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Former LACTC Executive Director Survives Scrape with Death

- Coast Guard helo plucks Neil Peterson and friend from raging sea

(June 20, 2007) Neil Peterson is lucky to be alive today.

The former executive director of the Los Angeles Transportation Commission, who now lives in Seattle, was hiking with his family in a risky area on western Canada's Vancouver Island, June 11, when they were struck by a large wave that dragged four of their five-member group into a treacherous sea channel.



Neil Peterson and his children, Guy and Kelsey. Along with friend Tim Kniffin, they were swept into a sea cave on Vancouver Island while hiking Canada's West Coast Trail. Photo by Mike Urban, courtesy of The Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

After clinging to driftwood for nine hours, they were finally rescued in an attempt that included both U.S. and Canadian Coast Guard helicopters.

Peterson, 63; his son Guy, 22; daughter Kelsey, 20; nephew Joe Ellis, 24; and friend Tim Kniffin, 28, were on the second day of a week-long trip on the West Coast Trail, which runs 47 miles up the western side of Vancouver Island, known for its difficult weather and rough seas.

Along with the lack of road access, the arduous coastline passages make the trail one that even experienced hikers are wary of, but often hazard in order to experience what Peterson called the "aura" of the beautiful trail.

The hikers had set out at 4:30 a.m., carefully timing the tides for the coastline trek. Three hours later, they were on what looked like an easier stretch through a sandy beach area. But a surge channel was ahead that looked dangerous as the waves – now at high tide – rushed through.

Wave overwhelmed the group

The group was transiting across



Map courtesy of The Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

the 50-foot wide channel when a 10-foot wave that seemed to appear out of nowhere swept in and overwhelmed all but Peterson's nephew Joe Ellis, who managed to avoid the surge.

"Five people and we never saw it," Peterson told Seattle media. The crashing waves stripped them of their backpacks and camping equipment.

Ellis left the group treading water in the channel to find help, arriving at an abandoned park ranger cabin at around 11 a.m., searching for anything to help his stranded companions.

"I grabbed a hatchet and I smashed a window, opened it up, crawled through and ransacked the cabin," Ellis said. "I got a trash bag from which I made two arm holes and a head hole and got some rope. On the way back I ran into two separate hikers and told them the situation."

Meanwhile, Peterson and the group made several failed attempts to escape the surge channel. The walls proved to be too slick to climb and a sea cave they made their way into provided some cover but no exit.

'An emotional and stressful time'

"We just had to settle down and make sure we were making the best decisions possible, because it was really an emotional and stressful time," Peterson said.

Ellis returned and managed to get two of the group out with the rope he'd found. Peterson and Tim Kniffin proved too heavy for the rope.

Just then, the Coast Guard helicopters found them, alerted to the group's plight by the hikers Ellis had met on his journey to the ranger station. Peterson and Kniffin were airlifted to safety by a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter crew that lowered a rescue basket.

After several trips on U.S. and Canadian helos, the group made it to nearby Port Renfrew by nightfall, happy to be rescued.

"I'm not going to be OK for a while," Kelsey Peterson said. "It was scary. Luckily, I was there with my family. They calmed me down and it was a really bad situation."

Peterson left LACTC in 1992 for Seattle, where he founded Flexcar, the nation's oldest car-sharing company.

Editor's Note: This story was compiled with information from The Seattle Times, The Post-Intelligencer, Seattle KOMO-TV and News Services.

