

FALL OFF CORNICE, FALL INTO CREVASSE, BAD WEATHER

Washington, Mount Rainier

Between 0930 and 1000 on May 7, 1983, Douglas Vercoe (34), Judd Flynn, and James Busek left Paradise for Camp Muir. Their intention was to climb Mount Rainier on the following day via the Gibraltar Ledge route. After receiving a weather forecast from park rangers and registering for their climb, they left Paradise in overcast weather that was threatening to get worse. The forecast called for a 70-percent chance of rain on Saturday and drier and cooler on Sunday, according to Flynn.

All three climbers wore skis, but Vercoe was having a more difficult time with the climb toward Camp Muir because he was less proficient than the other two, and his no-wax skis frequently slipped. At 2550 meters, Vercoe began breaking trail for Flynn and Busek who were pulling a sled with their equipment. The team encountered worsening weather conditions as they climbed and found themselves in very windy and snowy weather as they ascended the Muir Snowfield. They did a number of long zigzag traverses so as to lessen the degree of slope they were climbing and make it easier for Vercoe with his no-wax skis. Because of the wind there was a tendency to traverse farther to the east, with the wind at their backs, than they probably normally would have. Around 1700, at a point when they were well onto the east side of the snowfield and about ready to traverse back toward the west, with Vercoe the farthest east and Busek the farthest west, Vercoe suddenly yelled and disappeared from view. Visibility was limited to six meters. A slight clearing a minute or so later revealed a cornice over which Vercoe had apparently plunged. Flynn placed a wand at the spot and both men proceeded to set up a camp. They yelled a number of times over the edge of the precipice, but received no answer. Because of the wind (50 knots), blowing snow, and poor visibility, they felt there was nothing they could do to attempt a rescue of their companion.

At 1800 another climbing party approached their camp and were told about the accident. They told the two climbers they would report the incident to the rangers when they got to the radio at Camp Muir and would return to help with the search or rescue if weather conditions permitted.

Flynn and Busek remained in their tent for the remainder of the night, unable to search for their friend because of the poor weather. At 0700 on May 8, a three-man rescue team arrived from Paradise. This team consisted of Rangers Rick Kirschner and Garry Olson and Rainier Mountaineering Guide Mike Target. Visibility had improved by that time, and Camp Muir was visible from the camp site. The rescue team then proceeded to search for Vercoe with no success.

Subsequent flights over the area by helicopter revealed no trace of Vercoe, who is thought to have fallen into a crevasse or to have been buried in an avalanche. From the helicopter it appears that he fell 90–120 meters. (Source: John Wilcox, Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

FALL ON ROCK, FAILURE OF NUT AND PITON

Washington, Mount Garfield

On May 14, Frank Wells (33) and Craig Parsley (25) started an ascent of the South Face of the West Peak of Mount Garfield at 0700. At 1100, around the 1200-meter