

not have been enough protection for a safe descent using the rope 2,000 feet down a steep slope. The leader would have to have placed several pickets or ice screws on a 150 foot lead down the snow slope to have safely anchored the belayer and protected the second person climbing down—just the opposite technique of leading up a similar slope. The lack of protection may have been a factor in the decision not to use the rope; a fall of one of the two would have been fatal to both without a sufficient number or pickets or ice screws.

Each carried one standard 70 cm ice ax. It is not possible to self-belay with one ice ax as it would be with two ice tools, where one tool would always be attached to the ice while placing the other. In using one tool, whenever it is extracted from the ice, the climber is without protection. During the interview, Ryan Hokanson stated that he was “very surprised that Mike had down-climbed the ice with one ax—shocked.”

Each wore crampons. One of Hurtado’s crampons slipped off his boot at the start of the descent, just out of camp. He explained that their overboots made it difficult to have the bail of the crampons grab the boot welt securely. Vanderbeek’s crampon slipped off just before Washburn’s Thumb, and he re-attached it. This may have been an immediate cause of his slip on the ice. One crampon was found among the rocks on the fall line. The crampons have two front points, one of which was broken. It was analyzed by a metallurgist at Black Diamond Equipment, who determined that the break occurred as a result of a high impact, most likely during the fall, thus ruling it out as a cause of the fall.

Beyond the first short distance on the moderate angle snow slope, the team did not have adequate equipment to protect their descent.

Experience. Mike Vanderbeek was a very experienced mountaineer with a long resume of difficult climbs on various high altitude peaks, including Mount McKinley. Vanderbeek had significantly more experience than Hurtado, particularly in the Alaska Range; however, Hurtado had climbed on McKinley previously. Hurtado, a third-year medical student, had participated in SAR incidents with the El Paso search and rescue team. Vanderbeek did not list any SAR experience or training in his resume. Their level of experience and expertise would not lead one to expect to find them in a compromising situation. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger, and Investigating Team, consisting of Ralph Tingey, Reynold Jackson, Jay Liggett, and Jay Cabler.)

FALL ON SNOW, UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST, DESCENDING UNROPED, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

The Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. guided trip led by chief guide Phil Ershler and assistant guide Chris Hooyman began their expedition on May 21. The group, consisting of four clients and two guides, took nine days to reach the 14,200 foot camp. During this time, one of the clients was escorted to base camp and flown back to Talkeetna due to a minor foot injury. The group spent the next five nights at 14,200 feet while incorporating a carry to 17,200 feet.

On June 3 the party established camp at 17,200 feet on the West Buttress. On June 4 the party of five reached the summit in good weather, descended to their camp at 17,200 feet, and spent the night hoping to descend further the next day. On June 5 the group awoke to poor weather and decided to stay until visibility increased and winds decreased. Later that day, around 1600, the group broke camp hoping to take advantage of a weather window to descend to 14,200 feet. Before the group could descend to the 17,000 foot level on the West Buttress ridge, high winds were encountered and chief guide Ershler decided to return to 17,200 feet, set up camp, and again wait for better weather to descend. The National Weather Service forecast broadcast that evening was for a "wind event" storm to begin the evening of June 6.

On June 6, Ershler left camp mid-morning and visually checked the weather from atop the West Buttress ridge. The weather had improved and the RMI group broke camp and began to descend along with at least two other groups. The group of five began descending as a single team, using one rope of four climbers and adding a second rope linked to the fourth climber. The last and fifth climber (Hooyman) was tied in ten meters behind the fourth, with the remainder of the rope coiled and carried in the compression straps of his pack. The rope team was as follows: first on the rope was chief guide Phil Ershler, second was client Larry Semento, third was client Mike Van Stratton, fourth was client Meegan Pyle, and fifth (linked with separate rope to Pyle) was guide Chris Hooyman. The party chose to descend as a single rope team (incorporating a second rope) to better utilize running belays, specifically the many rocks on the snow ridge as natural protection.

Between 1100 and 1130 the team had descended in moderate winds, with gusts and visibility of about 160 feet, to a point on the West Buttress ridge at 17,100 feet. At this point the route traverses parallel to and just north of the ridge top. While traversing, Semento slipped and fell a short distance on the slope. Ershler utilized a rock as protection between himself and Semento, took out all slack in the system, and held Semento on tension to prevent him from slipping any further down the slope. Semento was unable to get up. Witnesses described a feeling of urgency in the situation due to the location and weather. As Ershler was yelling instructions to Semento, Pyle reports that Hooyman approached her, unclipped his rope from her harness, and began descending toward Semento, probably to assist. Pyle also reports that she initially told Hooyman to stay tied in to her, and then yelled ahead to have Hooyman clip into Van Stratton. While descending, Hooyman fell on the 35 to 40 degree snow slope. Witnesses report that he dropped his ice ax and was unable to self-arrest. They watched him accelerate onto the steeper slope below and begin to tumble end over end toward the Peters Glacier.

Without contact and unable to see Hooyman, Ershler, with the help of a private party and another RMI group, took his team back to 17,200 feet and established camp. In deteriorating weather, Ershler fixed approximately 500 feet of rope down Hooyman's fall line (using Hooyman's ice ax as a reference), but was unable to find any sign of Hooyman. At 1417, while Ershler was de-

scending the fixed lines, climbers at the 17,200 foot camp reported the accident to NPS Rangers at the 14,200 foot camp. Ershler ascended to the accident site and joined RMI guide Jeff Ward, who had acquired lines again and searched approximately 700 feet below the fall point. Again, no signs of Hooyman were found. Increasing winds and poor visibility forced Ershler and Ward back to the group's camp at 17,200 feet. That evening the forecasted storm hit the mountain and no one was able to travel anywhere above the 11,000 foot level for the next 36 hours.

When the weather improved on June 8, Ershler and his group were able to descend while four NPS personnel ascended to the accident site from 14,200 feet. Nine hundred feet of rope were fixed down the fall line and two NPS personnel searched the area for several hours. Nothing was found in the search. No other ground searches were conducted. On June 13, the weather permitted an air search with the NPS helicopter, which found and recovered Hooyman's body with the use of a remote grabber. Hooyman's body had taken a fall line that brought him below and to the west of the fall site, where he stopped at 16,000 feet.

Analysis

Experience. Chris Hooyman's mountaineering experience includes several Northwest area ascents on both technical and glaciated peaks. This expedition was Hooyman's first on Denali. RMI's apprenticeship system is in place, whereby senior guides help evaluate assistant guides. Hooyman's evaluations, both written and verbal, were good with several senior guides praising his technical and people skills. Phil Ershler stated that Hooyman was comfortable on all terrain found on the West Buttress of Denali.

RMI's Standard Operating Procedures. RMI's documentation states that, "All guides and clients should be roped at all times on the McKinley routes, except within an established camp area, emergency situations..." As Larry Semento's fall on the ridge does not qualify as an emergency, and as there were other options available to render assistance, Hooyman disregarded RMI's safety policy when he unclipped from the rope team.

Unclipping from the Rope Team. When Chris Hooyman unclipped from Meegan Pyle, he put himself at a greater risk of taking a serious fall and decreased the safety margin of the rope team. Chris Hooyman acted independently when he unclipped his rope from the team. He did not communicate his intentions to any person and was told by at least one client to reclip into the rope team before descending to Larry Semento. Although traveling unroped is a common practice for skilled climbers in this type of terrain, this is not the first accident where an experienced climber/guide was injured or killed because he chose to unrope or put slack in a rope team in order to handle a situation more rapidly.

Weather. The weather, specifically the wind, did not allow for discussion between the two guides. If it were possible, dialogue between Hooyman and chief guide Phil Ershler may have prevented the accident. The wind may also be directly responsible for the fall itself. Two out of the five witnesses inter-

viewed believe that Hooyman was literally pushed over by the wind. The other witnesses believe it was a combination of the wind and Hooyman's footing. The sense of urgency described by those who were interviewed was also amplified by the weather. In calmer conditions Hooyman may not have felt the need to unrope and help his client. Ershler had decided to postpone descending on the morning of June 5 due to poor weather, and later that same day decided to return to the 17,200 foot camp after beginning to descend and experiencing high wind. The weather on the ridge the morning of June 6 was less than perfect, but substantially better than the previous day. The forecasted "wind event" which was to begin in the evening of June 6 may have contributed to deciding to descend that morning, but it is apparent that the group was prepared to wait if they needed to. The group, specifically Ershler, was aware of the increased risks and difficulties the weather could potentially impose when descending the ridge from 17,200 feet. (Source: From a Denali National Park and Preserve Case Incident Record)

FALL INTO MOAT—SNOW BRIDGE COLLAPSED, POOR POSITION Alaska, Chugach Range, Cantata Peak

On June 6, around 1400, Kirk Towner (26) and I (29) were in the process of descending from Cantata Peak (5,205 feet). After glissading almost 2,000 feet down a prominent snow gully on the southwest face, we traversed the snow slope on the north side of the ice-covered glacial tarn that is the headwaters of a small creek that flows into a lower valley before emptying into Symphony Lake. Due to heavy, late-winter snow storms the area was still covered in four to six feet of packed, granular ("spring") snow which was relatively easy to travel on, but that obscured many terrain features.

At the outlet of the lake, the slope levels off, so we removed our crampons knowing that ahead there was only one relatively easy glissade of approximately 500 feet that would take us to the valley floor. We continued walking along the north side of the creek which disappeared under the snowpack shortly after leaving the lake. Just before the slope began to angle downward toward the lower valley, I suddenly broke through a snow bridge that spanned the glacial creek. I was instantly swept downstream and over a 40-foot waterfall that was completely hidden under a winter's-worth of snow where the creek drops into a narrow gorge as it descends toward the valley floor.

I landed on my back in a pool of freezing water where the snow pinched down toward the rock. I was able to pull myself up to stand on a narrow ledge after nearly drowning. Luckily, I was still conscious and realized that my predicament was serious. I had to remove my backpack because it was so heavy. I didn't think I could move out of the main flow of the waterfall without falling. Leaning against the snow wall, I unbuckled the waist belt and let the pack drop behind me. It disappeared into the rushing water beneath my feet. I then carefully moved to the right out of the main flow on my little ledge. I saw a small hole about 40 feet above me where light was coming in. I attempted to climb out of the cave by stemming between the slippery rock (under the waterfall)