

which sped up the overall response, but sadly, to no avail. The lesson here is to bring a communication device – and to use it appropriately. (Source: Brian Hasebe - Park Ranger, The News Tribune, Tacoma, WA, and Mount Rainier News Releases)

LOSS OF CONTROL ON GLISSADE - FALL INTO CREVASSE/MOAT, POOR VISIBILITY, MISPERCEPTION, NO HARD HAT

Washington, Mount Baker

On July 2, my girlfriend Sheryl Costello (34) and I (45) climbed the Coleman Headwall route on Mount Baker in excellent conditions. That afternoon we descended the normal route to a camp on an outcrop near the bottom of the glacier.

Conditions deteriorated that evening, with high winds, sleet, and moderate intermittent rain showers. The winds decreased by morning but the rain and fog continued. The entire approach route was still covered with several meters of snow at this date.

We encountered several men from a Canadian party near a feature known as the “hogback” which is about 1600 meters, just below the glaciated terrain. A descending party has the option of walking down the hogback or glissading the adjacent snowfield. The area’s standard climbing map indicates a “dangerous moat” about halfway down the snowfield. Our climb the previous day indicated that most such features were still covered by solid snow bridges. We decided as a group that a glissade would not pose an unusual risk.

Visibility remained poor (less than 20 meters at times) when we began the glissade about 11:30 a.m. Sheryl went first and immediately disappeared into the fog. Two or three of the Canadian party and I followed her. Partway down the snowfield the figures of the Canadians materialized out of the mist. They were investigating a small gap (about one by three meters) in the snow, which had considerable water flowing through it. A glissade path was visible below the gap, continuing into the forest.

We bypassed the gap and presumed that the glissade path indicated that Sheryl had continued down the snowfield. At the bottom, another 200 vertical meters below the gap, we gathered again. Sheryl was not in the group. The glissade trail continued down into the forest and we presumed that she had continued lower. As a precaution, I returned upslope to the gap in the snow. After shouting into the hole (no response) and examining the hole for scrapes, breakage, or other signs of entry (inexplicably, there were none), I returned to the bottom of the snowfield, and we began a search of the immediate area.

I suggested the possibility of descending into the hole in the seemingly unlikely event that Sheryl had fallen in without leaving any indication. However, I was counseled – wisely, it turned out – by a member of the Canadian party with search and rescue experience that, lacking any such indication, such an attempt was a risk.

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.)