

Editor's Note: A similar case occurred to an individual from the Harvard Outing Club in August. The climber was carrying the overboots which would have prevented frostbite, but he didn't take the time to put them on.

LOSS OF CONTROL—VOLUNTARY GLISSADE, FULL PACK AND STEEP SLOPE

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On July 3, 1987, Piotr Jankowiak (35), of the four-man Polish Denali Expedition, fell almost 800 meters to his death while descending the Messner Couloir. Jankowiak and his partner Jezierski (29) had summited and descended to their 5725-meter camp when, after resting, they opted to descend the Messner to the 5200-meter level instead of ascending 60 meters to the ridge and descending via the West Buttress.

They decided to glissade the 30- to 40-degree gully. Snow conditions were soft and quite stable. Jankowiak was 50 meters in front. He hit a hard patch of snow or ice and lost control at the 5250-meter level and fell to the 4450-level.

His partner cut over to the West Buttress and ran down to the 4300-meter basin, met his partners, and with two Americans climbed up to Jankowiak, who had died from multiple trauma. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

Analysis

The pair felt confident in descending the steeper route versus climbing up and going down the West Buttress. The big mistake was obviously glissading down a steep slope with variable snow conditions with a full pack, particularly with such a nasty runoff. Roped versus unroped is always a big dilemma. In this case with glissading it would most likely have cost them both their lives. (Source: Scott Gill, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

AVALANCHE, POOR POSITION, ATTEMPTING TO ASCEND TOO FAST

Alaska, Mount McKinley

A Ranier Mountaineering, Inc., group began a guided ascent of the West Buttress on July 1, 1987. On July 7, the group moved from the 3330-meter level to 3850 meters—below Windy Corner—in a whiteout. Their plan was to go around the corner to the 4250-meter camp, but one member was having altitude problems.

At 0530 on July 8, a slab avalanche released just below the bergschrund to the east of camp on the West Buttress proper. It was 20 meters wide and ran 100 meters, covering four of the five RMI tents with a meter of debris. The two guides were able to get out in one minute and dug out one other tent. The third tent's occupants dug themselves out. The occupants of the tent that had not been hit by the avalanche were not immediately aware that everyone else was buried, but once they investigated, they quickly began probing and digging. One of the occupants of the remaining tent took

a knife and cut a hole in the top of the tent, then thrust a hand up out of the snow which helped in his location.

The weather at this time was clear. It had been snowing the night before, but the gullies above where the slide occurred were blue ice and nothing was accumulating due to the steep angle. The snow was sliding down the gullies and accumulating below the bergschrund, the site of the eventual release.

The four tents struck by the avalanche were destroyed. The last person dug out was hypothermic and in shock from being buried for so long. Another had frostbite with small blebs on one finger from digging out people and gear. Several people in the group reported coughing up blood from the exertion of digging and bruised lungs from the debris. Two ice axes and one harness were lost; all other gear was found after extensive probing.

The guides located the stoves, rehydrated their clients, packed up, and left by noon. They moved down to base camp after picking up caches, arriving there at 0400 on July 9. (Source: Ralph Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

Analysis

The climb from 3330 to 4250 meters is too much for most groups to do in a day. Avalanches have hit parties camped in or near the basin in the past. A safer alternative is to camp in the bergschrund area below Windy Corner (which was completely filled in this year) or further west in the basin near where the icefall begins to drop down to the 3330-meter level. A big slide could completely sweep across this basin, so camping in the bergschrund or carving out a platform along the slope below Windy Corner is the best bet. (Source: Ralph Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

CLIMBING ALONE, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Alaska, Mount McKinley

Brian Hoover (26) registered with the Talkeetna Ranger Station on June 17, 1987, to solo climb both the southeast ridge of Mount Foraker and the Cassin Ridge on Mount McKinley. Mountaineering Rangers Scott Gill and Bob Seibert attempted to convince Hoover to try the standard West Buttress route since Hoover had limited mountaineering experience for the other more difficult routes. In addition, during the winter and spring of 1987, Hoover corresponded with Seibert about his climbing plans. Seibert attempted to dissuade Hoover. Clearly warned of the hazards involved in solo travel on large Alaska Range glaciers and of the difficult nature of the Cassin Ridge, Hoover insisted on continuing with his planned itinerary. He flew over into Kahiltna base camp with 30 days of food. There, he had a discussion with climbing guide Jon Waterman, who convinced Hoover to try the West Buttress of Mount McKinley and possibly the Cassin Ridge afterwards.

He climbed the West Buttress, reaching the summit on June 30 via the upper West Rib route. His primary intention was to make an ascent of the Cassin Ridge after this initial ascent of the mountain. On July 7 he departed up the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier (the approach to the Cassin Ridge) with about eight days of food. Hoover's registered due out date with the Park Service was July 20. Hoover hadn't