

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION—FAILED TO CLIP IN TO ANCHOR

Alaska, Mount Wake, Denali National Park

On April 20, 1994, Michele Morseth, Todd McCann (26), and Walker Parke (36) flew into the Ruth Gorge. Their climbing objective was Mount Wake's North East Ridge. This route has technical mixed rock, snow, ice, and a long corniced ridge with steep steps along it. It is a difficult route that requires experience, proper planning, and commitment.

Todd McCann and Walker Parke, both from Girdwood, knew each other, and together organized the climb. Michele Morseth heard through a third party of McCann and Parke's plans to climb while she was in Talkeetna. Morseth asked if she could join them on the climb, and was accepted. Morseth had not climbed with either Parke or McCann before this time.

The party spent several days in the gorge familiarizing themselves with the route, objective hazards, and each other. Morseth felt that Parke and McCann didn't have that much experience.

Jack Tackle and Bill Belcourt, members of a separate expedition, had set up basecamp nearby. (Tackle and Belcourt were attempting The Shaft on Mount Johnson but abandoned that plan because of objective danger.) Tackle had been on the North East Ridge of Mount Wake several years before, and provided route information for the trio.

On April 22, the weather was clear. McCann and Parke made an exploratory trip on their route. Morseth did not accompany them due to illness. Parked logged in his journal the following:

"Todd and I went way up the couloir to an ice/rock snow ramp and accessed the snow fields up on this route. Steep and snowy with runouts of 1000+ vertical if the slope goes. But it's so steep that it must be stable. Right? Todd led a pitch on the snow and a shovel was needed to get down to good snow for the pickets. Well the snow seemed stable. We came back down and back to camp. Getting much colder and windy."

McCann and Parke went off route during the climb. The actual route ascended easier terrain in the couloir. This information was provided by Jack Tackle who had spoken to the group.

On April 23, Morseth, McCann, and Parke started their climb on Mount Wake. The following is excerpted from Parke's journal:

"We got packed and it started snowing so we waited. We hit the first technical pitch at 5:00 pm. We went all the way up the gully to mixed climbing to get out. It took 6 pitches to get out. We kept looking for some place to stop and bivouac. No way—up we go. We finally top out to a bivouac spot at 1:30 am. We dug a spot on a very exposed flat spot. Very tired. Went to sleep at 3:00 am."

The group exited the couloir onto a ridge top. They wallowed in deep snow on the ridge. Their camp on the ridge was at an approximate elevation of 6,800 feet.

On April 24, the group was divided on when to start. The following is excerpted from Parke's journal:

"...8:00 am. Heated discussion as to whether or not we should let the sun leave the slopes and cool down before we go. M. says go now, I say wait. Argument. Finally a big slide comes down our slope and discussion ends."

This was the last entry in Parke's journal. The three spent several hours talking, and taking in the views. Parke attempted to climb higher, became uncomfortable, and reversed down to the camp. Parke expressed that he didn't want to continue with the climb, and wanted to return home. The group decided for all to abandon the climb.

At 1500, Jack Tackle saw the group at their high camp from down in the gorge. They started their descent at 1530. They had completed two rappels from their camp when the fall occurred. McCann was first to descend on the second rappel. When he reached the end of the ropes, he elected to down climb 20 feet to set an anchor for the upcoming third rappel. McCann placed a picket and an ice screw within the 20 foot distance. It is unclear how McCann used this protection during the down climb. Morseth was second to rappel and down climbed the 20 feet to the other side of the couloir across from McCann. Morseth anchored herself to two pickets while McCann worked on constructing a rock anchor. Parke was last to rappel. Near the end of the ropes Parke stopped, and appeared to Morseth as if he was unclipping his descending device from the ropes. Parke was asked if he was comfortable with the situation and he indicated that he was all right. At this point Morseth thought that Parke lost his balance, which caused him to fall. An examination of Parke's harness and associated equipment indicated that Parke had unclipped his Figure Eight device from the rappel ropes and attached it to a gear loop on his harness.

Parke fell 20 feet into McCann, knocking McCann off his stance. McCann had set a good stopper, but had not anchored himself to it. Both Parke and McCann tumbled down the couloir and out of sight from Morseth.

Morseth climbed back up to the ropes, and retrieved them. Morseth used the stopper McCann placed as an anchor to start a series of rappels. It ended up taking three rappels and six hours for Morseth to eventually get herself back to basecamp.

At 1630, Tackle heard McCann yelling. Tackle and Belcourt, using binoculars, saw Parke lying face down without movement. Forty feet further down the cone, McCann was sitting up facing the gorge. Equipment was strewn along the cone. Tackle and Belcourt packed a first aid kit, radio, and rescue equipment. They reached McCann at 1730. McCann had severe impact injuries, including an open femur fracture, tibia/fibula fracture, contusions, lacerations about the head, and only knew his name and general location. McCann told Tackle and Belcourt that Parke was sleeping and that Morseth was alive. Belcourt examined Parke finding no pulse, and cold, pale skin. Morseth was not yet visible.

Tackle and Belcourt splinted McCann's leg and provided emergency care. They began evacuating McCann, stopping frequently to position him, which improved his breathing. Tackle, using a CB radio, tried unsuccessfully to contact aircraft in the vicinity. McCann lost consciousness and died between 1845 and 1930. Tackle and Belcourt returned to basecamp at 1930 with McCann's body.

Tackle and Belcourt returned to the scene at 2200, met Morseth descending, and assisted her back to basecamp.

Analysis

The accident involved decision making and perceptions of risk. Rappelling requires good anchors, and the reason for McCann down climbing 20 feet at the end of the rappel ropes may be because that is where the best anchor was located. McCann's other option would have been to ascend the ropes looking for a better anchor. The down climbing involved a judgment call and was a risk accepted by all three climbers.

McCann had not completed or clipped himself into the rock anchor he was constructing before the next climber began rappelling. Being unanchored in a couloir with people above is dangerous. Morseth's decision to anchor in safeguarded her during the rappelling sequence.

If McCann set an anchor within the 150 foot rappel, the rappellers would have been able to clip a daisy chain into the anchor while still on rappel, never being exposed to an unprotected fall. (Source: Kevin Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)