

Several small but important factors contributed to this accident. Through interviews with the primary witness, Ms. Martin, secondary witnesses, climbing partners, and empirical observations, it was determined the following factors played a role in this accident.

- Communication was poor between the climbers due to the wind-noise and proximity to one another.
- The easterly wind may have moved the rope into the notch between pillars on the east thus hiding the end from view.
- Peruchini was only able to see the west strand of rope safely on the ground. If the east strand of rope was in the notch it was invisible to him beyond eight feet.
- The wind may have caused the rope to travel through the anchor chains resulting in one strand becoming substantially shorter than the other.
- Peruchini had rock climbed three days in a row after a long layoff and was nursing a rotator cuff injury to his right shoulder. Fatigue may have played a part in his decision-making ability and observation acuity.
- Fatigue and shoulder pain may have reduced his physical ability to hang by his hands from the ropes and/or regain a safe hold on the pillar.

(Source: Edited from a very thorough report primarily authored by Andrew P. Jenkins, PhD, WEMT, of the Central Washington Mountain Rescue Investigative Team)

SLIP/FALL ON SNOW AND ROCK

Washington, Mount Rainier, Liberty Ridge

Climber Scott Richards (42) called Mount Rainier National Park on a cell phone requesting a rescue for his climbing partner Peter Cooley (39) at 6:10 a.m. on May 15. The two-person team was ascending Liberty Ridge near 12,000 feet when Cooley's crampon caught and he fell while leading. Richards was on the opposite side of the ridge-crest when the accident occurred and was able to stop the fall using a hip belay. Cooley had fallen approximately 30 feet and hit his head, sustaining severe head trauma including a skull fracture as well as injuries to his left arm and leg. At roughly 6:30 a.m., Ranger Mike Gauthier advised Richards via cell phone to chop out a platform, secure their tent, and stabilize and prepare Cooley for a lengthy evacuation. Scheduled cell phone calls were arranged to conserve the team's cell phone batteries.

An Oregon Army National Guard Chinook and contract helicopter and climbing field teams were assembled for the rescue. At that time the weather was deteriorating rapidly, and forecasts predicted large amounts

of precipitation. On its initial reconnaissance, the contract helicopter approached Liberty Ridge, but due to whiteout conditions was forced to land on the Carbon Glacier at 8,000 feet and wait for a clearing. Because of the increasing clouds near the mountain, the Oregon National Guard Chinook helicopter was sent to Rimrock, WA, instead of Kautz Heli-base inside the park to connect with an aviation rescue team of NPS rangers and Rainier Mountaineering guides (RMI).

An air-assisted rescue seemed uncertain because of weather conditions, so a field team of two climbing rangers was hastily assembled and dispatched to make a quick ascent of Liberty Ridge. The advanced climbing rescue team of David Gottlieb and Chris Olson departed Ipsut Creek Campground Saturday at 4:00 p.m. Heavy rain and snowfall slowed Gottlieb and Olson, forcing them to bivouac on lower Curtis Ridge that evening. A second team consisting of five climbing rangers also assembled at Ipsut Creek Campground. They carried extra supplies and prepared to support the advance team for a lengthy ground evacuation.

Late afternoon clearing around the mountain allowed the contract helicopter to depart the Carbon Glacier and return to Kautz Heli-base. Richards was apprised of the rescue efforts and difficulties. He prepared for a night on the mountain at the accident site with Cooley.

Via cell phone the next morning, Richards reported that Cooley was in and out of consciousness all night and was unable to eat or drink. The weather remained inclement for much of the day.

A team of five climbers from Tacoma Mountain Rescue (TMR) departed Ipsut Creek Campground at 11:00 a.m. after a briefing at Longmire. Another TMR team of two staffed the Camp Muir hut. In all, over 60 people joined in the rescue effort; the event generated international media attention.

At noon, the Chinook team attempted a flight with rescue personnel but heavy cloud cover and foul weather caused the mission to be aborted. Difficult climbing conditions and harsh weather made progress for the ground/climbing teams very arduous. Rangers Gottlieb and Olson worked through whiteout conditions and deep snow on the Carbon Glacier to prepare a field operations basecamp at 8,800 feet in the Carbon Glacier basin below Willis Wall. A six-person climbing ranger team later joined them while the TMR team prepared a camp at 7,200 feet on lower Curtis Ridge. At 6:35 p.m. the weather briefly cleared above the Carbon Glacier, allowing the contract helicopter to conduct reconnaissance at the accident site and deliver a sling load of supplies, including a radio to replace Richard's dead cell phone.

On the evening of May 16, climbing rangers Gottlieb and Charlie Borgh prepared for an ascent of Liberty Ridge on the morning of the 17th. They planned to access the accident site, a 50-55 degree ice slope at roughly 12,000 feet, evaluate the scene and determine the feasibility for a helicopter

evacuation or, if impossible, a technical rope rescue. Behind them climbing rangers Johnson, Olson, Anderson, Sherred, and Loewen, laden with camping and rigging equipment, climbed to Thumb Rock, and established an advanced camp. Ranger Glenn Kessler remained at basecamp to manage field operations.

On May 17, the contract helicopter attempted to sling-load additional supplies to the climbing teams. However, the weather again thwarted the aviation operation. The Chinook insertion team also attempted a mountain flight but was unable due to weather and was forced to return to Yakima. Additional supplies and equipment were ferried via ground teams from Ipsut Creek campground to 7,200 feet on Lower Curtis Ridge.

Around noon, Gottlieb and Borgh arrived at the 11,800 foot accident site. Gottlieb attempted a medical assessment and relayed information to medical control via cell phone. Only limited care could be provided due to the conditions and patient and rescuer safety concerns. The team also prepared the area and set ice anchors preparing for a technical rescue. The weather improved throughout the afternoon and at 2:30 p.m., the contract helicopter delivered a sling load to the 8,800 foot camp, while a supply cache was transported to Thumb Rock. The stabilizing weather also allowed the Chinook insertion team to head for the mountain at 4:30 p.m.

As the Chinook lumbered over the mountain at 5:03 p.m., Cooley was extracted via vertical litter hoist. He was immediately flown to Madigan Hospital and, very sadly, pronounced dead. Gottlieb and Borgh descended Liberty Ridge with Richards to spend the night at Thumb Rock.

Analysis

Cooley and Richards were accomplished climbers. This accident was not a result of any lapse in judgment or lack of skill. Cooley's short, but ultimately fatal fall seems to be the result of an unfortunate misstep. Cooley was wearing a climbing helmet, but sometime during the fall, he hit his head on a rock that contacted his temple just under the helmet brim. That impact eventually caused his death.

Any serious injury on a remote route at high elevation can be life-threatening due to the difficulty of access and evacuation. This accident highlights the difficulties of high altitude rescue on technical terrain, particularly when exacerbated by poor weather. Aviation is a key element of many successful upper-mountain rescues of climbers with serious injuries. When weather precludes flying, the survival of a critically injured climber is often compromised.

The fact that Richards was able to care for his climbing partner for almost 60 hours on a small exposed platform that he chopped in ice during poor weather speaks highly of him as an alpinist, rescuer, and friend. The NPS strongly recommends choosing climbing partners carefully, considering not only the ability to reach the summit, but how a partner will perform in the event of an emergency or stressful situation.

While many were saddened by the outcome of this extended event after so much effort by so many people, it should be noted that the rescue was also a great success in that Richards returned safely and no rescuers were hurt. Without his climbing partner, Richards would have been placed in the difficult position of soloing the route in order to reach safety. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

(Editor's Note: Another fatality and serious injury occurred on Liberty Ridge on June 3, when two climbers fell several hundred feet from just below the Black Pyramid.)

LOSS OF CONTROL—VOLUNTARY GLISSADE, FAULTY USE OF CRAMPONS, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

Washington, Mount Rainier, Emmons/Winthrop Glacier Route

On June 3, Doug Thiel (40) and his two climbing partners summited Mount Rainier via the Emmons Glacier Route. On their descent, Thiel started to experience a great deal of knee pain. The pain became so intense that he preferred to glissade instead of walking down. Thiel decided to glissade while roped and wearing crampons. It was the team's intent to descend in this fashion back to Camp Schurman.

At 11,600 feet, Thiel hit an icy section and was unable to stop his slide. He slid uncontrollably past his partners and pulled them off their feet. All three fell 75-100 feet before Thiel's two partners arrested. Thiel sustained a lower left leg injury in the process and recalled the rope wrapping around his leg, which he feels contributed to the injury.

At 3:30 p.m., the Park received a cell phone call from Thiel's team detailing the accident and requesting assistance. With a large rescue and body recovery already in progress on Liberty Ridge, the I.C. dispatched a reserve climbing ranger team to the site of the new accident. Climbing rangers Stefan Lofgren and Stoney Richards were inserted on the Emmons Glacier via light helicopter near 11,300 feet. They ascended to the accident site, assessed Thiel and then carried him to a Landing Zone and from there he was flown to the Kautz Heli-base where he was transferred to an ambulance.

Analysis

Thiel wanted to avoid requesting outside help while descending. Unfortunately, glissading, particularly on the upper mountain glaciers while wearing crampons, is dangerous. It would have been safer and more efficient for Thiel's partners to have steadily lowered him in a sitting position, one rope-length at a time. On most sections they could have simply lowered him hand over hand. On steeper sections, they could have lowered him off set protection (pickets, ice axes, etc). In the end, it is always best to avoid glissading. Glissading with crampons is never a good idea. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)