

Avalanche Incident Summary

Washington State, Mount Rainier, Liberty Ridge—June 13, 2004

Luke Casady and Ansel Vizcaya departed White River Campground on Friday June 11th for a planned ascent of Liberty Ridge. The exact details of the subsequent 48 hours may never be known, but the facts uncovered during the subsequent search, body recoveries and during investigation suggest the following sequence of events:

Casady and Vizcaya, both experienced and seasoned climbers camped along Curtis Ridge on Friday night and began the ascent up Liberty Ridge early Saturday morning. It is likely the pair climbed past Thumb Rock around midday and continued on up the ridge as the first signs of incoming weather appeared. With the winds building and the visibility decreasing the climbers continued pushing forward hoping that the storms would be short-lived and benign. By early evening, however, the winds had increased to 70 mph and the snow began accumulating. Casady and Vizcaya realized that they would have to hunker down and wait out the storm.

Through the night, the winds hammered the mountain at speeds approaching 100 mph scouring the falling snow from certain areas and building large slabs in others. This was an uncomfortable night for climbers everywhere on Mount Rainier, with tents destroyed and nerves rattled.

On Sunday morning somewhere between 12,200 and 13,200 feet, Casady and Vizcaya assessed their predicament. Several inches of snow had fallen, but more importantly the high winds had deposited large slabs of snow on leeward slopes. The pair had to decide whether it was better to continue on up and over, or turn around and down climb the most difficult part of the route. The visibility was still not very good, but there were breaks now and then where the Casady and Vizcaya could get brief glimpses of the summit, a tempting sight.

Sometime midmorning, as the pair were preparing to make their move, but before they had roped up, Casady and Vizcaya were caught up in a large slab avalanche that released several hundred feet above them, below the bergschrund on Liberty Wall. The avalanche swept them down the slope they were on and then over steep bands of rock coming to rest only when they had reached the base of the gully on the Carbon Glacier at 9,200 feet, a fall of approximately 4,000 vertical feet. Neither climber survived the fall.

The bad weekend weather had turned back many teams and significantly slowed the progress of others. Rangers were aware that several teams were overdue, but this was typical following harsh weather. On June 16th at approximately 1300 hours, rangers reported ten climbers descending the Emmons Glacier route who were moving very slowly. Rangers interviewed six of the ten climbers on the morning of June 17th. All had climbed Liberty Ridge, some beginning their trips before, and some after, the Casady/Vizcaya team. None of the climbers, however, had seen the Casady/Vizcaya party. This triggered a search.

On Thursday June 17th, Mount Rainier National Park began intensive search efforts to locate the overdue climbers. Rangers were dispatched to Camp Schurman to interview any remaining Liberty Ridge climbers descending the Emmons Glacier route, while aerial reconnaissance with a helicopter commenced near Liberty Ridge and the Carbon Glacier. After nearly an hour of aerial search, a backpack and body were spotted on the Carbon Glacier at roughly 9,200 feet below Liberty Wall. Winds prevented the helicopter from closely approaching or landing near the body, which rested near a large avalanche debris cone beneath the Liberty Wall. The weather was very warm and many avalanches of significant size were noted from 4,000 foot Liberty Wall. The location of the body is particularly known for its rock and ice fall hazards. For this reason, ground recovery operations were planned for first light the next morning (during the coolest temperatures). Aerial search continued for the second climber that afternoon.

Further aerial reconnaissance on June 17th revealed a second backpack and climbing rope near the avalanche debris. Also observed was a fracture line (likely evidence of avalanches) at approximately 13,000

feet on the Liberty Ridge. After the recon flight, two rangers were inserted on Curtis Ridge (7,400 feet) to continue observations with a telescope and support recovery operations the following day.

On the morning of June 18th, a helicopter inserted two rangers near the 9,000 feet level on the Carbon Glacier. They quickly located the body and backpacks and prepared them for removal. After the recovery, the rangers continued ground searching using avalanche transceivers. Their efforts were focused on the area near the backpacks and recovered body but no further clues were found. The ground team was removed after an hour of search due to safety considerations.

Subsequent aerial search on June 18th revealed more evidence approximately 50 yards west of the recovered climber. Rangers were then inserted onto the glacier to investigate and dig through the snow debris. Nothing more was found and aerial searching resumed. The primary aerial search area consisted of Liberty Ridge, Liberty Wall, Willis Wall and the likely “fall lines” off of the Liberty Ridge climbing route. These were strongly considered to be the most likely areas in which to find clues.

On June 19th an Oregon Army National Guard Chinook helicopter with NPS Rangers conducted further aerial search. No new clues were detected.

On June 22nd a private contract ship provided additional aerial search. During that flight, a climbing harness, carabiners, pulley and ice axe were spotted near 9,400 feet on the Carbon Glacier. Those clues were located near the avalanche debris cone below Liberty Wall; they were not retrieved.

On July 13th, a climber reported seeing a large blue object on the Carbon Glacier near 9,300 feet while he was climbing Liberty Ridge. Three climbing rangers were dispatched via the ground to investigate the report on July 14th.

At 1200 on July 15th, those rangers found the remains of a climber on the Carbon Glacier at 9,300 feet. A contract helicopter inserted two rangers near the site. The body was successfully recovered from the mountain via long line at 1900 hours and transferred to the Pierce County Medical Examiner’s office at 2000 hours.

Analysis:

The obvious fracture line noted below the bergschrund on Liberty Wall was direct evidence of a large slab avalanche whose crown appeared to extend halfway to Ptarmigan Ridge, some 250 meters. The crown was observed from the air only, appearing to vary in thickness from about 25-100 cm. Whether or not this crown belonged to the avalanche that swept the climbers to their deaths is uncertain, as a smaller slide subsequently overrun by this larger slide is possible. Observations during the search found that large avalanches had run on other slopes in the general vicinity of Liberty and Ptarmigan Ridges following the storm. As there had been no climbers on some of these slopes it is probable these were naturally triggered.

Upon registration the climbers indicated that they would have with them avalanche transceivers. Neither climber was wearing a transceiver when the slide occurred. One transceiver was found (in the “off” position) in a recovered pack.

(Source: Glenn Kessler, Climbing Ranger)