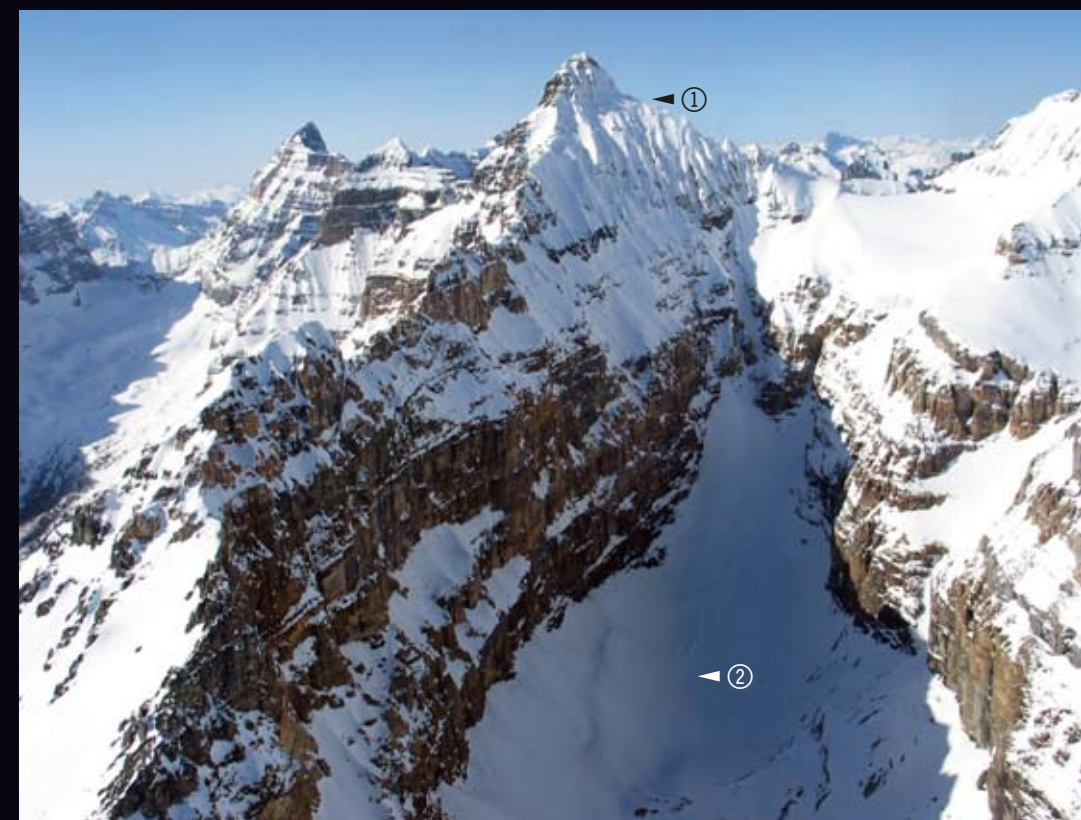




Mount Deltaform. Descent on south side of Super Couloir route ① top of route ② descent track ③ avalanche trigger location ④ fall



Mount Deltaform SE face ① fall location (avalanche trigger) ② victim location (avalanche toe)

TOUCHING THE VOID

Tragedy and Survival in Kootenay National Park

By Adrian Bergles

As he regains consciousness, Gabe Coler discovers he is lost in the vast backcountry below 3,424-metre Mount Deltaform, the tallest mountain in the Valley of the Ten Peaks, deep in the remote wilds of British Columbia's Kootenay National Park. Coler, 24, has managed to avoid being buried in an avalanche that carried him and his best friend Charlie Borgh, 26, down a 45-degree slope and then over a series of cliffs on the mountain's southern face. The two men have just plummeted 950 metres—nearly a vertical kilometre—from the summit ridge.

Beaten by falling chunks of ice and rock, the avalanche has left Coler incapacitated, with two broken legs, a crushed knee and bruised lungs. Unable to move, he tries to take stock of the situation. He regains his bearings and attempts to move his legs. His damaged limbs, however, ignore his mind's instructions to move.

He pulls at his climbing rope. Minutes earlier the rope had tethered Gabe and Charlie together as they began their descent off the mountain. All he finds now is a frayed end. College buddies from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, the two are experienced climbers who spend as much time as they can pursuing the sport they love.

That morning, Thursday, April 20, 2006, they had topped out on Mount Deltaform after climbing the Super Couloir route, a technically challenging class IV 5.8 rated ascent up the mountain's northern face.

Outside and exposed, Coler has lost most of his equipment in the fall. Luckily, his backpack managed to stay on. He tears the pack apart, using a piece of foam from the bag to lie on. He puts his feet in the bag to keep them warm.

As Coler lies in the snow, about 2,300 metres above sea level, still on the lower flanks of the mountain, he realizes the direness of his situation. He ponders the possibility of being found. Maybe Charlie has avoided the slide and is coming with help? Maybe someone back home will get nervous and call the park wardens when he doesn't check in? He always calls home when he's on these trips. He begins to hallucinate. Rock and ice move as if alive. Any perceived movement he takes as a sign of imminent rescue. In these moments anything can be a person. Day becomes night.

All that keeps Coler alive in the cold is his strong will and excellent physical condition. In the summers he works as an Oregon mountain guide. In winters, he's a high school cross-country ski coach.

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It is now Saturday, April 22, two full days since he's been swept away by the avalanche. A snowstorm hits the mountain. Through the blinding snow and howling wind, Coler hears his lost friend. He swears it's Charlie calling to him. He spends hours yelling back, hoping his friend will find him in the snow. But as the hours pass, doubt begins to creep back into Coler's mind. Lying in the snow he yells to his friend, asking if it's really him. Charlie gives no reply.

When the sun dawns in a cloudless sky the next day, Coler realizes he has imagined his imminent rescue. Valuable time is passing, with still no rescue in sight. He decides to go for it himself. With the goal of getting to the base of the mountain, he starts his descent, bit by painful bit.

He sets little goals for himself. The pack that has protected his feet now becomes a target. He gathers all of his strength and throws the pack. Then with his arms he drags himself toward the bag. Coler does this once or twice before exhaustion overtakes him. He takes a nap and then does it all again. Alone, desperate and in pain, Coler's luck takes a turn.

His disappearance has been noticed. On Sunday afternoon when

friends back home worry about his absent phone call, wardens in Jasper, Yoho, and Kootenay National Parks are alerted. A search is initiated and the vehicle that brought the two climbing partners and best friends to the mountain is found. Wardens search three mountains in the area by helicopter. When they get to the south side of Mount Deltaform, they don't see Coler initially. But he sure sees them.

Waving pieces of clothing, the fallen climber attracts the attention of the men piloting the machine. As it comes toward him, he has cause to be excited. He sees a man wearing a jacket that looks like Charlie's. He gives his friend and the flight crew a big thumbs-up. As soon as they land, however, Coler makes the bittersweet realization that the man wearing the jacket is not Charlie, but a park warden.

When the helicopter touches down and the wardens tell him of Charlie's death, Coler's feeling of being lost in the Kootenay wilderness is replaced with despair. In all, he lay exposed on the mountain for three nights and four days.