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Bitter Sweet SUCCESS

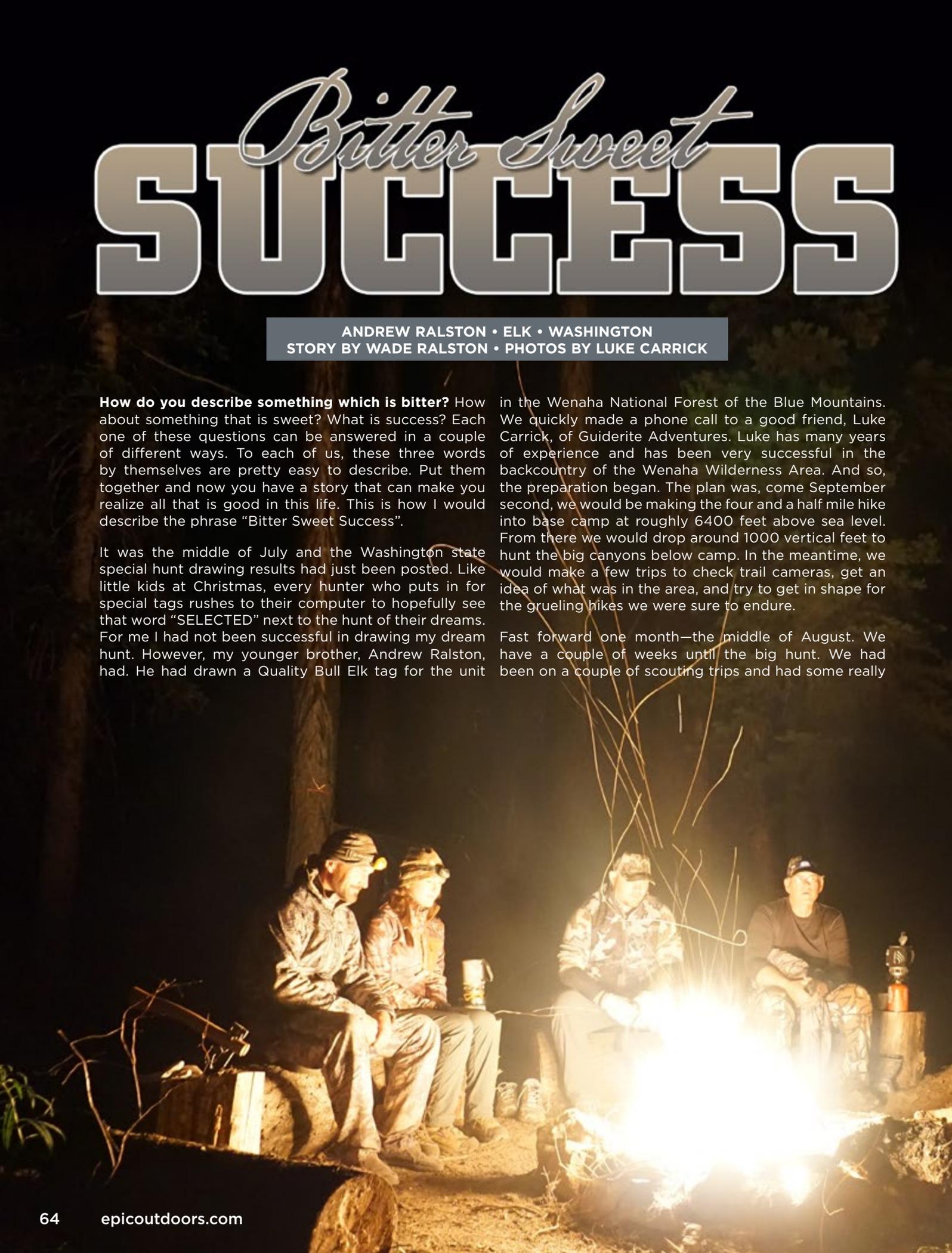
ANDREW RALSTON • ELK • WASHINGTON
STORY BY WADE RALSTON • PHOTOS BY LUKE CARRICK

How do you describe something which is bitter? How about something that is sweet? What is success? Each one of these questions can be answered in a couple of different ways. To each of us, these three words by themselves are pretty easy to describe. Put them together and now you have a story that can make you realize all that is good in this life. This is how I would describe the phrase “Bitter Sweet Success”.

It was the middle of July and the Washington state special hunt drawing results had just been posted. Like little kids at Christmas, every hunter who puts in for special tags rushes to their computer to hopefully see that word “SELECTED” next to the hunt of their dreams. For me I had not been successful in drawing my dream hunt. However, my younger brother, Andrew Ralston, had. He had drawn a Quality Bull Elk tag for the unit

in the Wenaha National Forest of the Blue Mountains. We quickly made a phone call to a good friend, Luke Carrick, of Guiderite Adventures. Luke has many years of experience and has been very successful in the backcountry of the Wenaha Wilderness Area. And so, the preparation began. The plan was, come September second, we would be making the four and a half mile hike into base camp at roughly 6400 feet above sea level. From there we would drop around 1000 vertical feet to hunt the big canyons below camp. In the meantime, we would make a few trips to check trail cameras, get an idea of what was in the area, and try to get in shape for the grueling hikes we were sure to endure.

Fast forward one month—the middle of August. We have a couple of weeks until the big hunt. We had been on a couple of scouting trips and had some really



good bulls on camera. One in particular that Andrew had made his number one. We named him "Hook", as he had double drop tines that looked like hooks. He was a 7x8 that Luke figured would score somewhere in the 370" Pope and Young range. He was an absolutely beautiful representative of the class of elk that this area has to offer. We could hardly wait for September fifth, the first day of the hunt. On Sunday August 28th, I got a call from my mother saying that my grandfather was in the hospital and not doing well. Grandpa "B," as we all called him, was 84 years old and up until that point had been doing great—or so we all thought. As a family, we headed for the hospital in Colfax, WA to be with him. On Tuesday August 30th, we got the bad news that the doctors had given Grandpa "B" two weeks to live as he had an inoperable cancerous tumor between his heart and lungs. As you can imagine, we were all devastated at the news. Only a week before he had been out working in his garden. For me and my siblings, grandpa was our hero. He was the leader of our family. My brothers and I were ready to give up our hunt to spend the rest of grandpa's days with him. But he would not have any part of that and made us promise that no matter what, we would not miss our hunt. All he said was, "You guys go get the big one and bring him back here and let me get my hands on that rack". So, we took grandpa home as that's where he wanted to be and we left him with that promise.

Friday September second, two days after leaving grandpa's side we were at the trailhead, preparing to hike the four and a half miles into our backcountry



home, for the next however many days it would take us to accomplish our goal. We had our Stone Glacier packs loaded with around 70 lbs. of gear. My brothers, Andrew and Tyson, and I headed out. Luke and his girlfriend, Kali, would be getting into camp later that night. It didn't take long before we heard our first bull sound with a growly bugle. We all looked at each other with enthusiasm in our eyes and our hearts pounding. I would like to say that it was purely from the excitement but truth be told, it was partly due to the steep hike into camp. You sure could forget about the hard walk as we were serenaded by bugling bulls all the way. As the sun went down, the bugles slowly stopped and we prepared ourselves for a couple days of glassing from the ridge top before the season actually opened. Unfortunately for us, during the next few days the elk never showed themselves and went quiet.

Opening day was September fifth. The plan was to walk the ridge line and cow call hoping to have a bull answer and give away his position. "Hook" was on our mind and that was who we were after. We woke up, around 3:30 am to a chilly 30-degree morning with overcast skies, ate a little breakfast and loaded our packs to hit the trail an hour before daylight. As we made our way down the trail with Luke sending out the flirtatious calls from his Primos cow call, it was hard not to think about Grandpa "B" and how I wished he could be with us. As the sun rose over the adjacent ridge line, the excitement grew and the guilt of not being with him made its way into my mind. I had to keep telling myself that this is where grandpa wanted us to be. I could only imagine Andrew's feelings as this was his tag and hunt. It didn't take long before we heard an elk bugle way down in the bottom of the canyon and the chase was on. We dropped about 1800 vertical feet into what looked like a very promising drainage. We knew that the elk had to be somewhere close by. Luke told us to go ahead of him 50 yards or so to set up and he would start calling. We set up several times with no luck; the elk had gone silent. We spent most of that first day in that canyon only to see a couple of very nice mule deer bucks and a black bear that walked past one of our set ups at only 30 yards. At around 4:00 in the afternoon we decided that it was time to make the long 4 hour and 1800 vertical feet hike back to camp. With no success and not a whole lot of bugles to be heard, the thoughts of grandpa were hard to fight back and I kept reflecting on all the hunts we had shared as I was growing up. On more than one occasion, I found myself wiping tears away from my face along with the sweat from the rigorous hike to camp. We finally made it back to camp where we prepared a Mountain House dinner, on our Jet Boil stoves, and prepared for bed. We were lucky enough to have cell phone service where we were and were able to get an update on grandpa. He had a pretty good day with some old friends stopping in to see him. That made sleeping that night a little easier. The fact that, except for Luke and Kali, my brothers and I were not cut from the same mold they were, when it came to time in the backcountry, may have had something to do with that as well.

Day two, we awoke well before sunrise and prepared for another long day of hiking by filling our packs with all of our provisions for the day along with our Kuiu rain gear as it looked like it could rain—and rain it did! We did see one little rag-horn bull that snuck in on us as silent as a mouse. After a couple of hours of nothing but the sound of rain and no elk, the decision was made that we would pull out and go home to save some vacation days and to let the rut get going a little better and come back on the weekend.

When we got into camp a few days later we found Andrew and Tyson in good spirits as they had heard a lot of elk bugling before we had arrived and were pretty excited. With a new sense of optimism we hit the sack in hopes they would be responsive to the calls in the morning. It seemed like I had just closed my eyes and Luke was waking us up. It was time, we put on our gear and loaded up our packs. Andrew got his Expedition Xcentric bow ready and we hit the trail, heading down the ridge before sunrise.

It didn't take long for Luke to get an answer from a bull. 500 yards down the canyon, on a bench below us, was Andrew's "HOOK!" He was there with 10 - 15 cows. Our hearts sank because we knew how hard it was going to be to get him to come up and cross the ridgetop. We decided to keep working our way down the ridge. We hadn't gone very far when Luke got another answer from a bull. It was time for us to make a stalk into shooting range. With Luke's vast knowledge of the Unit, he put us on a trail that took us right to where he said the bull would be. We came upon a rocky outcropping overlooking a basin and a rocky side hill below us where two draws came together. We were right in the middle of, not one, but three different bulls. One would answer Luke's cow call and the other two would scream back at him. We had the perfect position. Luke backed off just a little and proceeded to cow call. Andrew readied his bow and I got the camera set up to hopefully catch it all unfold. Within minutes, we had a bull screaming right below us. Andrew drew his bow before the elk showed himself from behind the rock outcropping. I raised the camera in hopes of catching the shot on camera. Tyson gave a little chirp on the cow call and the bull stopped in his tracks, just 42 yards away. It was like slow motion; the arrow came out of the bow and down the elk went with a loud crack as the four-bladed slick trick buried into the spine of the elk—it was a pretty steep downhill angle. The bull dropped and rolled a good 200 yards to the bottom of the drainage. We were all in shock; it was high fives and a lot of hugs!

We spent the next 6 hours boning the trophy and packing it out to a spot that we could get the horses to the next morning. We had found our "Success". The next night we found the "Bitterness". My brother Andrew was able to keep his promise with our Grandpa "B". He walked into the house with the rack, stood next to grandpa's bedside and let him get his hands on "The Big One". Three days later grandpa took his last breath surrounded by his family. And with that we learned the meaning of "Bitter Sweet Success". Love you Grandpa "B".



