

## **Analysis**

This type of medical emergency, involving an expedition member who does not disclose previous medical conditions to other expedition members, has become more common in recent years on Denali. This places all involved personnel in harm's way. This issue raises a series of ethical questions: Should such an individual be allowed to climb in the first place? Should someone like this—who jeopardizes so many people—be fined and escorted off the mountain? Or, should the NPS allow the situation to remain status quo? What most bothered the author of this report is that this Hong Kong climber wanted to go back up after a few days of rest at 14,200 feet. He was told he could not, under the authority that he would be “Creating a Hazardous Condition” (36 CFR 2.34[4]). It seems unfortunate but likely that Mr. Man would rather have died than come back without tagging the summit.

## **FALL ON SNOW**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley, Denali Pass**

On June 10 at 1945, Lev Sarkisov (61) of the Denali-2000 Khalatian Expedition (D2K) was descending unroped from Denali Pass on Mt. McKinley when he stumbled at the 17,400-foot level and fell 400 feet. Sarkisov sustained numerous broken ribs and was stabilized at the 17,200-foot high camp. On May 12, a large rescue team lowered him to the 14,200-foot camp where he was evacuated by military Chinook helicopter to Talkeetna. From Talkeetna he was flown to the Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage where he was diagnosed with eight fractures on six ribs.

## **Analysis**

This was the second rescue this season where a European climber fell descending the Denali Pass traverse unroped, using only ski poles. Both men were fortunate that they were not killed, though both required extensive rescue operations. The D2K party was adamant that Lev Sarkisov be flown off from the 17,200-foot high camp without delay, regardless of the weather conditions. They learned very quickly that the Park Service does not provide a European-style helicopter rescue service and that Denali's weather dictates everything. For the past 20 years the Park Service has tried to educate climbers with reference to the exposure of the Denali Pass traverse and our inability to provide instant rescues. There has been some headway made regarding Europeans who frequently acknowledge Park Service concerns, and many more are now descending with an ice ax, as witnessed by this author. Those who refuse to listen and end up being rescued create hazardous conditions for all rescuers involved. The Park Service and many volunteer rescuers are frustrated with this attitude.

## **AMS—ASCENDING TOO FAST, CLIMBING “ALONE”—BUT DEPENDING UPON OTHERS**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley, Denali Pass**

On June 25 at 1940, Ranger Meg Perdue received a radio call from Volunteer Ranger Karen Hilton at the 17,200-foot high camp regarding a solo climber

who was non-ambulatory on the traverse from Denali Pass. A guide there relayed to Hilton that he had been contacted via CB radio by a private expedition, Spirit of El Rancho, who were very concerned about this climber, Russell Worthington (29). He had been traveling with them to the summit and had vomited on the summit ridge several times and appeared ataxic. Now, upon their descent, they relayed he was unable to walk and was again vomiting. Worthington's position was reported to be halfway between Denali Pass and the rock band that initiates the traverse above the 17,200-foot camp.

At 1947, the Spirit of El Rancho Expedition was recontacted directly by Hilton, and confirmed that Worthington was exhausted and unable to walk, but that he was alert and oriented. They were instructed to give him fluids and await further assistance. At 1951, Hilton was able to contact two other Volunteer Rangers, Josie Garton and Dave Shuman, who were descending from the summit and were currently at Denali Pass. At 2000, Hilton had secured the assistance of three guides, Bob Hornbein, Scott Raynor and Kirby Spangler, and was preparing to ascend with oxygen to meet them. At this time, Ranger Perdue also contacted Talkeetna and relayed the situation, gave current weather observations, and requested the helicopter be put on stand-by.

At 2022, Garton and Shuman reached Worthington's location and assessed his condition. Worthington's condition had already improved somewhat with fluids and food, and though he showed signs of Acute Mountain Sickness, he was not ataxic. They determined that he could be safely short-rope down to camp.

At 2204, they arrived at the 17,200-foot camp, Worthington's condition was reassessed and he was found to be doing well. He rested at camp that night, was checked again in the morning, and descended to the 14,200-foot camp on his own.

### **Analysis**

Two important and intractable issues present themselves in this case. One is the relative rapidity of Worthington's ascent and the second is the problem of "solo" climbers asking to rope up with other expeditions on the mountain. Worthington had been on Mt. McKinley only 10 days by the date of his summit bid. He had actually ascended to 17,200 feet on day nine, but returned to 14,200 feet when he developed a severe headache. There is always a question in cases such as this if a slower ascent rate might have resulted in the whole situation being avoided. In interviews with members of the Spirit of El Rancho Expedition and Worthington, it came to light that Worthington had asked if he could rope up with them on summit day to which they agreed. They had become very concerned about Worthington near the summit and wanted to turn him around, but did not feel comfortable telling him that since he was not part of their expedition. They also felt a certain responsibility for him since they had agreed to rope up with him and, thus, did not want to leave him on his own. For Worthington's part, in interviewing him, he admitted that he did not believe he was properly acclimatized and stated, "I knew I would get sick."

When queried as to why he would put another expedition in the position of dealing with this, he said, "I didn't think it would be a problem." Since he had done things like this before (rapid ascents where he felt ill), he thought he

could handle it and did not expect the group to react the way they did. Worthington maintained throughout that he did not need the assistance and never would have called for it.

The problem still remains that one individual's difficulties invariably become the concerns of others in an environment such as Mount McKinley. It is only when everyone takes very seriously the need for self-sufficiency that the risks can be minimized for all concerned.

*(Editor's Note: All the reports from Denali National Park were edited by Daryl Miller, South District Chief Ranger in Denali National Park. The reports he worked from were written by Rangers Roger Robinson, Kevin Moore, and others.)*

## **AVALANCHE—UNSAFE CONDITIONS, WEATHER, POOR POSITION, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT—NO ICE AX**

### **Alaska, Chugach State Park, Flat Top Mountain**

On Saturday November 11, Nick Coltman (36) and his dog Boozer decided to get some exercise and do a fast hike up Flat Top Mountain via the back side—not a standard route, but one Coltman had traveled many times before. Walking was easy because the snow was less than ankle deep most of the way and the tundra was blown bare in many places. The crux of the route is the last 100 meters to the ridge where the gully narrows and steepens through an S-shaped curve. The snow conditions as Coltman entered this segment around noon were different (i.e., more unstable) than any of the previous route. Within a few steps, the snow broke beneath him and sent him falling out of control down the gully. Scrape marks from his finger tips were found in the old bed surface where he had attempted to arrest his fall (he carried no ice ax). Coltman slid an estimated 60 meters down the gully at high speed (estimated at 35-45 mph). As the avalanche gained momentum and distance, it entrained additional unstable snow on the surface. Where the gully opened onto a 35-degree scree slope, he was carried in soft slab debris another 120 meters. In the process he was banged against many boulders lodged in the frozen scree and his dog was scraped and bruised. Debris in the runout zone was less than 30 centimeters deep by 50 meters wide by 200 meters long. The debris extended about 60 meters beyond Coltman in a shallow arc.

Coltman was found in a vertical alignment lying on his back, arms out, legs twisted with his feet up-slope and head down-slope. His hands and head were bare. All 10 fingers were white with frostbite, his head covered with blood. In his right hand, he held a cell phone. He was conscious of his situation, mildly hypothermic, complained of difficulty breathing, and had no feeling in the lower portion of his body. He said later that he knew he would die if he could not reach his cell phone in the bottom of his pack. Somehow, with one lung collapsed and the other partially collapsed, a broken back and paralyzed legs, and frozen fingers, he managed to remove his backpack, retrieve his cell phone, dial 911, and describe his location and predicament.

Rescuers from multiple agencies and groups responded immediately to the Glen Alps parking lot in Chugach State Park. Within minutes, a Life Flight helicopter lifted two paramedics and an avalanche/mountain rescue specialist