

were lost and in a precarious situation. That was when Michael arrived.

Michael attempted to lead the group back to the primary descent route, but the weather continued to deteriorate, and he too was unable to locate the footpath. As the conditions worsened, it became apparent that the trio would not be able to get out, or back to Camp Muir that night. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Michael put up his tarp and made the best arrangements possible to keep them warm and provide water. The group spent two nights under this tarp and in Michael's care while waiting for a break in the weather. The break came on Tuesday morning. With a break in the fog and clouds, Michael was able to ascertain their position, which allowed the trio to promptly descend.

It's important to note that Michael's skill, preparedness, and personal effort probably saved the lives of Delorenzo and Lance. This incident highlights the fact that even the most experienced mountaineers can get caught off guard in a seemingly benign situation. There is nothing very technical about descending the Muir Snowfield, yet incidents here are relatively frequent. In low visibility, knowing your position and direction of travel will make a significant difference in the remainder of your day.

Using a compass, map, altimeter, and GPS may have gotten them back on route in a short period of time. Without these tools, it's hard to discern up from down in a whiteout. Exposure on the Muir Snowfield can easily make a person hypothermic in a very short period of time: part of the reason that the Muir Snowfield claims more lives than any place on Mount Rainier. The importance of staying together as a group is also highlighted—especially when gear and tools are divided among group members.

An additional factor in this case is that incorrect information on trip plans led to the delay in rescue efforts for Delorenzo and Lance. (Source: Mike Gauthier, Climbing Ranger)

(Editor's Note: When guiding on Mount Rainier in the early 60's, I kept a piece of paper with the compass bearing from Camp Muir to Paradise in my pocket. On my third guided climb, I needed it to negotiate a whiteout from Camp Muir while descending with three clients.

It is good to see so few incidents from Mount Rainier again this year. Readers are reminded to check out www.mountrainierclimbing.blogspot.com for up to date information.)

FALL ON ICE, CLIMBING GEAR IN PACKS—CLIMBING UNROPE

Washington, Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, Sherpa Peak

On September 25, Otto Vaclavek (53) died of hypothermia after falling between 100 and 150 feet down an ice slope and over a cliff. Vaclavek had no broken bones, so it's unclear why he didn't move from the location where rescue crews found him.

His son Max Vaclavek (12) died of head injuries suffered in the fall, even though he was wearing a helmet.

Investigators believe both father and son fell at the same time. They were not using climbing ropes or harnesses, just ice axes and crampons.

Sharon Marion, wife of Otto and mother of Max, said her husband was very familiar with the area.

Rescuers found backpacks. They were hidden underneath rocks. Deputies say it's not uncommon for hikers to leave heavy gear behind, but they usually come back to retrieve it. The backpacks contained their tent, sleeping bags, and some climbing gear. (Source: From a report found at KREM.com)

Analysis

This is an unfortunate case, especially as it involves a father and son. Both were avid outdoor enthusiasts. Otto Vaclavek came to the U.S. in 1988, having been granted political asylum from Czechoslovakia. While Sherpa Peak is a technically difficult climb with complex terrain, it is believed that the two had the skill levels to accomplish the route. The mystery is why their climbing gear was in their packs. (Source: Jed Williamson)

(Editor's Note: In terms of other Washington climbing areas that normally see at least a few accidents each year, Kelly Bush, Wilderness District Ranger for North Cascades National Park, reported that there were no mountaineering accidents there in 2007. There were several hikers rescued, including two fatalities, however.)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, CARABINER CAME OFF SLING, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

West Virginia, New River Gorge National Park, Beauty Mountain

On August 19, approximately twelve or fifteen feet up on a route called "Brainteasers" (5.10 a), CU (21) placed a medium-sized hex, which was attached to the rope via a standard length sling. About eight to ten feet higher, CU placed a medium sized nut in a thin vertical crack. It too was attached to the rope via a standard length sling. CU struggled about six to seven feet higher and placed a 0.75 cam in an upward flaring vertical crack. No more than one foot above this placement, CU became fatigued and casually yelled, "Falling," to his belayer, RE (24). RE took in slack expecting to catch a small fall. Instead, CU fell approximately 30 feet and hit the ground, landing on his back.

CU was totally unresponsive for several minutes upon landing and appeared to be in extreme pain. Fearing the worst, RE called 911 and an intensive rescue took place. CU was evacuated from the cliff by stretcher and then airlifted to a hospital in Charleston, WV. He suffered a broken right scapula, several broken ribs, and a bruised lung. He was released from the hospital the next day.