

ACUTE MOUNTAIN SICKNESS, MISCOMMUNICATION, INEXPERIENCE Washington, Mount Rainier

Mount Rainier communications received a radio call on May 21 from a team of three climber/researchers in the summit crater of Mount Rainier. The reporting party, Francois LeGuern leader of a French research team, indicated that one of his members was suffering from Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). LeGuern reported that Eric Bouvet, exhibited the signs and symptoms of vomiting, insomnia and general malaise with an increase in severity over the last 24 hours. Bouvet was part of a film crew documenting volcanic research.

LeGuern's team spent the previous four days on the summit conducting research and sleeping in the steam caves. During this time, a storm deposited a significant amount of snow on the upper mountain creating an increased avalanche danger. Due to the avalanche hazard and Bouvet's condition, it was decided to evacuate the team from the summit by helicopter.

Approximately 90 minutes after initial contact with LeGuern's team, NPS rangers Kirschner, Gauthier, Yelverton, and Carney were flown to the summit in a military Chinook helicopter. Bouvet was assisted from the research cave, across the crater and into the helicopter. Bouvet was then flown to Madigan Army hospital for evaluation and treatment.

Analysis

LeGuern's party was part of a larger 15 member research and film team, some of whom had limited climbing experience. The team had spent two days acclimatizing at 11,000 feet prior to ascending, but Bouvet still suffered from the effects of altitude on the summit, perhaps due to the extended time spent there. It was later determined that Bouvet felt sick prior to ascending but told no one because he thought it was due to the food he ate. Additionally, the snow storm had created an increased avalanche hazard, estimated at moderate to high, preventing the research team from safely descending on their own. Since AMS can lead to further complications and is considered life threatening if untreated, flying Bouvet during the break in the weather was the best option for his safety.

Climbers on Mount Rainier may feel the effects of altitude but extended acclimatization is generally not required. Most climbs take two days and climbers descend back to sea level before many of the serious symptoms arise. Acclimatization is very difficult because most climbers come from sea-level. Parties that expect to stay at altitude should have a systematic plan of acclimatization. Better communication among party members is stressed, especially with those less experienced who may confuse an upset stomach with AMS. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

STRANDED, INADEQUATE FOOD and FUEL Washington, Mount Rainier, Liberty Ridge

On June 15, two climbers called on a cell phone to the White River Ranger Station to report that they were pinned down in bad weather on Liberty Cap. Mike Catlett and Don Willcox had successfully climbed Liberty Ridge under favorable weather conditions but were caught in a lenticular cloud once they reached the summit. Unable to find the descent route due to reduced visibility, high winds and accumulating snow, the climbers decided to set up camp and wait out the bad weather. They also indicated that they were low on food, fuel and water and expressed concern about their situation but did not indicate the need for rescue or help.