

Alaska trip ends in tragedy for Montesano men

Local News

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ANCHORAGE, AK (AP) - Three old friends from Montesano High School were on a fishing and camping trip in Alaska when high winds and seas dumped them into the water off Baranof Island. Only one made it to shore. The Associated Press reports after overshooting their destination on Southeast Alaska's Baranof Island, three friends in the borrowed aluminum fishing boat turned around and realized they were facing strong winds and big waves. They gunned it for shore — to no avail. The water swamped the 24-foot boat in an ordeal that apparently left just one of them alive, the Anchorage Daily News reported. Dennis Monroe, 46, and Fred Swenson, both of Montesano, Grays Harbor County, were on a fishing and camping trip with John Reid, of Sitka, Alaska, on Thursday evening. They had planned to meet up with three other men about 15 miles from Sitka, on their way to Baranof Island's southern tip. They missed the rendezvous spot, said Alaska State Troopers spokeswoman Beth Ipsen. When they aimed for shore, the boat swamped 200 yards out. The three, all wearing life jackets, managed to climb into a small raft, but the waves tossed them out. Monroe and Swenson made it to a rock about halfway to land, where they could see Reid struggling in the water before being swept out of sight, Ipsen said. The rising tide forced them from the rock, and only Monroe made it to shore. "When he turned around, he saw Fred," Ipsen said. "And then it's dark, and he didn't see him anymore."

Monroe spent a cold night clad only in a tank top, jeans and his life jacket, Ipsen said. The next day, he found a reflective fishing lure and used it to signal for help. He was picked up by a fishing boat, the Otter, and taken to Sitka. The Coast Guard, Canadian officials and volunteer boats searched for the missing men. One boat Saturday found Reid's body, which was retrieved by a Coast Guard helicopter. Searchers were unable to find Swenson before calling off the mission Saturday night. "Suspending a case is one of the hardest decisions that we as search and rescuers have to make, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families," Scott Giard, a command duty officer with Coast Guard Sector Juneau, said in a news release. "We appreciate the support of our partner agencies and good Samaritans to put as many resources on scene as possible and maximize our chances of locating these boaters." The Anchorage Daily News reached Monroe at his Sitka hotel room. "I really don't want to talk about it while I'm here," Monroe said. "It's pretty messed up right now." He and Swenson had flown to Alaska on Thursday morning, along with a third man from Washington, Tim Decker. The men were friends from their days at Montesano High School, said Ken Decker, Tim's father. In Sitka, they met Reid, 44, another classmate who had moved to the town 15 years ago and worked as a commercial fisherman. "They go way back a long ways," Ken Decker told the newspaper. "(Reid) lives there in Sitka. The others go up occasionally to visit and fish, and just do recreational things." Kathleen Swenson, Fred's wife, said Saturday she was planning to stay in Washington with her two sons and wait for more news of her missing husband. "We've got a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old, little boys. I've got to be (at home)," she said.