

## UNITED STATES

### SLIP ON SNOW

#### Alaska, Mount McKinley

On February 2, 1983, the four members of the Denali Winter Expedition, Robert Frank (38), Charles Sassara (26), Steve Teller (24), and Chris Hraback (27) flew to the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. They planned on climbing a new route on Mount McKinley, a 1500-meter couloir due west of the West Rib route. It took about a week to ferry loads to the base camp at 2850 meters on the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. From this camp they decided that the planned route didn't look good, so they changed to the West Rib route. By February 28, they were established at the 3300-meter camp below the start of the West Rib. They spent time acclimatizing at this camp, leaving early in the morning on March 4 with eight days of food and fuel. They planned on climbing and descending the entire West Rib route. However, they made slow progress due to hard ice conditions in the couloir and poor visibility. They climbed to about the 3750-meter level and had to cut ledges for their tents due to the onset of darkness.

On March 5, they continued up to the normal camp at 3900 meters, where they spent the next couple of days resting. The temperature was  $-40$  to  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Everyone was feeling good, and no one had altitude problems. On March 8, they moved up to the camp at 4500 meters, going without ropes most of the way. Everyone was still feeling good. On March 9, they moved toward their high camp. They were ascending the rock rib when the wind picked up and started blowing 45 knots out of the northwest. This forced them to drop onto the east side of the Rib in order to get out of the wind. They climbed to about 5100 meters at the base of the couloir. Here they hacked out two tent platforms and made camp. This day was extremely exhausting and everyone had signs of altitude problems. They spent the following day resting at this camp.

Early in the morning on March 11 (0300 hours), there were light winds and clear skies. Hraback took off first followed by Sassara a little later, and Robert Frank last. Teller felt sick and decided to stay in camp. Hraback climbed to about 5550 meters before turning back due to exhaustion. Sassara and Frank made it to the top of the Rib (5820 meters) by about 1000. Here they stopped to rest before continuing to the summit.

By 1100, Sassara and Frank had reached the summit; they called home on their radio, then started back down. They were both fatigued and lethargic by the time they made it to the top of the West Rib. They started downclimbing the rib by 1230, facing into the 40- to 50-degree slope. The conditions were extremely variable with hard ice, soft corn snow, wind crust and hard snow. About 1500 meters below the ridge (5670 meters), Frank was descending about 5–7 meters above Sassara. They had both been unroped for the entire day. Suddenly Sassara heard Frank yell, "Falling." Sassara looked up just as Frank slid into him and knocked him off the slope. Sassara immediately tried to self-arrest and stopped about 30 meters down the slope. After he regained his stance and composure he looked for Frank. About 400 meters down toward the couloir, Frank was falling head over heels, with pieces

of his equipment being discarded. Sassara descended the route of Frank's fall finding blood, a camera bag, a glove and about three or four pieces of bone with flesh attached. Sassara took a large piece (4–5 cm) and brought it down with him. He slowly made it back to the 5100-meter camp by 1530. He told the others what had happened and that he was sure Frank was dead. Teller mentioned he thought he heard something come down the couloir about 1300. Looking about 60 meters across camp, they found evidence of blood. The following day, the weather was poor, so they spent another night at 5100 meters.

They began descending the West Rib in good clear weather on March 13. They found the route of Frank's fall but were unable to descend that way. They made it down to their 4650-meter camp that night. The next day they moved toward their 3900-meter camp. They tried to get back onto Frank's fall line, and about 4350 meters, Hraback found Frank's ice ax and blue parka. Hraback did a search, and the three climbers speculated that Frank's body was in a crevasse about the 4200-meter level. They then made it back to their 3900-meter camp.

They were up early on March 15 and downclimbed two pitches of the couloir, then did 17 rappels using new screws, some pitons and slings around exposed rocks. They started at 0900 and reached their 3300-meter camp around 1700. The next day they went to their 2850-meter base camp. It took two days from here to reach the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. On March 19, Cliff Hudson flew in at noon and picked Sassara up, while Hraback and Teller went and got two sleds full of gear. They were picked up around 1500. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

### **Analysis**

Under favorable weather (summer) and slope conditions, the use of a climbing rope by experienced climbers would probably not be considered. Under the conditions described, it should be considered. (Source: J. Williamson)

## **PULMONARY EDEMA, PARTY SEPARATED, IMPROPER MEDICATION Alaska, Mount McKinley**

At 0930 on April 24, 1983, Manfred Kessler (38), Wilfred Stelzhammer and Gebhard Fritz (an Austrian expedition) were flown onto the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier to climb the West Buttress of Mount McKinley. They left immediately and camped at 2670 meters at 1830.

On April 25, they climbed quickly and stopped at 3720 meters by 1600. Both Kessler and Stelzhammer were exhausted and threw up. On the morning of April 26, Stelzhammer still felt bad, while Kessler had improved. At 1200 they moved to 3950 meters and camped in the bergschrund to get out of the wind. By evening they all felt fine. On April 27, they proceeded to 4300 meters and set up camp. At 1000 on April 28, Carl Merritt and Brian Okonek, who were with the High Latitude Medical Research Group, examined Kessler and found his pulse to be 85. Kessler said his condition had regressed since the previous evening. Merritt gave Kessler fluids. At 1630, Kessler's pulse was 115. Merritt listened to Kessler's lungs but could not detect rales or gurgling. Merritt recommended immediate descent. At 1700, Kessler, Fritz and Stelzhammer started down. Kessler had a bad headache, shortness of breath and was coughing up pink, frothy sputum. He also found it hard to keep