

Conditions remained poor on the upper mountain for the next 24 hours. The party again called White River Ranger Station on June 16 to report that they were out of food and nearly out of fuel. They felt the situation was not urgent, however they believed that they would not be ambulatory if they had to go another day in similar conditions. The weather forecast called for continued high winds and cloudy conditions for the next two days.

On June 17, a ground team was sent to Camp Schurman to attempt a climb of the Emmons glacier in hopes of reaching the stranded climbers. This team reported steady 50 mph winds with gusts to 75 mph at Camp Schurman (9,500 feet). Later that day, another team of rangers on helicopter standby was able to fly to Liberty Cap during a brief weather window. A “drop bag” containing emergency supplies was prepared for jettison to the climbers, but extreme winds prevented the helicopter from nearing them and the mission was aborted.

No communication was established with the climbers after June 17 and on June 18 the ground team reported a break in the weather. The helicopter was launched again and successfully inserted four rangers on the saddle between Liberty Cap and the true summit where they hiked to Catlett and Willcox and assisted them back to the landing zone for pickup. Catlett and Willcox were then flown to Madigan Army hospital where they were treated for severe dehydration and evaluated for possible renal complications.

Analysis

Catlett and Willcox became pinned down on the summit due to deteriorating weather. They felt that traveling on an unknown route over glaciers during whiteout conditions might endanger them more and they elected to dig in. Although there were brief periods of clear weather, it was felt that there was no substantial weather window to allow the party to break camp and safely get to a better location. This continued bad weather prevented movement and under recommendation from park personnel, the party stayed put.

It's common for Liberty Ridge climbing parties to carry-over the summit and descend an alternate route. This requires carrying heavy packs up the route and climbers are tempted to pack just enough food and fuel for the proposed length of their trip. Inclement weather can spell disaster for a party that is committed to the route. It is especially important for climbers ascending remote and harder routes on Rainier to carry additional food and fuel for possible storm-bound days.

This also applies to ascents on standard routes. It's worth noting that weather conditions worsened shortly after the rescue, and the mountain experienced extreme winds and cloudy weather for the next four days. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

FALL ON SNOW, FAILURE TO SELF-ARREST

Washington, Columbia Peak

On July 13, Lee Giroux (50) and five other members of the Seattle Mountaineers attempted to reach the summit of Columbia Peak. The party left their camp at 6:00 a.m. that morning. Each party member was wearing a helmet and harness and carrying an ice ax. About 30 minutes into the climb there was about a 20 minute wait while Jim Tweedie, one of the trip leaders, scouted ahead to determine the route.

The party proceeded up to the toe of the glacier where Jim climbed a short rock

gully, set up a belay and belayed Justin Merle and Lee up the pitch. Lee belayed the remaining party members up the pitch. Jim and Justin proceeded up the snow slope to a rock section thought to be the chimney section described in the route description. Upon reaching the rock section it was apparent that it did not match the route description. After reviewing the map and route description, it was decided that they would traverse up a 35 to 40 degree snow slope. The traverse was about 200 yards and was situated above a cliff band. Jim and Justin kicked steps up the slope to where it ended in rocks and heather and proceeded up to a high point. The rest of the party followed. They decided that they were not on the main summit of Columbia so Jim spent about 30 minutes scouting ahead to determine if it was feasible to get to the main summit from their position. After deciding that this was not feasible, the party decided to retrace their steps.

The day was warm, sunny and about 70 degrees F. The snow was soft and would accept an entire kicked boot. Crampons were not used because of the tendency to ball up in soft snow thereby not allowing the teeth to cut into the snow. The party retraced their steps on the traversing slope. Lee was the third person traversing the slope, and was followed by three other party members, including Jim. Lee had been traveling about 15 minutes and had just gone from holding his ax in his right hand to holding it in a two-handed self-belay hold and was traversing facing the slope. Lee's fall was not seen by the members of the climb; however, one party member did hear Lee hit the snow but could not distinguish the sound as either being a slip or a fall. This party member was closest and observed that Lee was falling on his back, head down with his ax somewhat underneath him on his right side. As Lee began to slide down the slope, all members observed that he did not make any attempt to self-arrest.

From the point he fell, Lee traveled about 75 feet down the snow slope along a ledge and over the cliff into a snow runnel. Jim and the other trip leader, Bob Hétzel, talked to the other members to determine if they felt comfortable in continuing down the slope. They were comfortable and proceeded down the slope slowly using ice axes for self-belay. Jim observed that the steps were not broken where Lee had fallen nor did he see marks indicating that Lee had attempted to self-arrest.

Bob was proceeding first and came to within 25 feet above Lee. He stepped into the snow runnel and began to move down. He made about three steps down when he heard someone yell, "Avalanche!" Bob dug his ax into the snow and put his head down. The snow flowed over Bob pushing him down about three to four feet. The avalanche carried Lee down approximately another 500 feet.

Bob stepped out of the snow runnel and proceeded down the slope as did the rest of the party. The snow ended in the rocks about 15 feet above Lee. Bob belayed Jim down to Lee while the rest of the party stayed on the rocks with Bob.

Jim found Lee in a face up position. Lee had sustained fatal trauma to the right temple area of his head. Jim determined the safest thing to do was to secure Lee in his existing location. Webbing was attached to Lee's harness and around a boulder. Jim climbed back up the 15 feet of rock to the other party members, and informed them that Lee was dead and that they would not attempt to move the body.

The group arrived back at Blanca Lake at 6:40 p.m. Jim hiked out to notify the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office. The next morning Jim flew back to Columbia Peak in the Search and Rescue helicopter and identified the location of Lee's body. Lee's helmet and ice ax were not found at the scene. The other party members left Blanca Lake and hiked out.

Analysis

Lee had ice ax arrest training, was an active climber, and had recently been on several climbs involving steep snow travel. Lee's training included how to self-arrest in this situation. However, traveling downhill on your back, head first, is the most difficult position from which to arrest. It is unknown why Lee did not attempt to self-arrest. (Source: From a report written by a panel of five members of the Seattle Mountaineers and written statements from party members)

FALLING ICE**Washington, Mount Rainier, Kautz Ice Cliff**

On July 20 Mount Rainier communications received information relating to a 911 call from a climbing party on the Kautz Glacier route. The reporting climber Greg Prothman of Seattle Mountain Rescue called from Camp Hazard (11,300 feet) indicating that a party of three had been hit by falling ice from the Kautz Ice Cliff. One of the climbers, Tim Wentzer, had been seriously injured in the back and was in severe pain. Due to the location of the accident and severity of injuries, an Army Blackhawk was launched with a flight medic and flew directly to Camp Hazard. The medic was lowered to the accident scene and stabilized Wentzer in preparation for a winch raise into the Blackhawk. The Blackhawk flew Wentzer to Harborview trauma center in Seattle for treatment of a fractured C-7 vertebrae, other spinal complications and an injury to the knee.

Analysis

Wentzer's accident occurred in an area aptly called "The Chute" due to the amount of falling rock and ice. "The Chute" is the safest and fastest approach from Camp Hazard to the popular Kautz Glacier route. Rock and ice fall in "The Chute" is inevitable, therefore extreme caution and speed are advised when climbing or descending through this area. Wentzer was unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

FALL INTO CREVASSE**Washington, Mount Rainier, Emmons Glacier**

On July 29, Don McIntyre and Joel Koury had just climbed Liberty Ridge and were forced to bivouac near the summit of Rainier due to a sudden storm which deposited wet, heavy snow on the upper mountain. The team had lost the descent route in the weather and was making their way down the Emmons Glacier when Koury slipped while cleaning the wet snow from his crampons. Unable to arrest quickly in these conditions, Koury slid into McIntyre who was near the edge of the crevasse. Both fell and landed on a ledge system 25 to 30 feet below. McIntyre ruptured his aortic artery and Koury sustained knee, leg and hip injuries. McIntyre died a few hours later due to his injuries.

Ranger Kellogg was contacted by a climbing party of two descending the Emmons Glacier who reported that another team of two had taken a crevasse fall around 13,300 feet. One of the members was reported to be seriously injured, unconscious and having difficulty breathing. Kellogg relayed the information to White River ranger station and teams were assembled for a flight to assist with the rescue. Rangers Gauthier and Kellogg were climbing to the accident from Camp Schurman but were called back to join the other rescuers who were being shuttled to Emmons Flats where they awaited the arrival