

Reading for Leadership Dynamics Final Exam - The Chilko's Fatal Twists

from 'Outside', November 1987 - by Lisa Twyman Bessone

The Chilko River, 200 miles north of Vancouver in British Columbia, has long been famous for an 18-mile stretch that runs through Lava Canyon-"the toughest whitewater run commercially in North America," a brochure claims. Now the Chilko is famous for something much worse.

Five men, all executives or guests of the DDB Needham Worldwide advertising agency in Chicago, were killed in a rafting accident on the Chilko in August. Four days later, another man, from Germany, was killed on the same stretch, called the Whitewater Mile. A month earlier, on the Elaho River 100 miles away, five people - four Canadians and an Australian - had died in another accident. It was a summer unlike any other for rafting in B.C.

Eric Leeper, director of the National Organization For River Sports, says five deaths are high for an entire year of commercial rafting in the United States. "Five deaths on one trip is unusually high," he adds. Two groups of five killed on separate trips, and 11 deaths in one month are unprecedented.

The accident on the Elaho involved a logjam. The raft, operated by a commercial guide, hit some logs, then flipped. The current trapped the victims under debris.

The German, who was part of a private group, got into trouble after his party's outdated raft ruptured a pontoon on a rock. He waded into the Chilko to haul his raft to shore, was swept into the current and drowned.

As for the accident involving the American executives, no one seems to know exactly what went wrong or why so many were killed. Ron Thompson, the group's guide and the owner of Thompson Guiding, Ltd., had run the Chilko 208 times without incident. He had gone down the Class IV Whitewater Mile with eight members of the DDB Needham group just two days earlier. But this time through, Thompson hit a large rock, one of the many strewn throughout the rapids. "Usually there's a cushion of water that will ferry you past," Thompson told the Chicago Tribune. "You rarely contact the rock," he said. This time we hit a slow, sluggish patch of water that brought the boat sideways. Then a wave drove us hard into the rock".

According the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the raft hit broadside and rode up, almost perpendicular to the water, onto the five feet of exposed rock. Survivors said Thompson shouted for them to get to the high side of the raft. "But there wasn't enough time," Jack Collins, president of Clorox, told Advertising Age. Of the 12 passengers, Collins was the only one able to stay on board; the rest were thrown into the water.

Denver lawyer Earl Hansen rode the rapids clinging to the raft's side. Al Wolfe, president of the DDB Needham's U.S. Division and the trip's organizer, grabbed an overhanging tree, then spent the next 45 minutes inching his way to shore. Arthur Zeikel, an executive with Merrill Lynch, and Michael Miles,

president of Kraft, Inc., also made it out of the water, as did Thompson, who ran back to camp to get another raft.

Joseph Morrison, executive vice president of marketing for Mattel, told the Los Angeles Times that he was underwater for about 90 seconds before he could get to the surface. But he went under again. "I got hit in the face with a wave and sucked down," he said. "I thought I was going to die. I knew I had to get my feet in front of me, but the life jacket was going up (around his head). I was getting banged on the rocks."

Morrison hauled himself out, then watched as the raft, with Collins inside it, roared by. He also saw Richard O'Reilly, 65, who was moaning as the river carried him past. "And it wasn't 'help! help!'" said Morrison. "It was real moaning. I didn't think he'd make it."

O'Reilly was one fatality. The others included Robert Goldstein, 50, vice president of advertising for Proctor and Gamble; Stuart Sharpe, 37, and Gene Yovetich, 41, both senior VPs at DDB Needham in Chicago; and James Fasules, 63, a retired DDB Needham executive. The police say that these men drowned, though the coroner's report had yet to be released.

The Chilko is a glacier-fed river, its temperature around 40 degrees - conditions that call for wetsuits. But a kayaker who helped pull the bodies out said that not one of the victims was wearing one. There is some speculation that hypothermia could have been a factor. "In the 40 degree water it takes 30 minutes for the body temperature to drop significantly," says Dr. Peter Hackett, a leading authority on hypothermia and wilderness medicine. But Hackett added that heat loss speeds up if a person isn't in a tuck, because more surface area is exposed, or if he's struggling and expending energy.

There will be an inquest to determine the causes of death and, perhaps, to address other questions that are reportedly being raised. For instance, why were 12 people in the raft? "Twelve people is a lot," says Steve Anderson, owner of Fraser Expeditions in Vancouver.

And why was there only one raft? "That's unorthodox," says Richard Bangs of Sobek. "In a wilderness area it's common practice to have more than one boat."

In his account to the Los Angeles Times, Morrison mentions the life jacket around his head. "A jacket that's worn properly doesn't do that," says John Mikes of Canadian River Expeditions. Mikes has run commercial trips down the Chilko for 17 years and always portages around Lava Canyon.

"If anything positive has come out of this, it's the calls that I've been getting from clients, asking intelligent questions for a change," says Vern Whittle, who owns Whitewater Adventures in Canada.

At least one guide has been reminded of something as well. "Never underestimate a piece of water," says Anderson. "Even if you've been down it a million times."