

## **WEATHER, FATIGUE, FAILURE TO FOLLOW ROUTE, FALL OR SLIP ON ROCK**

### **Washington, Mixup Peak**

On August 18, 1989, Tim Backman (30) and David Newton (36) ascended Mixup Peak in North Cascades National Park. They began the climb in fog from Gun Sight Notch. Off route, the 4th class climb became a 5th class climb. Finally finding the top, they summited at 1330, but unable to see more than 30 meters, soon became lost on the descent and rappelled into a gully on the southwest side of Mixup.

Continuing down the gully to the 1650-meter level, they encountered a seven meter dry waterfall and could not find a rappel anchor. Backman belayed Newton down and then followed, down climbing. Facing into the rock, Backman couldn't find a foothold and fell over backwards about 2.5 meters. He tumbled down the 45-degree incline for approximately eight meters. His pack and helmet protected him until his right foot slammed into a rock, which broke his ankle.

They spent the night together, and Newton left on August 19 at 0500 to summon help. Park Rangers were contacted and tried to approach Backman from above while teams from Skagit Mountain Rescue and Skagit ESAR tried to approach from below. All had difficulty determining where to search due to rain and fog. Evacuation was finally accomplished by helicopter the following day just before heavy wind and rain entered the area. (Source: Compiled from accounts by Tim Backman and Paul Williams, Seattle Mountain Rescue Council)

### **Analysis**

Poor visibility was the most important contributing cause. Even equipped with USGS map, route description, compass, and altimeter, we became lost on our descent. Two things could have been done to prevent the fall. First, just about where I fell there was a good crack that could have been used with chock and sling to aid the step. Second, my partner might have helped my descent from below with his hands and prevented the tumble down the gully. Neither of these thoughts occurred to me at the time. (Source: Tim Backman)

## **FALL INTO CREVASSE—SNOW BRIDGE COLLAPSE**

### **Washington, Mount Rainier**

On August 27, 1989, around 0830, Park Ranger Nina Burnell (26) and her climbing partner Mark Ross (28) were descending the Disappointment Cleaver Route from the summit of Mount Rainier when a snow bridge collapsed, pulling them both into the crevasse. (They were on a 23-meter rope, which was doubled, so there was about 12 meters between them.)

At 0800 Burnell had radioed down from the summit with weather information. Then they began their descent down the mountain. When they came to the junction of the route they had climbed up and the older route, they decided to descend the older route. At the 4100-meter level they came to a snow bridge at the base of a fixed rope. Ross belayed Burnell across the snow bridge and then followed. When Ross stepped onto the snow bridge, it collapsed, pulling Ross and Burnell in. Both climbers were covered by blocks of ice. Ross dug himself out and then he located Burnell and dug her out. They both climbed a ramp to the surface of the glacier 15 meters above.

Once out of the crevasse, they assessed their injuries. Burnell's right foot was hurting,

she had a laceration on the left side of her head, and lower back pain. Ross had sore ribs, but otherwise was all right. Ross climbed back down into the crevasse and retrieved the pack, which had the park service radio in it. At 0848 Ross radioed Paradise and reported the accident.

Burnell sustained a fractured ankle, a laceration on her head, and multiple contusions. Ross had no serious injuries. A helicopter evacuation was completed by 1530. (Source: George Olson, Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

### Analysis

We summited at 0715 and started down at 0800. We followed the wands down the direct route and reached a crevasse with a fixed line at 4000 meters about 0830. There was a large snow bridge across the crevasse. To cross, it was necessary to downclimb about 1.5 meters of vertical snow on the uphill side. One could then walk across the bridge to the other side. The fixed line was anchored more or less parallel to the crevasse on the uphill side by pickets and then dropped down the vertical pitch to the bridge where the end was anchored with another picket. It was useable as an aid on the vertical part. It did not extend across the snow bridge.

We discussed the crossing. There were two issues: the vertical pitch and the bridge. We assessed the safety of the bridge with this information: (1) three parties crossed it earlier; (2) the air temperature was still below freezing and the snow around us was solidly frozen; (3) the bridge was large and thick and looked well-anchored at both sides; (4) the crevasse was filled with snow about 15 meters down thus limiting a fall if one did occur.

The vertical pitch was easily protected by anchoring to the fixed line. I planned to belay Nina down the pitch. I did not need a belay because the climbing was well within my ability.

I have been climbing for 12 years. I have been an Air Force Pararescueman for several years, participating in 93 rescues in the Cascades. I have climbed a number of glaciated peaks including McKinley where I evacuated two sick climbers in the process. I instruct Air Force Snow and Ice Rescue School, one of which we just completed July 29, 1989. Based on my experience and the information at hand, I made the decision that we could safely cross this crevasse. I have climbed with Nina for three seasons and made many such decisions. Over that time she has come to trust my judgment. I assured her that this crossing was O.K. and she trusted me.

I attached my ice ax to the fixed line with a clove hitch and drove it all the way in. I then put Nina on belay by munter hitching the climbing rope on the shaft of my ax. I lowered Nina down the vertical pitch and continued to belay her across the bridge. She was just able to reach the other side before running out of rope.

I then removed the belay and free climbed down the vertical pitch. Nina continued to move back away from the edge of the crevasse as the rope allowed. As I stepped onto the bridge, it gave way. I fell to the snow below and snow and ice continued to come down on top of me. When it stopped, I was able to look up and see the top of the crevasse. The fixed line was dangling from the uphill side, but our rope was not above me where Nina had been. I began to cry out her name. She responded, but I could not see her because of the blocks of snow between us.

It took me several minutes to get free. She was disoriented and not sure what happened. She said her ankle hurt, but could walk. We immediately walked up a ramp out of the crevasse on the downhill side. We anchored ourselves to the snow with our

axes about ten meters away from the crevasse. I was afraid we were seriously injured and needed help as fast as possible. We needed the park radio in my pack, so I went back down the ramp and dug it out. From then on, we were in contact with park personnel via radio. (Source: Mark Ross)

### **INADEQUATE PROTECTION—RAPPEL FAILURE, ANCHOR SLING KNOT PARTED**

#### **Washington, Icicle Creek Canyon**

On August 28, 1989, Gretchen Glatte (23) fell about 20 meters, breaking her neck, elbow and both wrists, and collapsing a lung when the sling being used for an anchor to lower her parted. (Source: From a report by Richard Watson)

*(Editor's Note: This is the fifth report of this kind of accident for 1989: two in Canada, three in the United States—all narratives presented in this volume.)*

### **FALL OR SLIP ON ROCK, FALLING ROCK, FAILURE TO FOLLOW ROUTE**

#### **Washington, Mount Thompson**

On September 24, 1989, Roberta Mohrholz (32) and Jalen Johansen (32) set out on what was to be a training hike and easy scramble up Mount Thompson. Roberta had left a route map with her fiance, Dave Whalen. Both Roberta and Jay were in top physical condition and were using this outing to train for various marathons and triathlons they were involved in. Roberta was a veteran snow and ice climber but generally stayed away from rock climbing unless necessary. Though Jay had done a lot of hiking, he had no rock climbing experience.

They stopped for lunch at a place where they could see the face of Mount Thompson and discussed their route. The only nonclimbing route was the east ridge, which Roberta had outlined and left with Dave Whalen. For some reason, Roberta decided they could start slightly south of the east ridge, work their way up a steep gully and fracture system, and then intersect the east ridge farther up. She told Jay that it looked terraced enough to prevent much exposure.

As they began to climb, it became apparent that they had committed themselves to a face with serious exposure, but found that it was too steep to downclimb. They continued up and were very close to reaching the ridge, when Roberta came to a difficult move and waited for Jay to come up along side her. She told him to see if he could make the move and get above her. He was able to do so, but because of the slight overhang, he could not see her. She shouted that she would try to the left, and at this point Jay heard her scream. He shouted to her. She responded that she had only slipped a short way to a narrow ledge and was all right. Shortly after this, she screamed again, and fell from the ledge.

A witness watching from a ridge across the valley reported seeing a rock the size of a car falling with her. Jay made his way down the east ridge and circled around below where they had been climbing. He realized she had died instantly after falling 200 meters. He ran the 16 kilometers to Snoqualmie Pass and alerted the Forest Service. A helicopter was dispatched but did not locate the body until dark. Because of the rugged terrain, a search and rescue team was sent to bring the body out the next day. (Source: Pat Whalen)