

As a group, we searched the trail down to the Heliotrope Ridge trailhead and asked ascending climbers whether they had seen Sheryl. All of them answered in the negative. Upon arrival at the trailhead, we alerted emergency response. Local USFS personnel, Deputy Mark Jilk of Whatcom County Sheriff, and Bellingham Mountain Rescue responded in about two hours; meanwhile, a Border Patrol helicopter conducted a brief aerial search.

I accompanied BMR personnel, who brought equipment to the snowfield and rigged a lowering line at the hole by about 4:00 p.m. An initial search to a depth of about eight meters revealed a number of lost items (gloves, snowshoes, etc.), none of which were Sheryl's. BMR continued the search effort in the woods and terrain nearby, pending arrival of a dry suit that would permit a deeper descent into the hole.

The dry suit arrived after sunset and the lowering line was re-rigged. One of the BMR people, equipped with a high-intensity light and a radio, was lowered into the hole between 10:00 and 11:00 p.m. Sheryl's body and a number of items of her equipment were identified about 15-20 meters down. There was no chance that she had survived the fall and subsequent immersion. BMR determined that a recovery would not be an acceptable risk. Her body and much of her equipment were recovered about six weeks later when conditions under the snow had sufficiently stabilized.

Analysis

Poor visibility was a significant factor. The fog and the convex slope likely prevented her from seeing the hole until it was too late to arrest. Nobody saw Sheryl disappear into the hole.

The snow in and around the hole was unchanged. I still don't know how a climber wearing a pack could fall into a relatively small hole like that and leave no scrape marks on the sides of the hole or cause no breakage of the snow around the opening.

Neither one of us were wearing helmets. We believed (incorrectly, obviously) that since we were below the glaciated terrain, we were past the dangers of the approach route. The autopsy indicated she suffered a fractured skull in the fall.

It's possible, though unknown, that the hole had been covered with a snow bridge until the previous night's rainfall.

The accident site is a "known" hazard among local climbers, and was adequately identified on the map. However, due to the poor visibility, we did not know where we were in relation to the hazard.

I wish to commend Deputy Jilk and BMR for their bravery, professionalism, and compassion in attempting to rescue my girlfriend. Sheryl was an experienced alpinist with ascents of a number of glaciated volcanoes on two continents to her credit. Her loss is a terrible tragedy for me, her family, and everyone who knew her. (Source: John Korfmacher)

(Editor's Note: We thank John for his willingness to write this difficult piece. In many ways, it is uncannily similar to the incident that follows.)

LOSS OF CONTROL ON GLISSADE - FALL INTO CREVASSE/MOAT, INEXPERIENCE

Washington, North Cascades, Aasgard Pass

On July 3 about 10:30 a.m., Julia Rutherford (21) was glissading down the Colchuck Lake side of Aasgard Pass with three other people: her boyfriend Peter Borschowa, his father, and a friend. She fell into a moat, down a high-volume sub-snow-surface waterfall and was swept downstream under the snow.

Peter Borschowa said he heard a scream and then helplessly watched as Julia Rutherford disappeared into a crevasse. He searched at the base of the waterfall but he could not see the victim and she did not respond when he called her name. It appeared she was unreachable without a rope. He then ran out to the Stuart Lake Trailhead for help. Three other witnesses went in separate directions for help, finding two more parties at the top of the pass, one from the Seattle Mountaineers with ropes and one from the Washington Alpine Club.

While two people stayed at the top of Aasgard Pass and called 911 at 11:00 a.m., the remaining first responders descended to the accident scene, which was approximately one third of the way up the pass. The slope was steep enough to be a black diamond or double black diamond at a ski area and we observed a glissade path leading directly over the waterfall. We shouted Julia's name into the base of the waterfall but received no response.

The remaining two members of the party were distraught and had begun descending very slowly. One had a shoulder injury from an out-of-control glissade that had preceded the primary accident. One first responder descended the pass with these additional victims and monitored their condition.

At the accident scene, we dug a hole five feet from the waterfall, built a snow anchor, and lowered a volunteer from our group into the waterfall to search for the victim. She was able to retrieve Rutherford's ice axe about 15 feet down the waterfall, but was not able to see Rutherford through just a 1½ foot aperture through which the water was flowing at the bottom of the space.

We then sent a small group up the pass to contact 911 again while another group started marking the slope for any helicopter rescue. We also marked the glissade path with sticks well above the waterfall to warn others of the danger ahead. There was only one shovel in our group and we used it throughout the day to dig more holes, although the snow got progressively deeper away from the waterfall. As a precaution, we were on belay while shoveling.

About 2:00 p.m., an off-duty rescuer from Seattle Mountain Rescue, who had familiarity with the terrain, arrived and instructed us to dig a hole in a particular spot. While we were digging, a helicopter from Whidbey Naval Air Station inserted two corpsmen. One of

them belayed off three snow anchors and lowered into the twelve-foot deep hole when it reached the watercourse. He located Rutherford's body approximately 45 feet from the waterfall. The first responders extricated the corpsman and the victim out, approximately 6 hours and 45 minutes after she had fallen in.

Analysis

It struck many of the first responders how relatively safe and normal the path must have looked from above. All that was visible was a lip beyond which the path was not visible for a few feet.

But there are several lessons and reminders here. First, don't glissade if you can't see the run-out and keep speed under control at all times. Second, be very cautious of moats and other sub-surface hazards in late spring and consider plunge stepping, being roped up, and carrying a beacon, probe and shovel.

The rescue came with its own lessons. First is just the sheer length of time that it takes to get trained rescuers on the scene. Next, Peter Borschowa spread the word far and wide on his descent to the trailhead, which was important in getting the manpower and skills necessary for the rescue. Third, personal radios would have been very helpful because we only had cellphone service at the top of the pass – and that was a 30 to 45 minute climb away. (Source: Will Kruse – Washington Alpine Club, Eileen Kutscha and Erica Cline – Seattle Mountaineers, and www.komonemews.com)

ILLNESS AND FROSTBITE (TWO INCIDENTS)

Washington, Mount Rainier

While on a summit climb on the morning of July 13 about 9:00 a.m., Dr. Walter Leonard (56) experienced extreme pain in his right abdomen and back. The climbers accompanying him called the NPS Ranger Nick Hall, who was on duty at Camp Muir, and explained that their patient was non-ambulatory and in extreme pain. Ranger Hall called Climbing Ranger Supervisor, Brian Hasebe, who became Incident Commander. The 214th General Support Aviation Brigade at joint base Ft. Lewis-McChord was called and accepted the mission to retrieve Dr. Leonard.

Meanwhile another incident unfolded within the same party. Sergeant Derek Ford (23) who was at 10,800 feet on the Disappointment Cleaver, began suffering from frostbite at the end of a leg that had been amputated. So these two injuries were communicated to the US Army Reserve unit at Ft. Lewis-McChord. The NPS and USAR formulated a plan to extricate both injured parties. Because of a cloud deck around Mount Rainier, rangers drove to Ft. Lewis where they briefed and boarded the US Army Reserve CH-47 Chinook helicopter. Rangers Philippe Wheelock, Chris Kalman, and Jonathon Bowman flew from Ft. Lewis to the summit and picked up one patient. Then they flew