

WEATHER, EXHAUSTION, HYPOTHERMIA, INADEQUATE CLOTHING**Washington, Mount Rainier, Muir Snowfield**

About mid-day on Saturday, May 2, Tim Stark (57) and his nephew Greg Stark (26) set out from the Paradise (5,440 feet) to Camp Muir (10,100 feet) planning to climb the Ingraham Direct route. When they set out, Camp Muir was visible from Paradise. By 1900, however, the entire route above 6,800 feet was in the fog, clouds, and snow. A party of two matching the description of Tim and Greg Stark were seen in the public shelter at Camp Muir. Independent climbers at Camp Muir said that this party left the shelter and descended shortly after they arrived around 1800. On the way down they got off route and descended onto the edge of the Paradise Glacier.

Either later that night or early on May 22 after trying to make camp and cook some food, they began their descent again but did not get far. Greg's backpack was left 50 yards from the camp. The tent was loosely strapped onto the back of Greg's backpack and the tent poles were partially collapsed. There was spilled food in the tent indicating the tent may have been packed in a hurry or that the weather was quite poor when they were packing up. Their sleeping bags were unpacked and loosely strapped onto the back of their backpacks. Neither Tim nor Greg was found with a map or a compass.

Tim's body was found approximately 100 yards from Greg's backpack and about 35 yards lower to the southeast. Tim was wearing four layers on his upper body, a pair of cotton pants, gaiters, plastic climbing boots, gloves, and a wool hat. Most of his clothing was appropriately synthetic. Tim was sitting on the snow with his feet pointed downhill. His backpack was still on his shoulders and his hands were in his lap. He was still wearing a headlamp. It was turned to the "on" position but was not shining.

Greg was found 175 yards from Tim and 100 yards lower on the glacier to the east. Greg was wearing a cotton button-down shirt as a base layer, a fleece sweater, a shell jacket and fleece gloves, canvas shorts, gaiters, and cross-training shoes. He was also seated on the snow. Over his wool hat he was wearing an LED headlamp, which was still on and shining dimly.

On Monday morning the Paradise climbing rangers' overdue report listed the Stark party. A check of the parking lot confirmed they had not yet returned. An intense investigation was initiated when Nancy Stark, Tim's wife, phoned to report that she had not heard from him. Climbing rangers Andy Anderson and Bree Lowen joined Pilot Doug Utech on an aerial search at about 1700. They spotted two inanimate individuals on the Paradise Glacier at 1830. Early the next day Rangers Anderson, Lowen, and Stefan Lofgren recovered the bodies from the glacier with the assistance of a helicopter piloted by Uttecht.

Analysis

Tim Stark had been to Camp Muir several times. When he and his nephew registered for their climb, rangers informed them of the inclement weather forecast for the duration of the weekend. Such weather is not uncommon for this time of year on Rainier. Over the course of the day the weather grew progressively worse. Climbing Ranger Mike Gauthier also on his way to Camp Muir that day recalls seeing the Starks and “leap-frogging” with them until about 1630 when he last saw them behind him still ascending into the cloudy and worsening weather just above Moon Rocks. By 1700 the winds increased to over 40 mph, it began to snow heavily and the visibility diminished to less than 100 feet. Two independent climbers staying in the public shelter reported seeing the Starks at Camp Muir around 1800. After finding out that the shelter was full, the Starks decided to descend around 1830 rather than set up their tent in the storm.

Ranger Gauthier began his descent from Camp Muir that evening at about 1915. He recalls keeping his head low and close to his body while following GPS coordinates to stay on the route as he descended. These conditions continued until just below 6,800 feet. He reported that the climb to Muir and back took twice as long as it normally takes him.

When the weather is like this, it is common for travelers on the Muir Snowfield to get pushed in the direction the wind is blowing (generally to the east.) Furthermore the descent route traverses mildly to the left. The combination makes it difficult to stay on route when there are no visual clues. The Stark’s descent path seemed to have traversed left (east) under Anvil Rock and out onto the Paradise Glacier where they were found.

In the storm conditions things that are normally easy become challenging and challenging tasks become exhausting. The Starks must have worked extremely hard to get themselves along with all of their gear up to Camp Muir and would have been quite tired by the time they got there. The temperature and winds steadily worsened as they hiked up as well. While they were hiking they would have stayed warm because they were exerting a good deal of energy, but as soon as they stopped, they would have cooled off rapidly. Faced with poor conditions and a full public shelter, the thought of setting up their tent and spending the night in it in the storm must have sounded unappealing. Choosing to descend in the storm when they were already wet and chilling down rapidly was decidedly a poor choice, but perhaps understandable when one adds in the exhaustion, probable dehydration, and perhaps even the first hints of hypothermia that would add confusion to their thinking.

The descent must have proved frightening when they realized they were lost and had no way of knowing which way to go in the whiteout conditions.

When lost, one's pace slows while trying to decide which way to go. Slowing down in such conditions would accelerate the onset of hypothermia. Hypothermia impairs one's ability to make rational decisions. With their predicament rapidly spiraling downward, and still facing extreme conditions, we begin to get a picture of how these two succumbed to the environment.

One may be tempted to make a pronouncement regarding what the Starks should have done or pick out mistakes that should have been avoided: their lack of map and compass, wearing cotton, their failure to set up their tent and stay put in their sleeping bags. What is hard to grasp is the ease with which each small error snowballs, eventually creating an untenable situation. And then, of course, the rational mind cannot comprehend what causes the hypothermic victim to do the irrational. (Source: Mike Gauthier, Climbing Ranger)

FALL ON SNOW—UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST

Washington, Mount Rainier, Gibraltar Ledges

On June 10 about 0600, Mike Beery (29) and Ryan Tillman were climbing the Gibraltar Ledges route on Mount Rainier. Having just exited the ledges and entered Gibraltar Chute, Beery, who was a few steps in front of his partner, fell. Tillman did not notice the fall until his partner slid by him. Tillman shouted as he watched his partner unsuccessfully attempt to self-arrest. Beery continued to slide down the 45-50° slope and over a small rock outcropping. At this point, Tillman lost sight of Beery, who tumbled some 900 vertical feet down the chute until he came to rest on the shallower slope below.

Tillman pulled out his cell phone and called his girlfriend, who then called 911. He then began his descent down Gibraltar Chute to look for Beery. Approximately 35 minutes later, having found several pieces of his partner's equipment strewn along the route, including his ice ax, Tillman found Beery lying face-down with his pack wrapped tightly around his neck. Tillman, an EMT, cut the pack loose and took Beery's vitals. At 0635 Tillman found no respirations but a weak pulse of about 35. Ten minutes later, when he could no longer detect a pulse, Tillman began CPR on Beery. He continued CPR until 0855 when climbing rangers Matt Hendrickson and Andy Winslow, who were on a routine patrol of the Ingraham Direct, arrived on scene and relieved him.

The rangers had descended to Camp Muir and then ascended the Nisqually Glacier with rescue equipment. Once on scene, Hendrickson checked vitals on Beery and found him to be pulseless, unresponsive, and not breathing. Beery had obvious signs of serious trauma and was bleeding from the head and ears and nose. At 0900, with the information provided