

It was midway through the second day that he fell. He went to explore a source of drinking water and fell through a snow bridge that had been weakened by the dripping water. He fell about three meters, but that's apparently where his bad luck ended. He landed in soft snow, didn't break any bones during the fall and landed right side up. Although the hole he fell into was too steep to climb out of, he was lucky that his pack ended up alongside him—with the food he needed for energy and the shovel he needed to dig his way out of the snow.

"I knew the only way out was to dig so I tunneled up through the snow," said Peterson. "It took me two days and by the time I got through I was exhausted. When I got out I got a little ways away from where I'd fallen and I pitched my tent and went to sleep. I wasn't hypothermic, but I was totally exhausted. I lost a day or two. If I'd known people were searching for me I'd have come down sooner, but I just slept in my tent and tried to get my strength back."

"This is not something I'm proud of," he said, looking back on the week he spent digging his way off the mountain while law-enforcement officials on the Peninsula and 60 of his friends searched for him.

"I'm embarrassed. I did some stupid things. I went by myself and didn't tell anybody where I was going." (Source: *The Seattle Times*, Tuesday, May 3, 1989)

(Editor's Note: While not a climbing accident, this case is worth reporting because of its obvious application for climbers.)

FALL ON SNOW, INEXPERIENCE, WEATHER

Washington, Mount Rainier

This is a report on the triple fatality on Mount Rainier in May of 1988. It turned into a media event. Fortunately, a summary of the essential details was prepared objectively by the rangers.

David Kellokoski (30), team leader, Craig Adkison (37), and Greg Remmick (32) fell to their deaths while attempting a climb of Liberty Ridge on Mount Rainier. The Kellokoski party signed out to climb on the evening of May 4. The party estimated their return date as May 11. On May 14, Lori Adkison (wife) called the Park and reported the party overdue. The search and rescue operation began on May 15. The three bodies were first seen from the air on May 19. The three bodies were recovered from the mountain and turned over to the Pierce County Medical Examiner on May 20. (Source: Park Rangers, Mount Rainier National Park)

Analysis

There is no way to know just what caused the fall that resulted in the deaths of the three climbers; it may have been a slip, an avalanche, or rockfall. Nor do we know for certain what time or day the accident occurred or whether the climbers were ascending or descending. However, from the facts available and from the reasoned judgment of experienced climbers and park rangers, the following scenario is probably a close approximation of what occurred:

On May 9, the climbers leave Ipsut Creek Campground at 0500 and hike probably as far as approximately Dick Creek Camp near the foot of the Carbon Glacier, where they spend the first night.

On May 10, the three climbers are seen and contacted by the Branscomb party which is descending from Lower Curtis Ridge after an unsuccessful attempt at climbing Liberty Ridge. The contact is made at the 1500 meter elevation in Moraine Park at noon. The Kellokoski party likely climbed as far as the normal camping area at 2200 meters on Lower Curtis ridge or climbed onto the Carbon Glacier.

On May 11, good weather permits the party to climb across the Carbon Glacier, get onto the lower Liberty Ridge and climb as far as Thumb Rock, the normal camping area on Liberty Ridge. The party could possibly have gone further up the ridge, but since Thumb Rock is the only good camping area, it is likely they stopped there.

Continued favorable weather for much of May 12 permits the party to proceed up the most demanding part of the climb—from Thumb Rock toward Liberty Cap, an ascent of some 1000 meters. However, a storm moved onto the mountain by 1500 to 1600 as a cloud cap developed and descending rapidly, totally enveloping the mountain in severe weather conditions. By mid afternoon, the party may have climbed to the 4000 meter level where tracks were observed by a subsequent climbing party. The bad weather probably caused them to abandon the idea of continuing on to the summit. The party then would have either camped for the night if they could find or create a tent platform, or they would have attempted a descent. It is hypothesized that they elected to immediately descend and that they successfully down-climbed to about the base of the Black Pyramid, about 3600 meters, where they fell some 300 meters to their deaths at 3300 meters, just west and slightly higher than Thumb Rock. This theory is based on the following:

1. If they had elected to camp at 4000 meters, they probably would have elected to camp an additional night as well, since May 13 was a continuation of the bad weather. May 14, however, was clearing weather. The party would probably have elected to climb over the summit on the 14th and descend via Camp Schurman, rather than down-climbing Liberty Ridge. If they did down-climb the ridge, they would have been doing it in much better weather conditions, and been more rested, when a human-caused fall would have been less likely.
2. All three climbers were found heavily clothed, with one climber having his hood tied tightly around his face. All three had glacier glasses, normally worn to protect against sun-caused glare, in their pockets. This would indicate that the weather was likely stormy and cold and not sunny (thus eliminating May 14 as a likely descent day). The heavy clothing was also indicative of down-climbing because of the lower amount of exertion and perspiration involved.
3. All climbers had little food and fluid in their stomachs and only one half liter of water in the two packs found. If they had camped first and then descended, they probably would have had breakfast and melted snow for water.
4. A fall from the base of the Black Pyramid is consistent with the location the bodies were found and the condition of them, to wit—injuries consisted of fractured skulls, one broken neck, and some broken ribs. The outer clothing was mostly intact. If they had fallen above the ice cliff or above the Black Pyramid, the bodies and clothing would have been expected to be much more torn and broken than they were. The autopsies indicated that except for the fractured skulls and broken neck, there were no other life-threatening injuries. A fall from the base of the Black Pyramid would involve falling down snow and ice covered slopes and over small ledges but not

over significant rock or ice cliffs that would likely have caused major body damage.

None of the climbers appeared to be experienced snow and ice climbers. None had climbed Liberty Ridge before. Adkison was the least experienced but had climbed Mount Rainier via the Emmons Glacier, according to his wife. The Emmons does not compare with Liberty Ridge for difficulty and danger involved.

Both Kellokoski and Remmick were experienced rock climbers, having climbed such demanding faces as El Capitan, Grand Teton, Half Dome, and Devil's Tower. Their snow and ice experience was limited, as was their winter camping experience. None of the three climbers was wearing a climbing harness—an item of equipment almost universally worn by snow and ice climbers. Adkison had rented much of his equipment—the ice ax, crampons, pack and boots. Experienced climbers have their own equipment. Thus, it is surmised that although some of the climbers were well experienced on rock faces, they may have been climbing beyond their abilities on snow and ice. This relative lack of experience may have led them to decide to descend rather than dig in and weather the storm or may have directly led to a slip that could have been the combination of fatigue, hypothermia, lack of nourishment, and inexperience. (Source: John Wilcox, Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

STRANDED, WEATHER

Washington, Snoqualmie Pass

Jim Doub and I set out from Source Lake early Sunday morning to climb the North East Buttress of Chair Peak. Jim was doing his first rock climb rated at class 4. We ascended the route without difficulty, but near the top we saw that the weather was deteriorating quickly. We decided to continue to the summit because I felt confident that I could find the descent route, although I had not climbed the peak in five years. Upon reaching the summit, we encountered a heavy fog with visibility of no more than 15 meters. Several attempts up and down various gullies left us in the approaching darkness and some light freezing rain. Jim and I spent the night in a plastic garbage bag under a space blanket sheltered by a mountain hemlock. I became moderately hypothermic. During the night it snowed about 15 to 20 centimeters. The wind was intense. We reviewed how to deal with hypothermia, ate our emergency food, and consumed our water at regular, scheduled intervals. We chanted a meditation mantra I know, and told stories of even worse situations we had found ourselves in in the past.

In the morning our water bottles were frozen and visibility was even poorer than the previous evening. My wife had been instructed to call the sheriff at noon if we had not contacted her by then. Although it was usually perfectly feasible to descend the peak and get to a telephone in four hours after sunrise, the poor visibility did not allow us to descend easily, quickly, or safely. We found the descent route but all the ledges and traverses were heavily iced. I felt it was better to wait until further warming allowed safer passage, especially for Jim who had no experience with verglass. By the time we were down the descent chimney, it was well past noon and the rescue helicopter was circling overhead. Through the courtesy of the pilot we were lifted back to the parking lot where Mountain Rescue and the Sheriff's Department rescue unit was waiting. Neither Jim nor I was injured or required medical attention. (Source: Dick Hoskins)