

About 500 meters above the glacier at 0500, McGivern was 15 meters below a large snow block below a serac while Sassara was about 60 meters below the block. Both were climbing tied into a double rope 50 meters apart. Suddenly the snow block collapsed, sending ice and snow over the two climbers.

McGivern was carried about 30 meters and was on top of a meter of avalanche debris. He quickly untied to render assistance to Sassara who was five meters away. Sassara had the rope tied three times around his neck and was blue and not breathing. McGivern removed the rope and had to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in order to revive Sassara. Sassara remained unconscious for four hours with convulsions.

At 0900 Sassara started regaining consciousness and was starting to improve. By 1400 the pair started to slowly descend with Sassara feeling very weak and tenuous. They made it to Ruth Gorge by 1900. McGivern left Sassara in a bivy sack while he went five kilometers up the glacier to get their camp.

After a restful night the pair started up toward their original camp on June 5. Dick Stone from Talkeetna Air Taxi spotted McGivern waving and Sassara lying in the snow at 1130. Stone landed along with Lowell Thomas in another plane. Sassara was then flown out to Talkeetna where he was put on oxygen and then flown to Humana Hospital by Lowell Thomas, Jr.

Sassara was diagnosed as having a concussion, pulmonary edema (from the hypoxic state brought on by strangulation), and a lung infection. He was hospitalized overnight. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

Analysis

It is always a calculated risk when crossing under hanging pieces of ice and snow. In this case the timing was not on the climbers' side. McGivern responded quite rapidly which undoubtedly saved Sassara's life. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

FALL ON SNOW, LOOSE EQUIPMENT

Alaska, Mount McKinley

After acclimatizing at the 4300-meter camp on the West Buttress of Mount McKinley, Thomas Bohanon (31) and Richard Strong (28), members of the "Lean, Mean Cassin Machine," climbed to the 5000-meter level to establish a camp on the Messner Couloir. Strong, feeling the altitude, returned to the 4300-meter camp. At 0620 on June 7, Bohanon began a solo ascent for the summit.

The snow conditions in the Messner Couloir were unusually deep. After summiting, Bohanon was descending using the plunge step when at 5150 meters in the couloir, at 1700, he caught his cramponed foot on a pack strap. This immediately knocked him forward causing him to fall head over heels down the 35-to-45 degree slope. The fall continued for 450 meters until Bohanon miraculously came to rest about 275 meters below his camp in some soft snow.

Climbers at the medical camp quickly organized a ten-member ground team. The NPS in Talkeetna was notified at 1710 and did an overflight in a C-185 with Mountaineering Ranger Ralph Moore and pilot Jim Okonek of K2 Aviation with air drop

materials. By 1905 the ground team reached Bohanon. After a quick survey, he was diagnosed as having possible pelvic and thoracic spinal injuries. Bohanon was unable to walk and was lowered five 85-meter lengths down before being dragged back to the medical camp.

At 2135 Mountaineering Ranger Scott Gill and pilot Ron Smith landed in a Bell 412. Bohanon was evacuated and flown to Humana Hospital where he was diagnosed as having an avulsion fracture of his right hip (trochanter) along with multiple contusions. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

Analysis

Soloing is always a risky game. In this particular situation it could have either prevented the accident if there were two climbers paying close attention, or caused a double accident. Bohanon was extremely lucky that some people were watching his progress, and for the speed in which an evacuation took place. A 450-meter fall down the Messner Couloir, and a little more than three and a half hours later he was in a helicopter! Catching crampons on back straps and slings dangling from harnesses is not uncommon, but one must remember the consequences when on a steep slope. This particular accident had occurred earlier, but he could not pinpoint where the strap was that was catching his crampon. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

FROSTBITE, DEHYDRATION

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On June 16, 1987, Franziska Bracher (27) and Ivan Seeholzer, (24) from Switzerland, began their attempt for the summit from the 5200 meter camp on the West Buttress. Two other members of their party turned back because of the cold temperature that night. (It was -35°C on the summit.) Bracher and Seeholzer returned from the summit at 1000 the next morning, and Bracher stated she had not felt her toes for hours. Her feet were not intentionally thawed, but gauze was placed between her toes and she was given pain medication.

She walked and was lowered to the medical camp where she was treated. At this time I asked if Seeholzer had any frostbite and he said no. But when he took off his boots, several toes were deep purple. He was also treated. After some rest days, they descended to base camp and were flown to the hospital in Anchorage. Bracher lost only the tip of one toe. (Source: Ralph Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

Analysis

Bracher and Seeholzer neither ate enough nor drank enough on their summit day. Full overboots are much warmer than supergaiters with ensolite between the crampons and boots, and are recommended even during the warmer part of the climbing season to provide adequate protection against the cold, as low temperatures and high winds can occur at any time. The decision to continue for the top despite loss of feeling in their feet was not a good one. (Source: Ralph Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)