

# As alpine glaciers melt, the corpses of long-lost climbers are being discovered in the ice

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In late June, as a group of mountaineers descended a treacherous glacier high in the Peruvian Andes, they spotted a dark, out-of-place lump resting on the blinding white snow.

When they approached, they realized it wasn't a rock, as they had initially assumed.

It was a corpse.

When they got a little closer, they could tell from the out-of-date clothes and the condition of the skin that the dead man had been there for a very long time. A miraculously well-preserved California driver's license in the man's pocket identified him as Bill Stampfl, a mountaineer from Chino who had been buried by an avalanche in 2002.

Avalanches begin as loose, flowing rivers of ice and snow that sweep their victims off their feet and wash them down the mountain. When the frozen debris stops, it quickly solidifies into something like a concrete tomb.

But in recent years, as the planet has warmed and ice has melted at an alarming rate, receding glaciers on the upper reaches of many of the world's most celebrated and deadly peaks have begun surrendering the bodies of long-lost mountaineers.

It's a blessing and a relief for grieving families who crave closure, but it creates a grim chore for [public officials](#) whose job it is to respectfully remove the remains.

Last year, on the heels of a heat wave that triggered the fastest loss of glacial ice in Swiss history, the boot of a German climber who disappeared in 1986 began poking out of a well-traveled glacier near the mountain town of Zermatt, not far from the Matterhorn.

In the Himalayas, where hundreds of adventurers have perished on the slopes of Mount Everest since the 1920s, Nepali officials have been forced to launch risky, arduous expeditions to retrieve the recently revealed—and rapidly thawing—corpses.

"Because of [global warming](#), the [ice sheet](#) and glaciers are fast melting

and the dead bodies that remained buried all these years are now becoming exposed," Ang Tshering Sherpa, former president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, told the BBC in 2019.

And now, a similarly gruesome scenario has played out on the slopes of 22,000-foot Huascarán, Peru's highest mountain.

The warming planet is "definitely the reason we found Bill," said Ryan Cooper, a personal trainer from Las Vegas who was among the group of climbers who discovered Stampfl's body a few weeks ago.

When Stampfl and two climbing partners disappeared in 2002, rescuers went looking for them. They found one body, that of Steve Erskine, but Matthew Richardson and Stampfl could not be located.

"If Bill had been on top of the ice they would have found him, but he was buried back then," Cooper said in an interview.

A lot has changed in 22 years.

Huascarán is the highest point, and crown jewel, of the Cordillera Blanca, a region of breathtaking natural beauty that's home to a dozen peaks higher than 20,000 feet and hundreds of alpine glaciers.

These ancient, frozen reservoirs supply irrigation and hydroelectric power to much of Peru. But, as with glaciers everywhere on the planet as temperatures have risen, those in the Cordillera Blanca have lost significant mass, as much as 27% in the last five decades, according to official estimates.

Cooper said he didn't understand the extent and speed of the changes underway until days before his guided climb was supposed to begin. He and his brother, Wes Warne, were hanging out in the Peruvian mountain

town of Huaraz, listening in as other climbers and guides compared notes.

They heard the glaciers were melting so fast that previously manageable crevasses—cracks caused by natural movement of the ice—had turned into deep, yawning chasms up to 60 feet wide that could swallow an entire team of climbers.

And they heard that many guides had begun steering their clients to more stable summits, because conditions on Huascarán had become so dicey.

Nevertheless, Cooper's team decided to give their planned route a try.

The five days they spent on the glaciers were tense, Cooper said, an up-close look at the chaos warmer-than-expected temperatures can cause.

"You're just hearing avalanches, you're hearing rock fall, you're hearing ice fall all around you," Cooper said. "I've never been on a mountain that was so active."

Eventually, the guides decided not to push for the summit, Cooper said. Instead, they led the group down an older, less traveled route that had been the standard track "back in the day," he said, before shifting terrain prompted climbers to start taking a different approach.

That's where they came upon Stampfl's body, at about 17,000 feet, resting alone, undisturbed and almost completely exposed.

In other cases, when just part of a body is sticking out of the ice, excavation can be a grueling ordeal. Rescuers use shovels, axes, boiling water—anything to help coax and pry remains free.

As soon as they discovered Stampfl was American, Cooper said, he and

his brother set aside their frustrations about not making the summit. They now had a much higher goal—getting Bill home.

Once they had climbed down far enough to have cellphone reception, a flurry of text messages began, and Cooper's wife joined the search for Stampfl's family.

Before long, Cooper found himself on the phone with Joseph Stampfl, Bill's son.

"I didn't know what to say, exactly, I'm not a grief counselor," Cooper said in the interview. So he kept it simple, the way he'd want his own family to hear such news.

"Hi, my name is Ryan," he said. "I'm in Peru. I found your dad."

Even though Stampfl's body was relatively easy to free from the ice and lift onto the stretcher, it still took a team of 13—five members of an elite police unit and eight mountain guides hired by the family—to safely carry his remains down the steep slopes.

The group was amazed by how well the ice had preserved Stampfl's belongings, Cooper said. His clothes, his sunglasses and his camera with a roll of film still inside. Even a pair of \$20 bills in his pocket were decomposing but recognizable.

For Stampfl's family in California, news of his discovery after 22 years came as a shock.

"It really took a few minutes to just, actually, process what I was hearing," daughter Jennifer Stampfl said in an interview.

She and the rest of the family had no idea what to do next. The sudden

need to retrieve a long-lost loved one's body from a towering mountain in Peru is not a problem most people face every day.

At first, she assumed the U.S. Embassy would be helpful, but it just provided "a list of funeral homes and basically said, 'Good luck,'" Jennifer said.

So the job of finding and hiring trustworthy mountain guides and sending them to the exact spot fell upon the family. Jennifer said she felt woefully unprepared—the family didn't even have precise coordinates to locate Stampfl's body—and she spent a few days haunted by the possibility of losing her dad for a second time.

The mission was a success, however, and her dad's remains arrived Friday morning in Lima, where they will soon be cremated and flown back to California.

Stampfl, who was 58 when he died, began his love affair with mountains like so many Southern Californians do, by climbing Mount Baldy, his family told the Los Angeles Times in 2002, shortly after he disappeared.

He used the 10,000-foot summit as a training ground for progressively higher peaks, including Mount Shasta, Mount Rainier, Kilimanjaro and Denali.

He and his ill-fated partners also trained on Mount Baldy for their 2002 trip to Huascarán.

When Stampfl's ashes arrive home, the family plans to sprinkle some of them on Baldy's summit, near an existing plaque commemorating him, Erskine and Richardson.

They've invited Cooper to join them for the ceremony.

"I will 100% be there," Cooper said.

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