

NOTE: Don Stockard shared the following account of Dennis Hitt's fatal climbing accident.

The Accident

The accident occurred July 1, 1963 on an attempted ascent of Mt. Alice, across the bay from Seward. There were five members of the party:

Vin Hoeman: An experienced climber who had climbed extensively throughout North America. He died in an avalanche on Dhaulagiri in the Himalayas in 1969.

Dave Johnston: Also an experienced mountaineer who frequently climbed with Vin.

Don Stockard: Resident of Seward. His father Paul owned and operated Seward Drug. He had been on only a couple of climbs.

Mike Campbell: A college friend of Don's, visiting for the summer. No climbing experience.

Dennis Hitt: Resident of Seward. His parents Vance and Amy owned and operated the Alaska Shop. Had just graduated from high school. He had scrambled up peaks for many years, but this was his first "official" climb.

Vin and Dave had come down from Anchorage the day before. They, Mike and Don joined Dennis for the evening. Dennis always cleaned the Alaska Shop after it closed. The four helped and he treated them to ice cream at the fountain. From there they went to his place and listened to music — Joan Baez mainly — and talked. Being included in the group was important for Dennis. At 18 he was the youngest. Although the age difference was not that great (Vin was the oldest at 26 and Don was only 20), they were important years. Years that included travel, college and climbing peaks with exotic names. Dennis would be starting college in the fall and the climb was a step toward his new life.

Permission to join the climb had not come easily. His parents, especially his mother, were reluctant to let him climb and had refused previous requests to join Don on local climbs. His mother was out of town, she was to return the day of the climb, and Dennis talked his father into letting him go.

The five left at about one the next morning, drove around the end of Resurrection Bay, and parked at the base of Mt. Alice. It was a clear day and pleasantly cool. As is typical for mountains in the area, there is a dense spruce forest followed by an equally dense band of alders. Dennis had run a trap line on the base of Mt. Alice and knew of some abandoned trails which helped on the lower sections.

They finally broke out of the brush onto an alpine meadow. Some mist floated across, reducing visibility to no more than 50 feet. A herd of mountain goats trotted through the mist. The goats were not particularly interested in the climbers, giving them no more than a passing glance. The five soon climbed above the mist and onto the south rim of the cirque (a bowl-shaped, amphitheater-like depressions that glaciers carve into mountains). It was a spectacular view. The cirque was entirely filled with mist, which boiled up as if from a giant cauldron. They spent several minutes admiring the view before moving on.



From left to right: Dennis Hitt, Vin Hoeman, Mike Campbell and Don Stockard. Photo by Dave Johnston

To reach the summit pyramid they had to traverse the crest of the cirque. Although it was snow covered with numerous rock towers, it was broad enough so that the towers could be easily circumvented. There was no technical climbing involved. After about half an hour they arrived at the base of the summit pyramid, where they had lunch.

The summit pyramid looked to be more of a scramble than a climb. They did have a rope and Vin had technical rock-climbing gear if needed. Just before starting, Don asked Dennis if he would like to rope up. He refused. Don realized he had phrased the question wrong, putting the onus of asking for the rope on Dennis. Don thought of rephrasing the question, but Vin started and he let it drop.

Vin led, Dave was second, Mike followed him, Don was next, and Dennis, last. Although the climbing was easy, the rock was shattered, typical for the Kenai range. Don pulled off a couple of pieces of loose rock and said to Dennis, "This mountain is falling apart."

Dennis laughed and said, "Yeah."

Don moved up and heard some more rock being pulled away. He glanced over his shoulder and froze. Dennis was pirouetted in midair, lying on his side with his arms extended over his head. There were several light brown blurs, which Don later realized were rocks. Dennis slammed against a rock tower, fell past it, and vanished from sight.

"Dennis is falling!" Don yelled.

Vin and Dave immediately started to descend, telling Mike and Don to stay where they were. They followed the fall line down a steep snow slope and were soon out of sight. They found Dennis in the bergschrund (the crevasse at the top of a mountain glacier where the ice pulls away from the rock). It was not deep and they were able to get him to a shelf on the lip of the bergschrund. Dennis was unconscious but still breathing. Vin sent Dave down the mountain to get help. He then returned to where Mike and Don waited.

Once the initial shock ebbed for Mike and Don, the wait became interminable. They spoke little. A breeze they had not noticed while climbing suddenly felt chilly. Finally, they heard Vin returning. As soon as he was in sight, they asked how Dennis was and Vin told them the situation. The three roped and

descended to the bergschrund. Although Dennis was pale, bruised, and there was some blood in his hair, there was no obvious major wound and he was breathing. There was no sign of Dave. He had already crossed the glacier and was on the lower slopes.

The three unroped and sat down beside Dennis to wait. It was early afternoon. Don had glanced at his watch a few minutes before Dennis fell. It had been one o'clock (AST, Alaska was not on daylight savings time in those days). They did keep a lookout for falling rocks. Dennis' breathing was labored and then it stopped.

“Vin!” Don said. “Dennis stopped breathing!”

“Yeah.”

“We've got to start artificial respiration!”

“Yeah.”

No one moved, so Don jumped up, knelt beside Dennis, and started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Something was wrong. Dennis' chest was not moving. By then, Vin and Mike were beside Don. He tried again.

“The air's going through his skull,” Vin said. “It's fractured.”

Vin put his hands on Dennis' head and applied pressure. The next breath caused Dennis' chest to rise. Mike got some gauze pads from the first aid kit and placed them on Dennis' head. They rotated tasks — one administered artificial respiration, another put pressure on Dennis' head, and the third kept a lookout for falling rocks. Several came uncomfortably close. Only once was the routine broken as they dove into the bergschrund for cover as some rocks flew directly at them.

Time froze and the universe collapsed to a few square feet on the lip of the bergschrund. Nothing else mattered. Everything was focused on the grim task. Force breath in....Gulp air....Force breath in....Gulp air....Ignore the taste of blood....Ignore the sound of falling rocks....Ignore the blood soaking through the compresses....Keep the air going in. So it went for hours. Eventually rigor set in and all signs of life had ceased.

“It's no use,” Vin said. “He's gone.”

Don gave several last breaths and rocked back on his heels. Rage, anguish, and disbelief competed for attention. They surfaced as a strangled sob.

“I'm sorry Denny” he said.

No one else spoke for several moments.

Vin finally stood up. “We'd better get him down where it'll be easier to evacuate him.”

They tied Dennis to the rope and lowered him down the head of the glacier to the cirque floor and carried him to the meadow.

Dave had reached Seward and notified the authorities. A military helicopter was dispatched from Anchorage. It had difficulty landing as the mist was closing in. Once it did land, they put Dennis in a body bag and flew to Seward, landing at the airport. A number of townspeople were there. It was evening and given his exhaustion and residual shock, Don barely recognized them. As they removed Dennis' body from the chopper, Don stepped forward to help. They shoved him aside. A blind rage swept over him. *How dare they!* he thought. *Where were they during those hours on the mountain!* And then his rage faded into the exhaustion.

The Aftermath

It wasn't long after the four had return to the home of Don's parents that the phone rang. It was Vance Hitt, Dennis' father. He wanted to see Don. Although Vance lived just across the street and around the corner, it was one of the longest walks Don ever made. Amy Hitt, Dennis' mother, and a longtime employee of the Alaska Shop were in the front room crying. Dr. Gentles was preparing to give them sedative injections. He greeted Don cheerfully. Vance, in tears as well, led Don to another room. He wanted to know how Denis had died. After Don related the sequence of events, Vance said, "I want you to know that I do not hold you in any way responsible for Dennis' death."

Given the circumstances, it was a statement of amazing magnanimity. Don, in tears as well, thanked him and asked if there was anything he could do.

Vance shook his head. "Thanks, but we'll just tough it out."

Don offered his condolences once again and left.

The funeral was held several days later. Vin and Dave had already returned to Anchorage. Mike and Don attended. The church was packed. Vance and Amy asked Don to sit with the family during the service and then drive them to the cemetery.

The media noted the accident. Articles appeared in the Anchorage papers. The accounts are reasonably accurate. The site of the accident indicated on a photo in the *Anchorage Daily News* is wrong. The picture is shown below with the correction.



The Mt. Marathon Race was only three days after the accident. Dennis was the captain of the Seward Team. Mike and Don, who was also the race chairman, were running for the Seward Team. Vin and Dave were scheduled to run on the Mountaineering Club of Alaska Team. But after the accident, Dave decided to run with the Seward team as a tribute to Dennis. Vin chose not to compete.

The U.S. Army Biathlon Team dominated the race in those days. It was coached by Sven Johansson, who had won numerous Mt. Marathon races and was the current record holder. To give others a chance for recognition, trophies were given for the top finishers, military and civilian.



The Seward Team. Back row, from left: Butch Broughton, Dean Rickerson. Jesse Lanman and Dennis Hitt, captain. Front row, from left: Earl Snyder, Don Stockard. Not pictured: Mike Campbell.

There were about 50 runners (a record at that time). Karl Bohlin of the biathlon team set a new record and Jane Trigg from the Jesse Lee Home was the first woman to ever finish the race.

The Seward Team won the civilian team trophy. The top finishers for the team were Dean “Rick” Rickerson, a former army biathlon team member, and Mike Campbell, who held the record for the cross-country course at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) at the time.

Don accepted the trophy for the team, saying, “I accept this trophy on behalf of our team captain, Dennis Hitt.”

The team gave the trophy to Vance and Amy Hitt, who frequently displayed it in the window of the Alaska Shop.



Looking south on Fourth Avenue, start of the 1963 Mt. Marathon Race



On the mountain. Dave Johnston at lower left and Don Stockard at right. Third runner unidentified.

The Plaque

Vance had a plaque made to be placed on the mountain where Dennis fell. He wanted to be there when it was placed. Don was reluctant to take Vance to the site without another climber. Don was not an experienced rock climber at the time and did not have the necessary gear for adequate protection. Vin and Dave left immediately after the race to climb Denali and there were no other climbers available. It never worked out to have an experienced climber in Seward when the weather was good to place the plaque. As a result, it was never done.

