

## 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.

For three days prior to this attempt, warm daytime temperatures and freezing nighttime temperatures provided stable melt-freeze snow conditions on the ridge. Footprints in the snow from an ascent the previous day also allowed for quick route finding through and around the short rock buttresses that characterize the route itself. The team found themselves making good time, reaching approximately 9,600 feet at the top of a major feature called “the S couloir” by 1300. The route brought the team to a traverse on the east side of the ridge where a belay was made about 50-80 feet below the true ridge. It was at this time that a C-130 military aircraft flew over the team twice, causing concern over a possible incident elsewhere in the range. Hilton immediately established communication with the Talkeetna Ranger Station via park radio. The Station confirmed that no incident was occurring. Just seconds after placing the radio back into her pack, Hilton and her team were unexpectedly struck by a large piece of falling ice and snow. Both Oswald and Smith stated they were not hurt. However, Hilton suffered intense pain in her right arm with limited movement. Due to the immediate swelling that occurred, the team climbed an additional 50 feet and rappelled to the nearest bivouac site. After assessing her injuries, Hilton decided it would be ill-advised to continue climbing that day. South District Ranger Daryl Miller was immediately updated of the situation via satellite phone and the Talkeetna Ranger Station by park radio. By morning, Hilton’s condition had not significantly changed, and the team chose to retreat.

Hilton and her team descended the south face and arrived back at camp at the base of Peak 11,300 by 1900. The following morning, the team was picked up by Talkeetna Air Taxi and transported to Talkeetna where Hilton received treatment for her injuries.

### **Analysis**

Being at the right place at the wrong time tends to best describe the incident that occurred during this park patrol in the Ruth Glacier area. Unfortunately, the cycle of warm daytime and cold nighttime temperatures that helped provide ideal climbing conditions on this route also caused the release of the snow and ice that forced this team to retreat. The climbing on Peak 11,300 is mainly concentrated on the ridge itself, which mitigates the exposure to objective danger from above. However, this incident is a good reminder of just how quickly the sun can affect even the smallest patches of snow and cause instability.

## **FALL ON SNOW, RESCUE HAMPERED BY WEATHER**

### **Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount McKinley, West Buttress**

The following account is that of a difficult and intense Denali Search and Rescue operation conducted on the upper slopes of Mount McKinley. The individuals who participated in the rescue operation were Renny Jackson, Chris Harder, Steve Rickert, Jack McConnell, and David Bywater. It is also imperative to mention two British climbers who played key roles in the