic champ. Impossible! But it happened.

Impossible feats of strength and endurance, courage and heroism, are commonplace in wars and disasters, natural or otherwise. Most so-called survivals are in the final analysis nothing more than beating
the odds in a thousand unique ways. In that sense, James White’s survival of his Grand Canyon journey was no more or less impossible than a thousand others.

The Grand Canyon was an unknown wilderness 134 years ago. Major Powell and his men in 1869 suffered through the dangerous rapids and menacing walls, the isolation and fear, the threat of injury and eroding food supplies. Their perception that a lone man trapped in its depths had no hope of rescue and no chance of survival under the conditions described by White led irrevocably to the initial cries of impossible. The Grand Canyon today is no longer an unknown wilderness. Those who ride the rapids—whether in kayaks, prams, expedition boats, “baloneys,” inner tubes, or wet suits—contemplate these depths with more excitement than fear. They marvel at the canyon’s grandeur and the awesome forces that created it and enjoy the experience. The idea that surviving on a log raft within its depths is impossible is no longer as compelling as it once was.

It is claimed that a log raft voyage through the Grand Canyon has never been repeated, although several attempts have been made. Some see this as proof that the first one didn’t happen, but given the recent addition of inner-tube and swimming transits of the canyon, discrediting White’s raft trip now appears to rest less on its impossibility than on a lack of eyewitness confirmation.

Simply saying that something is impossible is not enough; alternatives are required. And indeed several were offered to explain how White got from the San Juan River to Callville, but they were far more improbable than White’s own explanation. Here was a man who lacked a self-defeating imagination; he possessed not only exceptional physical strength but a frontiersman’s mental toughness. He also had two vital advantages: the benign face of the Colorado during August and September of 1867 and his fortuitous arrival at Callville in daylight and in the presence of Captain Wilburn’s barge and crew. Viewed objectively, White’s journey emerges as a classic case of survival.

White’s distance estimates were inaccurate.

Two specific distance estimates have been repeatedly cited as proof that White did not go where he said he did. The first one derives from Dr. Parry’s report:
they reached the Animas branch of the San Juan River. Here their prospecting for gold commenced, and being only partially successful, they continued still farther to the west, passing the Dolores, and reaching the Mancos, which latter stream was followed down to the main valley of the San Juan. Crossing the San Juan at this point, they continued down the valley in a westerly direction for about 200 miles, when the river entered a cañon.

The notes backing up this portion of the report read “came to Colorado City—left 20th May—for San Juan—struck Animas—Dolores—Mancos Canon followed to San Juan down that 200 miles crossed to north side.”

Following the pattern of Parry’s punctuation in these notes, it appears that he lumped together 1) the party’s arrival at the Animas, 2) gold seeking at Eureka Gulch and Baker’s Park, 3) travel to the Dolores, the Mancos, and the San Juan Rivers, and 4) travel along the San Juan until it went into a canyon. This gives the strong impression that the entire prospecting section of the trip was one continuous experience.

When he wrote his formal report, Parry separated and expanded this group of events into discrete segments but applied the two hundred miles only to the distance along the San Juan River. Considering that there was at the time no way to check it out, it seems just as reasonable to attribute the two hundred miles in Parry’s report to an error caused by the lack of detail in his notes than to condemn White for inaccuracy.

White, in his own letter, says,

i Went prospeCted with Captin Baker and gorge strole in the San Won montin Wee found vry god prospeCk but noth that Wold pay. then Wee stare Down the San Won river wee travel down a bout 200 miles then Wee Cross over on Coloreado and Camp.

He, too, jumped from the San Juan mountains to the San Juan River valley, using as a segue only the words “stare down” (started down). Given the vagueness and lack of detail in White’s letter, it seems just as reasonable to interpret his two hundred miles this way:

I went prospecting with Captain Baker and George Strole in the San Juan Mountains. We found very good prospects, but nothing that would pay. Then we started down [to] the
San Juan River. We traveled down about 200 miles, then we crossed over on [to the] Colorado and camped.

The distance from the Silverton area across to the Dolores and down the Mancos and then down the San Juan River to Comb Wash is about 200 to 230 miles. This distance matches up far more logically to White’s 200-mile estimate than the obviously shorter distance from the mouth of the Mancos River to Comb Wash and deserves to be considered at least as valid as that proposed by White’s detractors.

The other disputed estimate is the fifty miles White said they traveled from where the San Juan River becomes entrenched to the side canyon where the Indian ambush occurred. Objection to this figure arose primarily from Stanton’s insistence upon the Grand Wash Cliffs point of entry, discussed in chapter 21.

The following map and inset (figures 10 and 11) are from Samuel Bowles’s book *Our New West*, published in 1869, and they graphically illustrate the state of nineteenth-century knowledge about the huge territory surrounding “the Great Cañon.” Any reliance on distances either shown or implied on Bowles’s map must be faulty; comparison with a present-day map (figure 12) may explain part of the early confusion.

*White could not have gone through the Grand Canyon in fourteen days.*

It was Parry who assigned the date of August 24 to White and Strole’s embarkation on the Colorado River, based solely on White’s vague schedule and the known date of his arrival in Callville. No one questioned it then, and few have questioned it since. Most of White’s detractors did not believe that he could have traveled that distance through the canyon in so short a time, while Stanton struggled to rationalize two weeks of travel to cover the sixty miles from Grand Wash Cliffs to Callville that Jacob Hamblin managed in two days. Actually, without any real evidence to anchor elapsed time, the time factor should have been considered a variable because it was unknown.

There may be a clue to this elapsed time in White’s letter to his brother. In reading it, I was struck by the possible significance of the words he had crossed out. He could hardly have done this for any language refinement; there must have been other reasons. Some corrections
Figure 10. Map of western United States, 1869 (from Samuel Bowles, *Our New West*)
Figure 11. Inset from western United States map, 1869.
were obviously due to confusion over how many days had passed, but I believe that one word was definitely replaced to clarify a fact.

In his description of escaping down the side canyon, he wrote that they arrived at the river “just at dark [dark],” then crossed it out and wrote “night.” There were so many errors that it is highly unlikely he would make a change to correct the spelling. What possible significance could this replacement have? Dark and night both convey the fact that the sun has set, but it is possible for it to be night without being dark. There is no darkness quite like night in an uninhabited landscape deep within a canyon; that darkness is truly black. And a night that is not dark must be one illuminated by light from some source; in that country at that time it had to be by moonlight. And that moonlight must indeed have been significant for White and Strole.

Consider their activities upon arriving at the river after fleeing down Moqui Canyon. To continue their escape by river, they had to collect driftwood logs and lash them together with lariat ropes to make a raft. They could not take a chance of attracting the Indians’ attention by lighting a fire, but neither could they perform these tasks in the blackness of this remote area. Without some kind of light, they would have had to hide and wait for daylight, which, by White’s account, they did not do.

White, describing their Mulberry Creek raid for the Indian horses, specifically recalled waiting for the moon to rise because they needed its light; they faced a similar situation in Moqui Canyon. That crossed-out word “dark” only makes sense if when they reached the river, it was after sunset, and the moon was already shining. This would make a significant difference in the timetable.

In the summer, the full moon gives light from about sunset to sunrise, shining all night long. A waxing moon is progressing toward full and rises before sunset; a waning moon is moving away from full and rises progressively later, leaving an increasingly longer period of darkness between sunset and moonrise. The lunar month is roughly twenty-eight days.

According to the almanac for 1867, full moon occurred on August 15. At fourteen days past full moon (August 29), it would be new moon or effectively no moon at all. During the two weeks between August 15 and 29, the moon was waning, rising later and later.
in the night until by August 24, it was coming up quite close to dawn. White stated that they built and launched the raft between sunset and midnight and embarked on the river about midnight, which requires the presence of moonlight for that period and, I think, implies moonlight for some time after they set out. August 24 does not correlate with these activities. The waxing August moon rose well before sunset from August 1 to August 7 or 8 but did not shine through midnight or beyond, so these dates do not meet the requirement, either. But closer to the full moon of August 15, moonrise occurred before sunset, and moonlight would have extended through the later hours of the night.

Guessing when and how much moonlight was available to White and Strole is pure speculation, but it is possible to eliminate certain dates, and August 24 as the date of embarkation is one. There is no way to pinpoint an exact date since one guess is as good as another, but one may choose between several possible dates—perhaps August 13 through August 16; any one of these four days would fit the bill. Since the date of White’s appearance in Callville is not disputed, this would allow roughly twenty-one to twenty-four days to make the journey from Moqui Canyon to Callville, a more likely time period than White’s “14 days.”

One of White’s recollections was awakening in the belief that it was daylight but discovering that it was really about three o’clock in the morning. On August 27 and 28, the moon rose between 3:00 A.M. and 4:00 A.M., but it is highly unlikely that this event occurred only three or four days after White and Strole embarked on the river. White implies being alone when this happened, and it seems related to a later period when White was struggling to survive the rapids. If they embarked between August 13 and 16, then moonrise on August 27 or 28 (thirteen or fourteen days later) would make more sense. This memory of White’s is neither bizarre nor sinister; I and many others have experienced this same phenomenon in Arizona.

In any case, the lunar evidence seems to expand those fourteen days of travel on the river, which in turn suggests that White’s rigid schedule was the result not of careful timekeeping but of some form of stress. This possibility is discussed in chapter 23.