

with too much weight, had improperly attached it to their anchor system, and had neglected to tie themselves in to an independent anchor. (Source: Tu Thanh Ha—*Globe and Mail*, and Edwina Podemski)

## **FALLING ROCK, WEATHER**

### **Yukon Territory, Mount Augusta, North Buttress**

At 1500 on June 18, South District Ranger Daryl Miller in Talkeetna, AK, was phoned by Charlie Sassara's wife, Siri Moss, about an accident on Mount Augusta—a border peak 20 miles northeast of Mount St. Elias on the U.S.-Canadian border. In the U.S. the land is managed by Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and in Canada by Kluane National Park. Jack Tackle (40's) and Charlie Sassara had flown onto the Seward Glacier at 6,300 feet on June 16 in order to attempt a new route on the North Buttress (Canadian side) of Mount Augusta. After caching their skis at 7,700 feet the pair began climbing on June 17 in the early morning.

At 2000 on the 17th, after 12 pitches of climbing, the team began looking for a suitable bivouac ledge at 9,200 feet. The first ledge they chopped proved too small for the tent so at 2200 Tackle climbed to a higher ledge to investigate its suitability while Sassara belayed. About 60 feet up, Tackle was excavating a possible ledge when a briefcase size rock struck him in the back causing him to fall. The protection that he had placed held and Sassara arrested his fall quickly. The blow initially paralyzed Tackle. Sassara was able to lower Tackle directly back to the existing ledge and secure him to the belay. Tackle's pain was so severe in his chest and abdomen that Sassara feared internal injuries. Sassara was able to stabilize Tackle in two sleeping bags inside the tent and secured him to the mountain using both rock and ice protection. Sassara remained on scene throughout the night helping Tackle with fluids and making him more comfortable. The team discussed their options and concluded that a helicopter rescue was Tackle's best chance for survival because they feared that lowering him could have been fatal.

Sassara began descending at 0630 on the 18th. It took him 13 rappels and five hours to reach the glacier and then another 45 minutes to ski to their base camp where they had a satellite phone. Sassara called Kluane National Park and his wife to notify them of the emergency.

Kluane's Chief Park Warden Ray Breneman and Hunter Sharp (Assistant Superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park) worked out a memorandum of agreement for cross border rescue cooperation. Miller offered to gather a ground team of experienced climbers and RCC offered air support. The Canadians had a helicopter capable of short-haul operations at these altitudes and were getting ready to fly to the scene. Miller assigned the mission to ranger Joe Reichert, who located Kelly Cordes, Colby Coombs, and Michael Alkaitis to form a ground team and emergency hired them. At 1930 the four flew from Talkeetna to Kulis AFB, Anchorage where they boarded a C-130 to Yakutat, Alaska. Arriving in

Yakutat at 2200, the NPS team conferred with the PJ's who had flown down on the Pavehawk. After discussing the options, the Pavehawk launched to locate the climbers on the north side of Mount Augusta and see if they could perform a rescue that evening. Because of poor weather, the pilot opted to not take additional personnel at that time. Unable to see either climber due to clouds and poor lighting, the helicopter returned to Yakutat at 2340 after locating skis at the base of the mountain face. Due to darkness, the operation was suspended until morning. The helicopter remained in Yakutat while both crews returned to Anchorage.

While this staging and reconnaissance was taking place, the Canadians were trying to get to the scene but due to low clouds and the VFR capabilities of their aircraft were not able to get closer than 50 miles to the site. The weather did not improve enough for VFR aircraft until June 20.

On the 19th, a C-130 returned to Yakutat at 1000. At 1130, the Pavehawk launched with three crew members, two PJs, and Reichert on board. Arriving on scene at 1215, Tackle's tent was located during the second pass and his elevation was determined to be 9,200 feet. Charlie Sassara could not be located at the team's basecamp due to clouds below 8,000 feet. The helicopter continued to make reconnaissance flights until the C-130 was in the air providing communication and fuel support for the mission. Once the C-130 was on scene and the fuel load was down to levels that maximized the helicopter's power, the first hover was made on location. All power checks were positive, so the pilot slowly guided the aircraft closer to the mountain above the tent while Reichert and PJ Robertson were estimating clearance distances for the pilot. PJ Shuman was lowered on the winch about 140 feet before he started swinging. Unable to stop the oscillations, the ship pulled away from the cliff, ending the first attempt. Another hover reconnaissance was made before the final lowering.

On the third trip hovering above the tent, all personnel were familiar with the site and their role in the operation, so it proceeded more quickly. Shuman was able to get on the ground below the tent, hike up 20 feet to the site, open the side of the tent and attach Tackle to the hoist cable. The engineer took up the slack and began to hoist as the pilot flew clear of the cliff. As Shuman and Reichert tended to Tackle, the helicopter crew met the C-130 and refueled while returning to Yakutat. Both aircraft were on the ground in Yakutat at 1430. In Anchorage, Tackle was taken by ambulance to Providence Hospital.

Charlie Sassara waited at his base camp until June 21 when he was flown out by helicopter, as softened snow conditions and crevasses prevented a fixed-wing evac.

Tackle was found to have several broken vertebrae. The extreme pain that he had in his chest and stomach was apparently due to bruised nerves in the spinal column. Tackle's specific injuries were a broken T1, broken T4-T5, and minor fractures in T8-12. He had a bruised spinal cord and impinged nerves at T8 and T10. He also had three broken teeth and major

cartilage and intercostal tissue breakage in the sternum area of the front lower rib cage, as well as a severely bruised left shoulder.

### **Analysis**

Tackle was climbing this last section without his pack because he was only scouting for a campsite. The weather was also a contributing factor. The temperature was 15 degrees F when they started to climb and it unexpectedly warmed up during the day, which probably contributed to increased rockfall. (Source: Joe Reichert, Mountaineering Ranger)

*(Editor's Note: For a first-hand account of this incident, see the magazine Alpinist I, Number 1, 2002)*

*Charlie Sassara received the David Sowles medal from the American Alpine Club, which is in recognition of an individual or individuals who give of themselves in an extraordinary manner to provide aid to climbers in distress.)*