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"I WAS FALLING AT 30 MPH" —A SURVIVOR'S STORY





## Case Study

# Surge Survivor

Name Neil Peterson, 63 **Predicament** Swept into a surge channel; stuck in a cave

The wave struck just after 7 a.m. Neil Peterson, his daughter Kelsey, son Guy, and their friends Joe and Tim were on day two of the West Coast Trail (WCT), a **challenging 47-mile route**<sup>1</sup> that traces Vancouver Island's rugged Pacific shoreline.

They were hiking near the water, taking advantage of an alternative route across a flat sandstone shelf **exposed by the low tide**,<sup>2</sup> which offered an easy route between the surf and a rugged inland bluff. They'd awoken early to time the crux of their day with the low tide, so the trekkers were tired when they encountered a five-foot wide cleft in the rock, a **surge channel**.<sup>3</sup> As they pondered their options to skirt it, a **sudden wave raced across the shelf**.<sup>4</sup> They had no warning, and the water **knocked all but one of the hikers into the surf inside the seething chute**.<sup>5</sup>

The wave pushed four of the group members inland, bashing them against floating tree trunks and the channel's narrow walls. As the wave receded, they dropped into a pool at the channel's terminus and climbed out of the water, into a cave under the bluff.

Regrouping inside the cave, Peterson and the drenched hikers heard a shout from the shoreline above. Just before the wave hit, their friend Joe had **leapt across the surge channel**<sup>6</sup> so that the others could throw their packs across. He'd been hauling Kelsey's pack to high ground when the group was swept inland. Now, **he was the only one who wasn't trapped**.<sup>7</sup>

Peterson's group was uninjured and relatively safe. The hollow was above the tide line, but the steep walls were too high to climb and the channel too dangerous to swim. They were soaked. **"Our immediate problem was hypothermia,"** says Peterson. Kelsey's pack, the only one that hadn't been dragged out to sea, contained extra clothes and a sleeping bag **but no firestarter and little food**.<sup>8</sup> Joe dropped it into the cave so the others could **put on dry layers**<sup>9</sup> while he went to find help.

"It was psychologically tough to stay put," Peterson says, but as the morning hours dragged by, they buoyed morale by **playing mental games and hatching escape plans**.<sup>10</sup> They waited more than nine hours for Joe to return.

While Joe was gone, he **got lost**,<sup>11</sup> encountered other hikers who he **sent to get help**,<sup>12</sup> and broke into a locked ranger cabin to retrieve food and a climbing rope. When he arrived back at the cave to help Peterson and the others, he **tyed footholds in the rope**<sup>13</sup> and passed it to his friends. Guy and Kelsey were able to climb to safety, but Tim and Peterson weren't able to scale the rope. They remained stuck until dusk, when a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter arrived.

Conditions weren't safe to use the chopper's hoist, so USCG rescue swimmer John Linnborn improvised. He **tripped and knotted a line and attached it to a U-shaped rescue collar**,<sup>14</sup> which allowed rescuers to pull Peterson and Tim up the slimy cave walls to safety. "We were running out of daylight," says Linnborn, "and their unique situation required creative thinking."

[1] Storm conditions, ladders on headland trails, and shifting tides add difficulty to any route. Parks Canada requires a pretrip orientation for all WCT hikers.

[2] June tides in the area vary as much as seven feet between highs and lows. Always check tide tables if you're hiking along coastal trails and headlands (see page 12).



[3] The only recorded WCT fatality occurred at a surge channel. Like crevasses in ice, they are dangerous to cross. They concentrate wave power and quickly fill with churning, frothy whitewater.

[4] Large waves can occur without warning. Constantly scan the ocean if you're hiking near or below the tide line so you can escape to high ground.

[5] Seawater weighs 64 pounds per cubic foot; even knee-high waves can easily topple an adult.

[6] Don't attempt to jump-step farther than your height. You may get lucky, but you shouldn't risk a backcountry injury to ankles, knees, or feet.

[7] Groups should stay within visual or shouting distance, but in hazardous conditions (lightning storms, traversing avalanche chutes, etc.) spread out so that if disaster strikes, the whole group isn't incapacitated.

[8] Wet clothing increases heat loss five-fold. If you're in 50°F water, you'll succumb to hypothermia in an hour.

[9] Distribute survival and first-aid gear like shelter, fire-starters, and food among multiple packs.

[10] If hypothermia hasn't compromised coordination, moderate exercises like sit-ups and jumping jacks will also increase body temp.

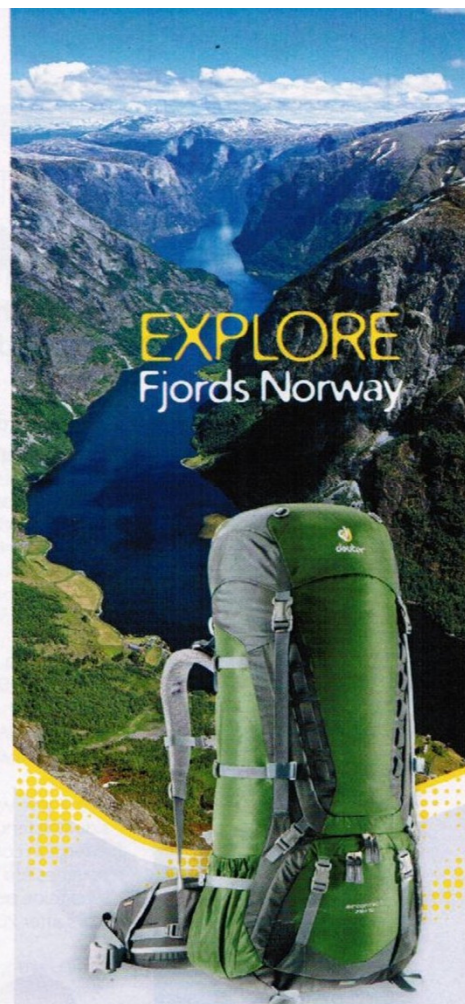
[11] Discussion, strategizing rescue plans, and even laughing can defuse critical-incident stress, which can manifest physically and emotionally, complicating rescue (and decreasing your chance of survival).

[12] Study maps as a group. Make sure everyone is aware of bailout and escape routes, plus nearby roads and services that could be resources in an emergency.

[13] The hikers misquoted the number of people involved in the accident (and their condition) to rescuers. Write down details like location, number of people, and injuries so that rescuers get the right info and arrive equipped.

[14] Add a loop with a Prusik knot to a main rope for easy ascending. The loop will hold weight under pressure, but slides easily when unweighted (learn the knot at [backpacker.com/prusik](http://backpacker.com/prusik)).

[15] Folding and tripling a rope increases its weight-bearing strength. To secure yourself in a rescue collar, place it over your head, tuck it securely under your armpits, and cross your arms over your chest.



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