

Team Homer Company was in a dire situation. In the end, they did end up requiring NPS assistance whether or not they had originally called for it. (Source: Ranger John Leonard)

ILLNESS-COLITIS

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

At 1825 on May 19, Christopher Allewell (age unknown) was assisted into the 14,200-foot NPS medical tent by his teammates. His chief complaint was severe abdominal pain and a mild headache. Upon examination, pain was localized in his mid quadrant, bilaterally, with a severity of ten on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most painful. Pain was not associated with vomiting or fever. However, Allewell expressed extreme tenderness and guarding of his abdomen. Symptoms occurred suddenly and had been apparent for approximately six prior to his arrival at the NPS medical tent. Past medical history did not indicate a cause. Bowel sounds were present and urination was clear. Allewell's pain was mildly relieved when he lay in a left lateral recumbent position. After conferring with Dr. Jennifer Dow, NPS volunteer Steve Stein started an IV. Two liters of intravenous fluids were given. No pain medications were administered at this time.

By the morning of May 20, Allewell's pain had increased in his upper right quadrant and had radiated into his back. Though his headache was relieved, Allewell's abdominal pain persisted, dramatically affecting his mobility. At 1257, Dr. Jennifer Dow authorized 30mg of Toradol for pain relief and recommended an immediate evacuation. At 1500, Allewell was transported to the 7,200-foot basecamp by the NPS contract helicopter and then flown to Regional Hospital in Anchorage by the LifeGuard helicopter.

Analysis

In the hospital, Allewell was diagnosed with colitis, an inflammation of the gut wall. Colitis requires surgery only when infectious. Lack of oxygen (i.e. altitude) can cause an infection, and therefore Allewell remained under observation in the hospital for several days.

Unfortunately, Allewell could not have predicted or prevented his condition or need for evacuation. However, Allewell's situation did reflect the difficulty of treating abdominal pain while in the backcountry. Determining the source of the pain can be extremely difficult. In Allewell's case, duration and severity indicated the need to evacuate. Extreme tenderness, guarding, the inability to move, and pain threshold were the key elements used to assess the severity of his condition. As a rescuer, patient assessment is a critical skill in order to determine acute abdominal pain and the need for immediate evacuation. (Source: Ranger Karen Hilton)

DEHYDRATION, UNABLE TO GET TO MITTENS-FROSTBITE

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Rib

On May 3rd, the three-member expedition, Rocky Mountain West Rib, led by Fabrizio Zangrilli, flew in to the Kahiltna Glacier to attempt the West

Rib. On the 17th, they ascended the 1200-foot West Rib Couloir. On this ascent, Roger Pennington (age unknown), a member of the expedition, frostbit several of his fingers. Pennington felt both dehydration and the inability to get to his heavy mittens when he needed them caused the frostbite. They spent that night on a small ice ledge at the top of the couloir. The next day they moved up to the Apex Camp at 12,900 feet. Over the course of these two days, Pennington felt he had thawed, refrozen and thawed his left ring finger.

On the 20th they moved to a 13,300-foot camp where as a group they decided that Pennington needed to be evacuated because of his frostbite and slow pace. At 0956, Zangrilli requested assistance through his aircraft radio to a scenic flight overhead, flown by Eric Denkwalter of Talkeetna Aero Services. At 1012, Zangrilli described frostbite on two fingers of Pennington's right hand and the ring finger on his left. Ranger Daryl Miller stated that the helicopter was not available on that day and recommended that the expedition continue to the 14,800-foot bergschrund camp where they would be in a safe place if weather changed. A call-back time was set at 1800. The NPS chartered Talkeetna Air Taxi to fly Ranger Roger Robinson for this call-back. While on this flight at 1805, Zangrilli indicated that they had only made it to the 14,500-foot level and were digging in. Zangrilli still insisted on the rescue, and he was informed that the Park Service would try the next morning.

On May 21st at 1000, the contract Lama helicopter with pilot Jim Hood and manager Dave Kreutzer departed Talkeetna en route to the West Rib. The Lama was on scene at 1046 where it was determined that a shorthaul using the basket could be accomplished. The Lama proceeded to the 14,200-foot camp where the shorthaul was rigged and then returned at 1052 extracting Pennington in the basket. Pennington was first shorthauled to the 14,200-foot camp and then transported inside the Lama to Kahiltna Basecamp, then to Talkeetna. Once in Anchorage, Pennington was diagnosed with superficial to partial thickness frostbite on the first digit of three of his fingers.

Analysis

Pennington's frostbite is very typical of what is seen frequently by the rangers at 14,200 feet. The Ranger Staff felt that Pennington would not need a rescue and could probably descend via the West Buttress if he could only get there. The big question was whether Pennington could ascend to 15,200 feet on the West Rib, because then he could easily reach the 14,200-foot camp.

Once the Rocky Mountain West Rib party had made up their mind that Pennington was not going higher, then we were left with two options—either doing a ground rescue or an air evacuation. Since slope conditions were unknown between 14,500 feet and 15,200 feet, it was felt that the least risk to personnel was to use the Lama helicopter. If Pennington had been climbing on the West Buttress he would have been told to walk down. (Source: Ranger Roger Robinson)