

UNITED STATES

FALLING SNOW BLOCK

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount Barrille

A party of four, Dr. Jim Sprott, Niles Woods, Martina Volfova and Kneeland Taylor, flew into the Ruth Glacier on April 19 with Talkeetna Air Taxi. On the 20th the group climbed Mount Dickey and on the 22nd they attempted a different route on Mount Barrille but turned around due to poor snow conditions. Also on the 22nd Taylor flew out of the range leaving a party of three. Two inches of snow fell on Thursday night. Due to weather conditions, the group got a late start on Friday for their attempt on the Japanese Couloir on Barrille. They departed camp about 1000 and began climbing at 1115 following the tracks of a group who had climbed the route the previous day.

After climbing about 700 feet, the group swapped leads and continued climbing. Between 1145 and 1215 while they were ascending, with Volfova leading and Woods in the middle, a picnic table-size chunk of consolidated snow came down from far above and knocked all three climbers down. They slid about 300 feet before a combination of their self-arrest efforts and soft snow stopped their fall.

All acknowledged that they were OK promptly, but Woods immediately complained of pain in his right knee. Dr. Sprott examined Woods and splinted the right leg. After activating their ELT, Sprott and Volfova were able to lower Woods 225 feet to where they felt comfortable traveling without a belay, and were able to holler out to a nearby group. The other group responded with a sled, and they all transported Woods over to a location where TAT had landed.

Woods and Sprott were air transported back to Talkeetna where the Talkeetna Volunteer Rescue Squad transported Woods to the hospital. Woods was diagnosed and treated for a broken right tibia, cracked right pelvis, lacerated liver and bruised kidneys. Volfova was flown back to Talkeetna the next morning.

Analysis

Short of not climbing that route on that day, this was one of those accidents that could be described as an “act of nature.” There are hazards in the mountains, and it is impossible to mitigate all of them.

FALLING SNOW

Alaska, Denali National Park, Peak 11,300

Around 0500 on May 3, Mountaineering Ranger Karen Hilton and her two volunteers, Carl Oswald and Matthew Smith, left their camp to patrol the Southwest Ridge of Peak 11,300, located in the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier.