

REQUIEM FOR

D A N I E L  
T R A S K

After three-and-a-half years of searching, the mysterious case of a missing man in northern Ontario is finally solved

BY CONOR MIHELL





T H E  
V I D E O

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H A U N T I N G

in a primeval way. The setting sun hangs over pine trees shrouded in mist. Water laps against shoreline rocks. Leaves and evergreen needles whisper together in the wind. And spring peeper frogs chirp tirelessly in the background. There's no crackling campfire to temper the rawness of the scene, no friendly voices. Just that weighty, unsettled feeling that sometimes permeates nightfall in northern Canada.

On this moody evening on Lady Evelyn Lake last May, three men from Michigan believed they'd solved a mystery that had captured the imagination of backcountry paddlers and armchair followers for more than three years. Beneath the tall white pines of northeastern Ontario's Temagami region, search-and-rescue experts Michael Neiger, Chris Ozminski and Todd Theoret were convinced they had found the bleached skull of a wilderness enthusiast who vanished into 15,000 square kilometres of lakes, rivers and ancient pine forests in late 2011.

It was twilight, 9:13 p.m. Before the men tucked into their bivy sacks for the night, Ozminski sang a requiem for Daniel Trask. In the video, Ozminski's wavering voice resonates over nature's chorus. My lip quivered the first time I watched it, and I felt a tremor slowly rise up my spine. ▶



**THE FOOTAGE, CAPTURED** on May 24, 2015, elicits such a visceral response because nearly three years to the day prior, I was there. My wife, Kim, and I discovered Trask's snow pants and jacket, perched atop a sloping rock cliff on Temagami's Diamond Lake, just south of Lady Evelyn.

The 28-year-old had left his family home in Waterloo, Ontario, unannounced, on the morning of November 3, 2011. As far as his parents could tell, he'd taken a pair of baggy lime-green snow pants, a blue Columbia Sportswear jacket, aluminum snowshoes and not much else. A local investigation turned up no leads on the young man's whereabouts.

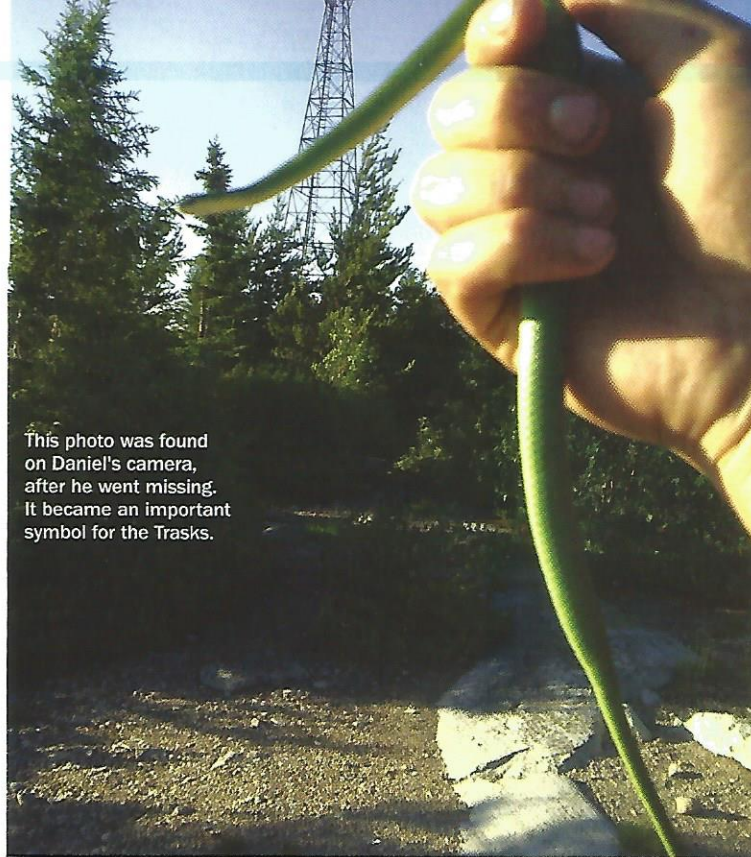
Ten days later, Trask's gold Chevrolet Impala was found in the parking lot of a Temagami summer camp, a place where he'd set off on several canoe trips earlier in the year. In a way, Don and Maureen Trask were relieved by the discovery. Their son had mentioned a desire to challenge his survival skills in the off-season. They assumed he had ventured back to his beloved wilderness sanctuary one last time before winter. Still, Don felt compelled to head north the day after the car was reported.

It turned out the Ontario Provincial Police wasn't taking Trask's disappearance casually. Don arrived to a full-blown ground and aerial search, which lasted several weeks and revealed no clues of the vanished young man. Trask remained missing through the winter.

Maureen solicited the canoeing community for help on an online forum. I was intrigued by the young man's disappearance and offered to volunteer my time, organizing a canoe trip search in May of 2012. We acted on Maureen's conviction that her son had set out on a late-season journey to remote Maple Mountain, one of his favourite places. For me, it was mostly an excuse to get back into a wilderness area I love and perhaps write a magazine story. I didn't anticipate finding anything.

So, it was downright chilling when Kim and I paddled up Diamond Lake's north arm and spotted Trask's abandoned clothing. Huddled around our discovery on the lichen and sphagnum of a jack pine forest, we both felt certain the next thing we'd find were human remains. We agreed it wasn't something we were prepared to encounter, so we recorded the GPS coordinates and retreated to a campsite just down the shore, where we spent a restless night—much like the one recorded in Ozminski's video. At daybreak, we sprinted back to the nearest access point on Lake Temagami to alert Don and Maureen and the police.

Our discovery triggered another intense search involving police helicopters, cadaver dogs, boats and divers. But to my surprise, nothing else turned up. My article in this magazine (Fall 2012) brought more public interest



This photo was found on Daniel's camera, after he went missing. It became an important symbol for the Trasks.

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in the Trask mystery, including many offers of assistance. Two proposals were particularly valuable: A man insisted that Don and Maureen use his small, water-access cabin on Diamond Lake, eliminating the need for lengthy commutes to and from the search area. And a small, dedicated team of backcountry search-and-rescue enthusiasts, led by a retired police officer from Michigan and known as the Long Range Special Operations Group, promised a more thorough investigation.

**AS MUCH AS** he cherishes the rugged hills and relatively remote backcountry of his northern Michigan home, Michael Neiger is madly in love with the wilds of northern Ontario. Since 1980, Neiger has organized snowshoe, ski, backpack, bicycle and canoe expeditions in the broad swath of wild land between Lake Superior and James Bay. A retired Michigan State Police detective, Neiger worked laboratory forensics and crime scene investigation for 26 years. But it wasn't until 2008 that Neiger discovered a passion for pursuing, as he puts it, “Unsolved missing persons cases as well as felony cold cases, most with a wilderness slant.”

On his first case, Neiger discovered a scrap of clothing containing trace human remains of a

73-year-old man, 50 days after he went missing in a northern Michigan state park. Since then, Neiger and teams of colleagues have taken on more challenges, doing boots-to-ground investigations on nearly three-dozen missing person cases in the U.S. and Canada, solving six of them.

Neiger's approach to backcountry search and rescue starts with a “wilderness behavioural profile of the subject”—researching their style of travel, likes and dislikes, gear preferences and other details. Neiger's search teams then spend multiple days in the field, trekking self-supported and logging long hours. They focus on “common-sense corridors... including lake shorelines, riverbanks, margins of wetlands, portage trails and two tracks,” says Neiger. Game trails are examined for human remains; Neiger even packs a metal detector to scour animal scat for rings and other jewellery.

“Daniel's case was what I call the ‘hardest of the hardest,’ one that would likely never be solved,” says Neiger. “I was not under any illusion that we were going to be able to find him, but I knew if we did, it would likely be along one of the natural corridors that you, I, or someone else traversing the area would follow, such as the shoreline.”

Daniel Trask

In Temagami, Neiger's Michigan Backcountry Search and Rescue (MibSAR) crew had two advantages: A solid starting point on the east shore of Diamond Lake, where Kim and I had discovered Trask's clothing; and unprecedented support from Don and Maureen Trask, who often fed the searchers and assisted them in accessing search sites.

MibSAR delivered results on their first search. In the summer of 2013, the team identified Trask's backpack in a wetland on the shore of Diamond Lake. The find gave Don and Maureen another glimmer of hope in finding closure. Part of the discovery was particularly eerie. On the scene, Don spotted a smooth green snake slithering out of the backpack. "Daniel had told us about the green snake he brought to Maple Mountain [on a canoe trip in the summer of 2011]," says Maureen. "He talked about communicating with his [deceased] grandfather at the summit, connecting symbolically through the snake."

Maureen had found a SIM card in his son's bedroom, after he had vanished. On it was a photo of Trask holding a green snake, with the Maple Mountain fire tower in the background. The snake in the backpack was a portent. "It was Daniel connecting with us," says Maureen. "He was saying, 'Everything's OK. I'm at peace with my grandpa, with the spirits.'"

**STILL, MAUREEN NEEDED** more proof, and, "that proof had to be him," she says. Searches in 2014 revealed nothing of Trask. While Don was convinced 2015 would be the year they would solve the mystery, Maureen admits she was a bit less optimistic. Yet, for some reason, she neglected to make 2015 updates to a flyer that was posted in Temagami-area stores last spring. "That felt strange to me. The flyer was a ritual," she says. "But looking back, I think it's because we were ready to find him."

They pulled out all the stops. In May, two dog handlers from Ottawa offered to bring their cadaver-sniffing German shepherds to Diamond Lake; Neiger recruited Ozminski and Theoret for the fourth MibSAR expedition; and Don scrambled with the logistics, hauling boat motors, food, gasoline and propane across the portage from Lake Temagami to Diamond Lake and setting up search headquarters in a small cabin. Maureen headed up north as well.

On the morning of May 24, Neiger, Ozminski and Theoret loaded their overnight gear into a boat and Don rowed them up the east shore of Lady Evelyn Lake. The team planned to search about 10 kilometres of shoreline, spend one night and get picked up after searching the next day. They would work an area "that had never been searched by ground pounders," says Neiger.

"Our strategy was to put one person on the shoreline proper, with their eyes on the point where the water meets the shore," continues Neiger, "with the second searcher flanking him, a pace or two away. The third searcher flanked the second searcher, further inland, and was charged with checking any game trails or openings leading back into the forest, where an animal or a person might be likely to travel, or be drawn."

This put the MibSAR team in a tangle of underbrush, but they stuck with the plan. Walking the established portage trail between Lady Evelyn and Walsh lakes was a break from the bushwhacking. Their persistence paid off. Just north of the portage landing on Lady Evelyn Lake, at 4:45 p.m., Neiger "instantly recognized [a] fist-sized bony specimen as an upright human mandible," partially buried in pine needles. Just like that, "we realized our search for evidence of Daniel's whereabouts was likely over," he says.

MibSAR switched to "CSI mode," documenting and preserving the scene for a proper police investigation. A short distance away they found a human skull. Neiger, Ozminski and Theoret bivvied for the evening. "As the sun set over Dan's Country, we quietly gathered around his remains," recalls Neiger. "Over a single candle, we paid our respects."

**THE NEXT AFTERNOON**, Don headed back up Lady Evelyn Lake to pick up the search team. Neiger hailed him, not nearly as far up the shore as Don expected. He nosed the boat into the boulders.

"Michael [Neiger] was standing there alone," says Don. "I said, 'You found him, didn't you?'" It was getting late by the time they got back to the Diamond Lake cabin and informed Maureen, but she insisted on visiting her son's remains that night, before the police arrived and cordoned off the scene.

Dusk was falling as they boated up the lake

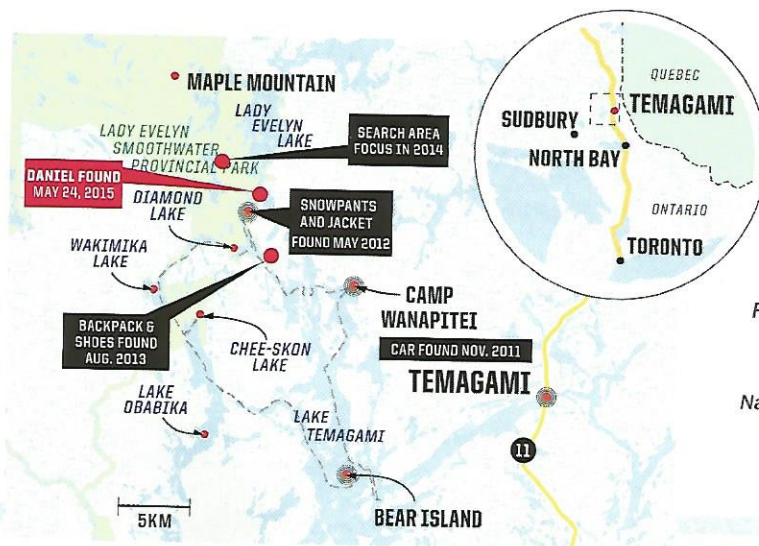
and pulled into shore. "It was surreal," says Maureen. "His jawbone was like a beacon. It was so white, just lying there. His skull was under a big pine tree, nestled in needles. There was a running brook nearby. It was so beautiful, the perfect place for Daniel."

In the ensuing days, police and forensic experts identified the remains of Daniel Trask. His pelvis was found offshore, beneath 15 metres of water. A forensic anthropologist pointed to a large fracture on Trask's skull. "It's likely he hit his head and would've died instantly," says Don. His theory is that his son slipped on rocks, suffered head trauma on the shore of Diamond Lake and ended up unconscious in the water. At which point, the body would've drifted north over a small waterfall into Lady Evelyn. Animals likely scavenged his remains.

What's important, for Maureen, is to bring meaning to this journey. Her work with families of missing loved ones has made her realize how lucky she is. Her experience has kept her lobbying for better support structures for those affected by Ontario's 370 or more long-term missing person cases.

The family held a celebration in Waterloo on what would have been Daniel's 32nd birthday. But the real goodbyes waited until September, when family and friends, including Daniel's brother, Adam, his wife Kelly, and their nine-month-old son, Grayson Daniel, gathered in the heart of Temagami's old-growth forest to scatter his ashes. This place, known as *Chee-skon*, "lake at the place of the large rock," is sacred to local Ojibwa.

Elder Alex Matthias and Temagami First Nation second-chief Joe Katt presided over the ceremony. Mixed with sprigs of cedar, Trask's ashes floated in Spirit Lake. The sun came out, and MibSAR's Chris Ozminski recited his song, "Dan's Country," the words echoing off the far shore and disappearing in the tall trees. ■



Conor Mihell's Fall 2012 feature article on Trask, "Into the Light," won Gold in the National Magazine Awards, Sports & Recreation category.