

UNITED STATES

FALL INTO CREVASSE, CLIMBING UNROPED

Alaska, Alaska Range, Idems Peak

On March 24, Karoline Frey (27), a German graduate student at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, died after falling 90 feet into a crevasse while snowshoeing down a glacier about 45 miles south of Delta Junction.

Martin Stuefer was one of three friends on the ski trip Sunday with Frey. Stuefer said the group decided to ski and snowshoe to the summit of Idems Peak. They made it up easily and retraced their steps back down. "There was no sign of danger when we went up," he said.

Frey was leading the way down when the snow gave out, Stuefer said. She fell through an opening about three feet in diameter hidden by a snow bridge. Stuefer said he and the two others in the group, Tim Dennenbaum and Tina Din, could see no sign of Frey after she fell.

"I looked down the crevasse and I couldn't see the bottom. We cried down and we never got an answer."

The group had neither cell phone nor radio. Leaving Dennenbaum and Din at the scene, he skied down the mountain, drove to Pump Station No. 10 of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline, and asked workers to call for help.

Troopers initially responded in a helicopter but were unable to land on the glacier. At 9:30 p.m., the Alaska National Guard landed, found the body, but were unable to recover it that evening. The Alaska Mountain Rescue Group resumed the recovery effort Monday.

Frey was buried beneath several feet of ice and it took four hours to dig her out, said Soren Orley of the rescue team. (Source: From an article in the *Anchorage Daily News* by Anne Marie Tavella, March 27, 2002.)

Analysis

It is not a good idea to travel unroped on a glacier, especially if one is not familiar with it. (Source: Jed Williamson)

AVALANCHE—BACKCOUNTRY SNOWBOARDING, POOR POSITION

Alaska, Mount St. Elias

On April 7, John Griber was carefully working his way down a 45-degree ice face on Mount St. Elias. He turned at the sound of a "swish" above. Forty to 50 feet away, he saw companion Aaron Martin (32) off his skis on his side and sliding. Griber watched for 30 seconds as Martin slid hundreds of feet and out of sight. Then the snowboarder yelled for the second skier in the party, Reid Sanders. There was only silence.

Pilot Paul Claus of Ultima Thule Outfitters in Chitina on Friday reported spotting a body about 3,000 feet below the peak, with a string of equipment tracing the route of a fall. Claus, a noted Alaska Bush pilot, planned to return to see if a body recovery was possible. Griber and a fourth climber, Greg Von Doersten, were rescued by a National Guard helicopter Wednesday.

Below is part of Griber's conversation with The Associated Press by telephone.

Griber said the men intended to climb the mountain, then become the first to ski or snowboard to sea level from such an elevation. Martin and another team had tried the same thing a year earlier only to be turned back by blizzards. This year the weather was sunny, calm, and relatively warm in the days after Claus dropped the men off at Hayden Col, a pass just above 10,000 feet, on April 4.

The next day the climbers tackled their first hurdle, a sheer 3,500-foot ice face. Climbing with 65-pound packs stuffed with food and gear for a higher camp, the four ran into a problem when Von Doersten lost a crampon on the last pitch, preventing him from climbing. By the time Martin pulled him up on a rope, Von Doersten had frostbitten his hand. The climbers dug a camp into the snow near 14,500 feet. Von Doersten decided to stay there while the others went on.

Griber, Martin, and Sanders set off the next day and by Sunday had reached 16,000 feet. The next morning, they were ready to go for the summit but faced another ice wall. It was not as steep as the first, Griber said, but the surface was lined with channels a few inches to 15 inches deep caused by water melting, flowing, and freezing. By late afternoon, though, the men were above that headwall and within 600 to 700 feet of the summit. Griber rested there while the others pushed forward.

"I just felt really drained," he said. "I wanted to let them take advantage of not pulling me up."

Griber estimates he paused 10 minutes, then followed the footprints of the two skiers. At 6:15 p.m., 150 feet from the summit, he decided he could go no farther. He worried that it would take another 20 minutes to the top, and darkness was coming.

Griber took off his crampons and neoprene overboots and locked into his snowboard. In severe conditions, Griber said, he often snowboarded with an ice ax in his hand. This time, he had one in each hand. "This wasn't snowboarding," he said. "This was absolutely survival technique." Still, he noted the conditions were the same or better than the three had encountered on previous trips.

"This is what we were used to doing," he said. "We specialize in high angle, extreme terrain. We're not just a couple guys who went out and said, 'Let's go ski this thing.'"

Griber started down. He paused occasionally, he said, to wait for Martin and Sanders. Within half an hour or less, he spotted his companions about 800 feet above. Griber slowly continued down the mountain for another 15 minutes, looking for good snow, occasionally able to make a turn. When a few ice balls rained down, he figured Martin and Sanders must be directly above. Griber said he felt it was "a little dangerous." He traversed across the slope to be out of the way if anyone fell. A few minutes later, he heard the sliding sound, and over his right shoulder saw Martin. Martin had self-arrest

grips on ski poles for braking to a stop on steep snow, but he could not stop.

Griber yelled for Sanders, but heard nothing. Sanders had yet to clear an area of unstable ice columns and crevasses, Griber said. As darkness fell, Griber put on his headlamp and made his way into a band of talus and rock, where he jettisoned his snowboard. He tried climbing on the rocks, calling for Sanders, and looked for a flat place to bivouac. Eventually, concerned with his own safety, he put his crampons back on, located the footprints the climbers had made that afternoon, and walked on ice in the dark until he found a crevasse to provide shelter from the bone-chilling wind.

"I was feeling cooked at this point," he said. "I was beyond tired."

He woke at 5:00 a.m., searched again for Sanders, then descended to the old snow shelter at 16,000 feet. He stayed long enough to warm up in a sleeping bag, then descended to 14,500 feet to tell Von Doersten of the tragedy.

A day later, Claus flew over to check on the climbers. Griber and Von Doersten waved to him, and Griber used his ice ax to carve out a message in six-foot letters: "TWO DEAD." Claus dropped a weighted bag with a note saying rescue was possible, and for the climbers to raise both arms if they needed help.

"I fell to my knees and raised both hands," Griber said.

A HH-60 Pavement helicopter from the National Guard's 210th Mountain Air Rescue group in Anchorage came to get them. The crew had to lighten it to safely climb to 14,000 feet. Griber and Von Doersten abandoned their camp and equipment on the mountain to scramble aboard the flight to safety. (Source: Associated Press and *Anchorage Daily News* reporter Craig Medred)

FALL INTO CREVASSE

Alaska, Talkeetna Mountains

At 1700 on April 26, Alpine Ascents guide Brian McCullough (42) was traveling with three clients on an unnamed glacier in the Talkeetna Mountains when he broke through a snow bridge and fell fifty feet into a crevasse. McCullough landed at the bottom of the crevasse on his left side, his sled was caught by the rope and stopped just above him. Within minutes of the fall one of the clients approached the crevasse and determined that McCullough could ascend the rope. The clients then constructed an anchor and McCullough began ascending the rope. As McCullough approached the top, it was determined that a separate line would be necessary, as the original line had cut into the lip of the crevasse in the fall. Another anchor was constructed, and McCullough was able to ascend out of the crevasse on a separate line. After removing the rest of McCullough's equipment that had been tied to the initial fall rope, the group decided to camp for the night.

On the morning of April 27, the team traveled to a location up glacier at approximately the 8,000-foot elevation. They believed it would be pos-