



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall — Hypothermia

California, Mt. Shasta, Clear Creek Route

On August 16, a two-person party summited Mt. Shasta via Clear Creek, pushing from their Wintun Ridge camp at 10,500 feet despite a well-publicized incoming storm. The pair was unfamiliar with the terrain, lacked adequate wet-weather gear, and pressed on despite symptoms of altitude illness and significant fatigue.

Descending in worsening conditions, both climbers became disoriented near 11,000 feet and could not locate their camp. One eventually found the tent; Paul Ingrassia, 50, of San Diego, did not. The two stayed in cell contact briefly—his partner noticed Ingrassia sounding confused and disoriented. He never arrived.

Storm conditions prevented aerial operations that night. By morning, conditions had improved, and at 12:30 p.m. a CHP helicopter spotted Ingrassia at approximately 9,800 feet—face down, shirtless, and unconscious, wedged between a scree slope and an ice sheet at the base of a steep, rocky gully he had fallen down. He was hoisted off alive and transferred to a medical helicopter bound for Mercy Redding, but died two days later from kidney and liver failure caused by hypothermia.

ANALYSIS

Clear Creek's reputation as Mt. Shasta's most accessible route can obscure the seriousness of any climb on what is a glaciated peak. The contributing factors here were numerous and compounding: climbing into a known storm, inadequate raingear, ignored altitude-sickness symptoms, unfamiliarity with the terrain, party separation in poor visibility, and the physiological cascade that follows a night exposed at high altitude without shelter. Any one of these, addressed in time, might have changed the outcome. Together, they proved fatal. (Source: Mt. Shasta Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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