

FALL ON SNOW—SKIING

British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains, North Alberta Peak

On August 23, 1986, a party of four experienced ski mountaineers was descending from North Alberta peak, altitude 2932 meters, 25 kilometers east of Revelstoke. They were on Nordic mountain skis. At an altitude of 2650 meters, one of the skiers overbalanced while attempting a turn on the steep hard snow. The fall resulted in a rapid slide into large boulders. The victim suffered deep, massive hematoma to the left thigh and feelings of weakness and nausea. One member of the party stayed with the victim while the other two went for help. (Source: E. Dafoe, Mount Revelstoke/Glacier National Park)

Analysis

The skiers had been off skis since April, and were skiing on the hard snow of late summer. The injury resulted from attempting a turn on steep terrain close to rocks. (Source: E. Dafoe, Mount Revelstoke/Glacier National Park)

STRANDED, ILLNESS, EXCEEDING ABILITIES, WEATHER

British Columbia, Rocky Mountains, Mount Robson

On August 26, 1986, a party of four climbers camped at Berg Lake, on their way to Mount Robson (3954 meters, the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies). The next day they ascended the Tumbling Glacier to the base of the North Face. On August 28, they ascended the steep and long ice wall of the North Face to about 25 meters below the summit ridge. During the course of the day, the physical condition of one of the climbers deteriorated to the point that he was too weak to climb safely. The climbers bivouacked in a crevasse which broke the ice face at that location.

On August 29, weather conditions were poor and the sick climber's physical condition remained poor. The climbers stayed in the bivouac.

On August 30, two of the party attempted to complete the climb in good weather in order to descend on a less difficult route to get help. However, they did not complete the last pitch, deciding that ice conditions were too poor for protection to be placed adequately. The climbing party remained in the bivouac another night.

On August 31, they resigned themselves to the fact that they would have to be rescued. No attempts were made to ascend or descend. Food supplies, strictly rationed to one meal a day, had been completely exhausted. They spotted two climbers at the base of the North Face and called for help. At 1300 two climbers started to descend from the Robson-Helmet Col. An hour later, they met a search helicopter that was investigating the now overdue climbers, and a full search and rescue operation was initiated. Warden Service mountain rescue teams came from Jasper and Banff National Parks.

In good weather, rescuers could have been slung to and from the scene on a line fixed beneath a helicopter. Unfortunately, the weather was deteriorating, and the upper half of Mount Robson was encased in cloud. The rescue coordinator faced the serious prospect of committing ground teams to reach the long overdue climbers.

Late that afternoon, a brief break in the summit cloud cap allowed the helicopter to sling three Banff wardens and their equipment onto the southwest face of the mountain. In poor visibility, and fading light, the team made surprisingly swift progress in the complex route that none of them had climbed before. The rescue coordinator, who

knew that mountain better than anyone from his more than 15 attempts on it, provided directions over the radio as they climbed up through a maze of crevasses and ice gargoyles. At 2100, in total darkness, they reached the summit, where they spent the night in a snow cave.

Early the next morning, the three rescuers crawled out of their comfortable shelter into full storm conditions, with visibility under 30 meters. They contacted the stranded climbers at 0830, and lowered ropes to them from the summit ridge. Exhausted from lack of food and exposure, the stranded climbers struggled one by one to the rescue team. Two of them were forced to jettison their packs in order to have the strength to get up and finally off the North Face. All seven climbers then went up the summit ridge and took shelter in the summit snow cave, where the rescued climbers quickly devoured some food and a hot drink.

Even through everyone was safe for the moment, the situation was still serious, with a forecast of poor weather for several days. Waiting for good weather and the helicopter was not a pleasant option. On the other hand, descending from the summit of Mount Robson in storm conditions is no easy task even when everyone is fit. Nevertheless, the rescuers decided to try, and began a careful descent about noon.

Meanwhile, a support team of four was flown into a climbing hut at 2450 meters. They climbed up into the clouds with ropes and hardware to prepare the lower portion of the rescuers' descent route with markers and fixed lines.

Weather and visibility became worse for the summit team, and at 1650, they took shelter in a bridged-over crevasse at 3875 meters. Inside, shimmering stalactites of blue ice suggested the name "ice palace." Shortly before dark, the mountain cloud cap cleared, and a Parks Canada rescue Jet Ranger III reached the summit team. In spite of buffeting by strong turbulent winds, the pilot managed to fly five of the seven men off the mountain in three sling loads. Darkness and the returning cloud cover terminated the evacuation, leaving two rescuers in the ice palace. Meanwhile, two support climbers had established a tent camp in howling winds and darkness 300 meters below.

The morning of September 2, the storm continued. Unstable new snow prevented descent from the ice palace, but the two support climbers moved up to the tent camp with more supplies. In the afternoon, the weather improved enough that the summit team descended through the gargoyles and the support team moved up to meet them. At 1755 all four reached the tent, and spent the night there.

Finally, on September 3, in continuing poor weather, they descended on the prepared route to the hut, below the cloud cover, and were evacuated by helicopter.

A footnote to the story: During the helicopter evacuation at the ice palace, two other climbers were spotted near the summit. They had ascended the Wishbone Arete, and were having difficulty finding their way down in the storm. The rescue team left the stocked tent camp in place, and radioed instructions to them for their descent. (Source: Banff and Jasper National Park Warden Services)

Analysis

All members of the climbing team were experienced, and all had completed advanced alpine routes in the Rocky Mountains. Equipment, clothing, and provisions were adequate. However, the route by which they chose to climb Mount Robson proved to be more difficult than the party's overall ability. The difficulties increased when one team member experienced lung congestion, reducing his effectiveness as a climber.

It appears that the climbers would have perished if the rescue team had not been able to reach them. The rescue was performed on a major mountain plastered in snow and verglas during a storm. It was possible at least in part because the rescue teams had trained on the same mountain in 1983 and 1984. (Source: Banff and Jasper National Park Warden Services)

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, INEXPERIENCE
British Columbia, Rocky Mountains, Yoho National Park

On December 28, 1986, a climber was attempting to lead the first steep pitch on Massey Waterfall. He put in one ice screw part way up the pitch, and then decided to go for the top without putting in more protection. Just when he was going over the top, his crampons kicked out, his ice tools released, and he fell to the bottom. The rope pulled out the one ice screw. After the fall, he was lying unconscious at the bottom of the pitch. He had a fracture of the left humerus and multiple facial cuts but no back injury.

Park wardens were dispatched to the scene by skidoo, and a helicopter was called. The victim was stabilized, then slung out to a waiting ambulance. (Source: Yoho Park Warden Service)

CORNICE COLLAPSE, DESCENDING UNROPED
Yukon Territory, Saint Elias Range, Mount Logan

On April 29, 1986, a party of six was descending from 5200 meters on the East Ridge of Mount Logan. They had spent 18 days on the mountain and had climbed the peak. It was cloudy, but visibility was good. About 1600, at an elevation of 3050 meters, they stopped for a break and unroped, since the terrain was becoming easier, and the ridge was relatively wide at that point. Two of the climbers started to descend again, with the others intending to follow after about five minutes. The two were wearing crampons and carrying ice axes, but were still unroped.

The climber in front (22) drifted toward the left (north) side of the ridge. A cornice broke under his feet, and he fell out of sight just centimeters beyond the fracture line. The remaining climbers were able to see him later after continuing farther down the ridge. He had fallen about 600 meters, and there was no indication that he was alive.

They climbed down to the base of the mountain, where two members of the group skied back up the alley to check on the fallen climber. They found that he was dead, and put some of his gear into his pack, which they found nearby. The expedition radio was in base camp, and they reported the accident when they reached it next afternoon. The victim's body was evacuated by helicopter on May 1. (Source: Lloyd Freese, Kluane National Park, and Max Lautenbacher, Smithers, B.C.)

Analysis

The climbers were aware of the cornice, and could see approximately where it was, but the climber in front somehow wandered a little too far onto it. (Source: Lloyd Freese, Kluane National Park, and Max Lautenbacher, Smithers, B.C.)