

THE GITZO THAT SAVED MY LIFE

A Testimonial by Manfrotto Ambassador Michael Zide

I knew that I was in trouble when I reached the ridge of the last dune. The road was nowhere in sight. No car, just miles of desert fanning out in all directions. Twilight had turned into night hours ago. I was lost, disoriented and freezing in the middle of an ocean of dunes and I was getting seriously worried. We had been tramping across the frozen sand searching for a way out. Then it started to snow.

I had arrived at White Sands National Monument around 2:30 that February afternoon. It was just a few hours before nightfall. The sky was leaden and it carried the feeling that snow might be on the way. The pure white gypsum sand dunes a brilliant contrast to the brooding sky.

I had opened the back door and my constant companions, two travel weary dogs leaped happily to the ground. We had been driving cross-country when I decided on this detour into the desert. The air was biting as I reached for my jacket and slung a backpack holding my 4X5 camera gear onto my shoulders. Reaching into the trunk I took hold of my tripod. It was a giant Gitzo, towering over 10 feet into the air when extended, stable and solid as a rock. It was my first professional tripod.

As we headed off into this surreal landscape, I took some sightings of the surrounding mountains, confident of finding my way back. In just two hours I would admit to myself that I was lost and we were in trouble.

With nightfall, the wind picked up, the temperature dropping from the low 30's to around 17 degrees. Fast moving clouds brought occasional flurries adding to the drama. An old television show popped into my head. In this television series, "Lassie", the fictional canine hero and wonder Collie would always come to the rescue and save the day. She seemed to understand her human companion's every word and worry, bringing him through to a happy ending. I thought



that my dogs were every bit as bright as Lassie, so I got their attention by repeatedly asking them to "find the car, come on now let's find the car". Their questioning looks only re-enforced the reality of our situation.

Carrying a full load of gear began wearing me down. I kept switching my Gitzo from arm to arm, getting momentary relief as the tripods' legs skipped or dragged briefly behind on the hard crust of frozen gypsum. I considered leaving it behind as my energy continued to flag but decided against it.

Around 4 a.m., we had been walking for almost ten hours. My feet felt hobbled. I could barely put any weight on them. I found a patch of brush and we lay down behind it, breaking the chill of the wind.

When the barking began, I thought that the dogs had smelled coyotes or some other night creatures nearby. Growing anxiety and their warning growls were soon replaced by feelings of relief and gratitude. A shape took form in the darkness. No hungry four-legged creature, the form of a park ranger resolved itself slowly, shouting in our direction as he closed the distance between us. The park personnel had found my car after the park had closed and they realized that I must be lost. The

ranger who found us said we were lucky. He found our trail etched in the frozen sand. Then he pointed to the legs of my Gitzo. I had been walking in circles the entire night and by his estimate, the trail that my tripod had carved in the sand was around twenty-five miles long. Happily, those miles were now behind us.

For years to come, that Gitzo stayed by my side. I still have it almost 40 years later along with a beautiful carbon fiber version. Those rambunctious dogs and my best friends continued on in the lead for many more years, forging trails of their own while I brought up the rear, always looking for that next shot. More careful and more prepared than before, at the end of the day, I never again failed to bring us home.

Michael Zide

Manfrotto Ambassador, Educator and Speaker