

## **FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT—OLD PITON**

### **Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Gate Buttriss**

On November 19, “Mike” (44) fell while leading the second pitch of Perhaps, a two-pitch 5.7 route at the Gate Buttriss in Little Cottonwood Canyon. The end of the second pitch is a long horizontal traverse. It’s an under-cling in a wide crack for the hands and low-angled friction for the feet. Mike had placed a #4 Camalot at the beginning of the traverse and had clipped an old fixed piton about 15 feet later. Another 15 feet out from the piton, he stopped and looked for the chains. As he straightened up a bit to look, his feet skated out and he fell. The piton pulled, and Mike pendulumped about 60 feet across the low-angled granite until he hit a small ledge, suffering fractures in five lumbar vertebrae, both feet, and both ankles. His partners, “Jim” and “Colin,” were able to lower him back to the anchors from there, then re-rig and lower him to the ground.

SAR team members met them at the base of the route. Mike was immobilized in a bean-bag vacuum splint, lowered down five or six pitches of steep scree to the road, and then transported by ground ambulance to the hospital.

### **Analysis**

Old fixed pitons should always be viewed with suspicion and tested. Go ahead and clip them but place good protection as soon after as you can. Mike also feels that there was a lot of slack in the rope because of rope-drag. The second pitch of Perhaps is long and twisting, with lots of ledges and flakes to snag the rope. The leader needs to choose protection placements and runner lengths carefully and consider the path of the rope to minimize these problems. Mike was wearing a helmet, and it did receive a few knocks during the fall. (Source: Tom Moyer—Salt Lake County Sheriff’s SAR)

## **FALL ON SNOW, WEATHER, EXPOSURE, MOVING TOO SLOWLY**

### **Washington, Mount Ranier, Liberty Ridge**

On May 29, Mount Rainier National Park communications received a 911 cell phone call from a climbing team at St. Elmo’s Pass. They were requesting a rescue for Andreas Kurth, another climber who reported having an accident near Liberty Cap the night before. Andreas just descended the Winthrop Glacier solo after his team, Cornelius Beilharz, Grit Kleinschmidt, and Keeta Owens, encountered serious trouble during a storm. Kurth reported that Beilharz was already dead from a fall and that the condition of the other two women was unknown. Andreas had last seen them in an exposed snow cave, hypothermic, near Liberty Cap.

The Kurth team had summited Liberty Ridge the night before, close to 6:00 p.m. They became disoriented while trying to descend from Liberty Cap to the Winthrop Glacier in a fierce storm with whiteout conditions. After unsuccessfully locating the Winthrop Glacier, the team then attempted to set up tents. However, the winds were too strong and made the task impossible. Still disoriented, the team then proceeded to dig snow caves.

Upon doing so, they encountered an impassable ice layer three feet below the surface. Unbeknownst to the team, the snow caves were being constructed atop a steep ice slope, just southeast of Liberty Cap, and fully exposed to the weather.

Unable to penetrate the ice, Kurth used the remains of a tent and the beginnings of a snow cave to erect a makeshift shelter for him and Kleinschmidt. Beilharz and Owens were attempting the same. Kurth and Kleinschmidt took cover in their shelter and got some rest as Beilharz and Owens worked to finish theirs. That's when the initial accident occurred. Beilharz somehow slipped while digging the snow cave and fell out of sight down the steep slope. Owens then rushed to report the incident to Kurth and while doing so, accidentally collapsed the makeshift shelter.

Struggle ensued as the team was again exposed to the storm. Kurth could not find one of his plastic boot shells after the snow cave collapsed. This presented problems as he attempted to resurrect the shelter in the dark. While securing the tent to the cave, Kurth also slipped and fell. The slope below the snow cave was roughly 50 degrees and icy, but it leveled off a few hundred feet below. There, Kurth landed and found Beilharz. Unfortunately, his climbing partner was dead.

Kurth tried to climb up to the snow cave but was unable to on the steep ice without a hard boot shell. He instead spent the rest of the night nearby in a naturally protected site, huddling in a salvaged sleeping bag that had also fallen from the snow caves. At first light, he reoriented himself and made his way down the Winthrop Glacier to report the emergency.

The Park Service began rescue efforts that afternoon. Dee Patterson led the field team off six climbing rangers. They were flown to the summit of Mount Rainier to search, rescue, and recover the climbers. Another helicopter was dispatched to St. Elmo's Pass to pick up Kurth.

Initial aerial reconnaissance of the summit helicopter revealed two climbers face down in the snow beneath a steep icy slope. They were located a few hundred feet below Liberty Cap on the southeast side. The US Army Chinook then inserted the Park Service team between Liberty Cap and Columbia Crest.

The team quickly located Beilharz and Owens at the base of the steep icy slope below the snow cave. Owens was dead when found. The team then began searching for Kleinschmidt, checking first the snow cave and later a heavily crevassed area below the accident site. Ground teams, however, did not locate her that day. Deteriorating weather conditions and sunlight constraints forced the recovery to be called off and only Owens could be retrieved.

The next day, similar efforts resumed, except this time under more favorable weather. Kleinschmidt was located from the air and recovered along with Beilharz and the climbing gear from the snow cave. Kleinschmidt apparently survived the fall but died from exposure while taking cover from the storm in the crevasse. Beilharz also died from exposure and Owens expired from trauma, most likely sustained during the fall.

## Analysis

The Kurth party possessed the experience and technical skills to ascend the route. What caught the team was inclement weather and pace. The team had planned to ascend Liberty Ridge more quickly, but was unable to do so. Generally speaking, the larger the team, the more slowly it moves.

When the four finally reached Liberty Cap, it was late in the day and there was little daylight left. Furthermore, the storm had intensified and the visibility had deteriorated. It's not uncommon for climbers to ascend the mountain under "reasonable" weather conditions only to be hit by fierce storms once on top. This is especially the case with Liberty Ridge, because the route is protected but the summit and Liberty Cap are directly exposed to the winds off the Pacific.

Though it seems counter productive to descend the route, away from an easier descent route and an established base camp, it's sometimes much safer to do so when confronted by these conditions. It's very difficult to navigate safely in severe weather while on the summit just after finishing Liberty Ridge. Many climbers have found more favorable bivy sites and snow cave locations back down the ridge (especially near the bergschrund) when faced with these conditions. (Source: Mike Gauthier, Climbing Ranger)

## **FALL INTO CREVASSE—INADEQUATE PROTECTION, WEATHER AND STRANDED—WEATHER, EXPOSURE—HYPOTHERMIA**

### **Washington, Mount Rainier, Ingraham Glacier**

On June 6, Mount Rainier Climbing rangers responded to two mountaineering accidents on the Ingraham Direct Glacier Route. The rescues are interconnected and began on June 5. That evening, climbing rangers Glenn Kessler and Paul Charlton noted a single occupied tent when passing through Ingraham Flats Alpine Camp on summit patrol. While descending later that night, the rangers encountered a party of two, Benjamin Hernstedt (25), and Jeffrey Dupuis (21), at 13,000 feet ascending the mountain. The rangers contacted the team and discussed current conditions, which included barely penetrable ice and hard snow, a poorly defined climbing route, clear, but windy and cold weather. The climbers said there were prepared and would descend immediately upon reaching the summit. The climbers also stated that they were the team camped in the tent at Ingraham Flats.

The next morning, RMI Guides contacted NPS climbing rangers at Camp Muir to report that one of their rope teams had fallen into a crevasse on the Ingraham Glacier. Near 11,800 feet, Melody Wyman, Charles Grubbs and their guide Kurt Wedberg fell after a wind gust knocked Wyman off her feet. When she fell, Grubbs and Wedberg were pulled along for the ride. The trio attempted to self-arrest but slid 100-150 feet on hard icy snow before falling 60 feet into a crevasse. Wyman broke an ankle and Wedberg and Grubbs sustained non-serious head injuries. Wedberg was