

No Way Out

Tragedy and Mystery on the Incomappleux



By Steve Ogle

Photos by Chris Armstrong

THE CAMCORDER'S DATE READS Wednesday, July 30, 2003. The tiny preview screen doesn't do justice to the mountain scenery, given the setting is Glacier National Park, British Columbia. Yet the purpose of the video is at least made clear: an adventure is unfolding—with momentum. Two men clad in short-sleeved wetsuits and red life jackets float rigidly through Class II riffles along a topaz-coloured watercourse. Their yellow, red and grey inflatable kayak is piled high with provisions; they are like modern-day voyageurs slicing through an uncharted frontier. Except this isn't the boreal forest; this is the Incomappleux River in the Selkirk Mountains, only 22 kilometres from the Trans-Canada Highway, near Revelstoke. The wilderness is so remote, so complete, however, it may as well be a world away.

Panning downstream, the two rafters encounter a minor hurdle in the form of a sweeper—an overhanging branch or tree that can barricade a river—but instead of paddling around, their vessel gets hung up on the obstacle and they awkwardly seek help from the videographer. Words are spoken in French, and the filmmaker puts down his camera to aid his companions with their innocuous dilemma. The video screen goes blank momentarily, then bursts back to life. Unexpectedly, the next image is that of a helicopter approaching from above camera-level, and a figure, a rescue worker, can be seen dangling beneath it on a 50-metre-long line. The location is different, the image shakier. The date now reads Monday, August 4, 2003.

The individual holding the camera is plucked from the river's edge by the Parks Canada rescue team and brought to a nearby land-

team that included Dave Jones, author of the same guidebook Laforest used to research his climb—the oft-referenced *Selkirks South*. Jones's team later notes the climb had “absolutely no difficulty involved.” This is likely the case for Laforest too, as a triumphant satellite phone call is received from the summit; however, indications are that members of his team may have struggled. Young students Champagneur and Aurélie, cinematographer and producer respectively, are there to capture the action but have minimal experience in the mountains. And these are the Selkirks—not known to go down without a fight.

Bastien rounds out the team and organizes the secondary component of the trip, which is the approximately 40-kilometre paddle down the Incomappleux River, or Fish River as it is sometimes known, to the Arrow Lakes reservoir. No later than August 3, the team will rendezvous with friends who, according to helicopter pilot Ben Wilkey, saw them off at the Trans-Canada with hugs, photos and smiles.

“When I met the group at Albert Canyon, it struck me immediately that they were probably in over their heads,” the veteran pilot notes. “There was one guy I remember that looked capable...the others did not, but who was I to say?” The fact that the team elected to fly from the closest possible staging area rather than scouting the river in the air was not lost on Wilkey, who, despite this, discounted the notion the group was improperly prepared: “I assumed they had done their research.”

Meanwhile, there were prime conditions for glacial runoff. In the words of Scott Jeffery, a firefighter and veteran Kootenay paddler

“THIS WAS SOME OF THE MOST UNBELIEVABLE TERRAIN I'VE EVER SEEN. THERE ARE INCREDIBLE WATERFALLS IN THAT CANYON. THERE WAS NO WAY THEY WOULD HAVE ATTEMPTED GOING DOWN IT IF THEY HAD KNOWN ANYTHING ABOUT IT.”

— SYLVIA FOREST, PARKS CANADA WARDEN

ing zone. He is identified as 27-year-old Martin Champagneur from France. In good spirits, Champagneur expresses immense gratitude in the few words of English he knows, making it clear to his rescuers he is fine and that he's been separated from his friends for six days since their boats capsized. He believes they are still on the river.

This much is true: they are still out there somewhere. At the time of Champagneur's rescue, however, the facts surrounding the accident are still foggy, but in the ensuing weeks the events become clearer. What follows is an account of the Incomappleux River tragedy compiled from the narratives of rescuers and other participants involved in this exhaustive search and rescue effort that became headline news across Canada.

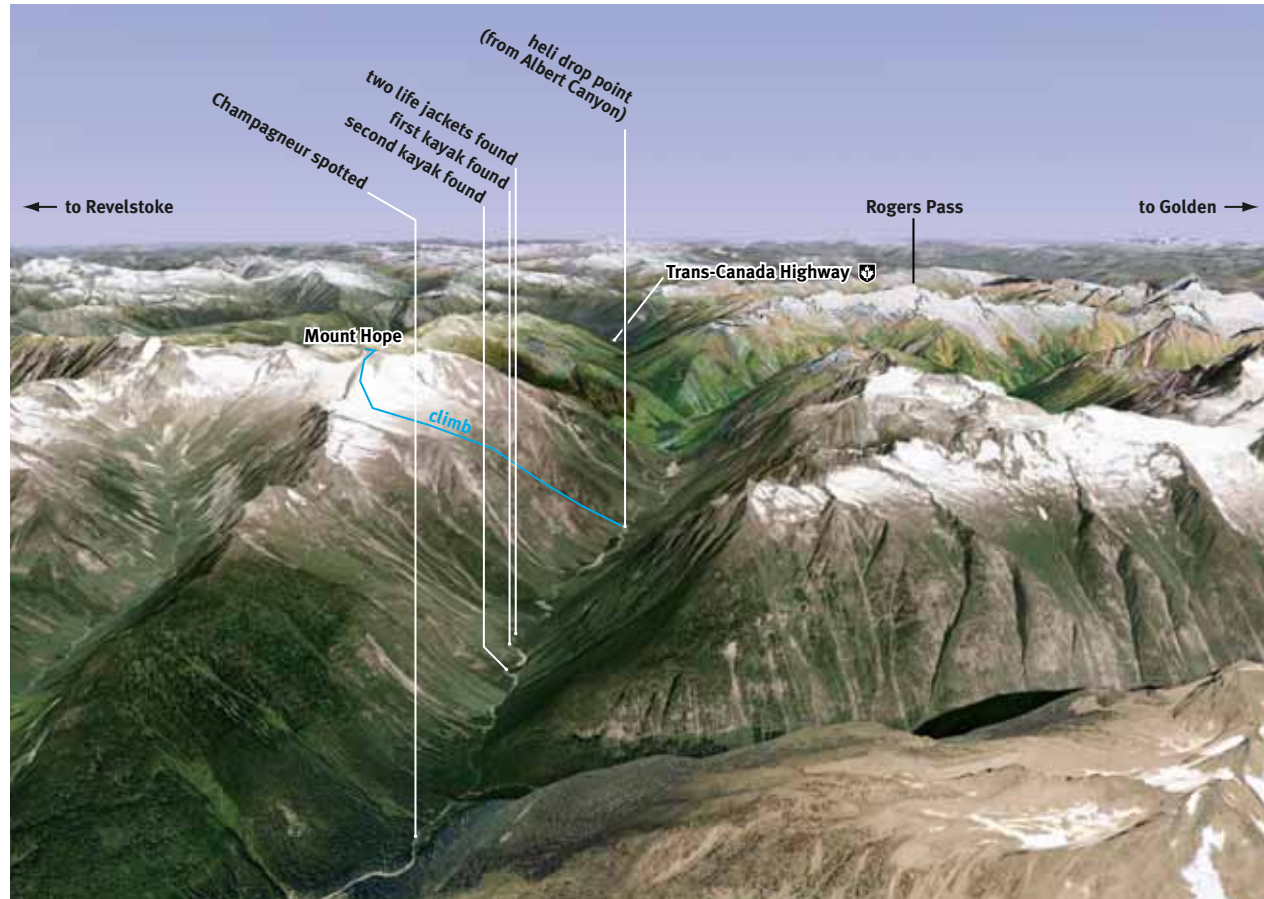
Jump back to July 26, 2003. Martin Champagneur joins his three companions—Yves Laforest and Michel Bastien, both from Quebec, and Frenchwoman Eve Aurélie—on a helicopter flight from Albert Canyon, near Revelstoke, southwest to the base of Mount Hope, a peak in the Albert Group of the Selkirk Range. The goal of their expedition is to climb a mountain to raise money for the Quebec-based Leucan organization, a charity dedicated to supporting cancer-stricken youth. Laforest, the team's leader, renowned as the first Québécois to summit Mount Everest and Canada's sixth summiteer, has his eye on the reportedly unclimbed 2,896-metre Mount Hope. Whether Laforest knows it at the time or not, this summit was tagged less than two weeks prior to his arrival by a

working in the area at the time, “Even the most experienced paddlers would not go near a glacier-fed river like that in the heat of late July.” Jeffery's crew was busy fighting blazes near the Incomappleux during a record-breaking BC fire season. All of this meant high water and unpredictable river conditions. Yet, the Incomappleux is known to have long stretches of flat, navigable water.

Chris Armstrong, a whitewater specialist with Nelson Search and Rescue (NSAR), expounds on the river's complexities: “That river breathes a lot. Every river has a diurnal cycle, and at that time of year there were huge fluctuations. We found a life jacket six feet up in a tree.”

Reports of this discovery raises the hopes of friends and family who think perhaps they are discarded intentionally by the victims. The jackets are zipped and buckled; loved ones cannot fathom how else they could have fallen off.

Champagneur's video picks up at the point where the team descends upon the river. Search crews studied the footage to get a sense of what they were looking for in terms of clothing, equipment and faces. Incidental to this, the video revealed other less tangible information, such as hints of the team's lack of preparedness and skill. For one thing, Bastien—himself having only limited river experience—was observed teaching the others basic paddle strokes at the put-in. This came as a surprise to the search crew, who assumed anyone tackling the Incomappleux River at high water would have some idea of what lay ahead.



Top: A view north up the Incomappleux and the isolated route of Laforest's doomed expedition.
Bottom: The river's unrunnable Class 6 rapids.

"He was giving them a crash course on how to paddle, and they were all having a good time," remembers Armstrong. "The last bit of video shows them going into a river right sweeper."

At this point, the team may realize their boats, not to mention their own skills, are grossly inappropriate for the task. Yet they choose to continue paddling downstream after the minor sweeper incident.

Bruce Gardave, NSAR initial response team leader, remembers how it took seven hours to walk four kilometres on the canyon rim, through devil's club and old-growth deadfall. "There was probably no way to portage anyway," he states somberly. Gardave remembers the inflatable raft in the video, the scant wetsuits, lack of helmets, and that the boat was loaded fore and aft. "That would mean there was basically no maneuverability in the boat whatsoever," he continues. "The video was one of the most disconcerting moments in my life, watching these poor people and knowing that they were not going to make it."

Around the corner, only about 100 metres downstream of the sweeper, is the beginning of a Class 6 canyon. To all but the most elite paddlers scouting the river at every turn, Class 6 is considered to be non-navigable water and basically suicidal, even at optimal water levels.

Indeed, the team's phone call from the summit of Mount Hope is the last anyone ever hears from them. Disconcerted friends, waiting too long at Arrow Lake, notify Parks Canada on August 3 that the group is overdue. Sylvia Forest, the warden who was lowered by helicopter to extract Champagneur, records his matter-of-fact state-

ment about the capsizing: How he and Aurélie paddle first into the box canyon and are tossed into the torrent. How he miraculously grabs hold of a log but is unable to save his partner, nor Laforest or Bastien, who soon float by into the depths of the canyon. How he spends the next six days wandering up and down the river in search of his friends. How he believes they are still out there, wandering in the woods.

Unfortunately for Champagneur, as well as many friends and family, seven days of intensive searching by air, ground, and water prove otherwise. Once the search is stood-down by officials, family members still refuse to give up and even employ special assistance from Quebec. A dedicated speleological (cave-diving) team arrives from Montreal, specifically in response to a tip from a hired psychic who professes the victims are "in a cold, damp place." The team is thwarted by the river's terrain in short notice.

To this day, Sylvia Forest asserts the group was oblivious to imminent dangers of the Incomappleux River. "This was some of the most unbelievable terrain I've ever seen. There are incredible waterfalls in that canyon," she adds. "There was no way they would have attempted going down it if they had known anything about it."

One can only speculate how the adventurers omitted critical information from the mental and physical planning phases of their expedition. Despite one of the largest and most bizarre searches in Selkirk Mountain history, the bodies of Champagneur's three companions were never found. □

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