

## CANADA

### **RAPPEL ERROR—MISUSE OF GRIGRI**

#### **Baffin Island, Stewart Valley**

On April 24, Drew Wilson, Kyle Dempster, Grover Shipman, Ross Cowan, and I (Pete Dronkers) left Ottawa for Baffin Island to make a first ascent in Stewart Valley. I knew of only four routes there, two of which were professionally organized expeditions to Great Sail Peak.

We left Clyde River in sub-zero temperatures and made the first sledged crossing from Sam Ford Fjord to Stewart Valley, establishing camp beneath Great Sail Peak. We knew of no other climbers in northeastern Baffin.

We chose a 2,200-foot overhanging spire south of Great Sail Peak and moved camp to the unnamed tower. Dempster (22) and Wilson (24) began fixing up snow and rock slabs while Cowan (41) and Shipman (32) and I (25) brought loads up the 2,000-foot approach.

Wilson and Dempster continued fixing—mostly free—over loose rock above a hanging snowfield, and Shipman and I narrowly avoided being hit. Wilson completed the free crux at 5.11—a traverse on loose flakes. Shipman would remain in base camp while we climbed in teams of two in shifts around the clock. While sorting 18 days of food at base camp, Cowan declared that he was too overwhelmed to participate.

After the final hauls, we drilled our camp below a dihedral. We had pulled up 1,100 feet of rope from below, and were suspended 400 feet up overhanging rock. Lacking spotting scopes beforehand, route finding was achieved by jumping out from fixed lines. We climbed 60- and 70-meter pitches—which were generally continuous and thin—in extreme cold over many days. Dempster and Wilson—cousins with a long climbing partnership—accomplished most of the leads, as Cowan had intended to be my partner. Wilson accomplished the aid crux, an A4- hook traverse, and Dempster led an 80-meter pitch by tying ropes together.

With a thousand feet of rope fixed above, it appeared that the high point was within 600 feet of the summit, so we didn't move camp higher. By our tenth day on the wall, we could fix no more and so packed for a summit push, unaware if it was day or night.

It was snowing lightly as we left camp in poor visibility. Dempster excavated snow and ice from wide cracks above the high point. Finally, the angle eased and Wilson quickly drilled up a blank slab to gain a corner. Then we noticed the first blue skies after a week in poor weather. The clouds sank, revealing the most impressive view imaginable.

I aided to a pendulum point, then Wilson began free climbing with rock shoes, using bare fingertips in snow-filled 5.10 cracks. He continued up an overhanging bowl and arrived at a ledge ten feet from the summit. It had been 25 hours. We rested and talked in the warm sun, gazing over distant summits protruding from the massive ice caps beyond Stewart Valley.

Wilson and Dempster displayed their summit costumes—Dempster with hula skirt, and Wilson with an inflatable monkey. We had succeeded in the most significant climb of our lives. We began rappelling and collecting hardware and ropes. We slept well that day. Fourteen hours later, we had a casual breakfast in long sleeve shirts. Days before, Cowan and Shipman moved camp 3.5 miles towards Sam Ford Fjord, but would meet us below the wall to help us bring loads to the new camp. Soon our haulbags were packed and I jumared to retrieve two remaining ropes from above while Dempster and Wilson arranged the lowering system.

Wilson had fixed a 300-foot line with a 15-foot tail end to safeguard himself while maneuvering around the anchors. He was clipped to it with a Grigri. Another rope was needed to reach the snowfield, so he clipped a spare cord to his harness. He didn't tie knots in either end of the 300-foot rope.

Wilson would rappel first, then Dempster would lower the bags. I would descend last with the remaining ropes. Wilson must have forgotten that he was on the short end when he weighted the Grigri. He was speaking to Dempster as he began rappelling. It was the last time he was seen alive.

From above, I heard Wilson's scream. I looked down to see him falling through space, impacting hundreds of feet below, and finally coming to rest 700 feet below.

I descended to Dempster. There was enough rope to reach Wilson, so he rappelled to be sure there was no pulse. He wanted to lower all the bags immediately, so he returned to the anchors to set up a lowering system. I descended to the snowfield to dock the bags and dodged the rocks they dislodged. Fifteen hours after waking, everything was near Wilson's body.

I drilled an anchor where Wilson rested, retrieved my personal haulbag and continued rappelling. Dempster found a way to walk down, and met Cowan and Shipman to explain what happened. Later, we all decided to return to base camp and come back later to retrieve Wilson.

Temperatures on the lake had turned Styrofoam snow to wet slush. We post-holed to our knees with feet in ice water. The three-mile walk took five hours. At camp Shipman notified the police using our satellite phone. We agreed to retrieve Wilson after resting.

When we returned, Shipman and Dempster prepared Wilson for lowering using a long plastic sled. Soon everything was at lake level, but because it required all of our collective strength to push Wilson, we could carry nothing

else. It was raining, and the slush was waist deep in places. We left the bags tied together in case a helicopter could retrieve them. We returned to camp exhausted and received confirmation that the police had been dispatched to Sam Ford Fjord—about three miles away—to aid in the extraction of the body.

An outfitter was able to reach our camp by driving his snowmobile over rocks, sand, and snow. He retrieved Wilson and left, and the police urged us to meet them. We had little choice, as to retrieve our massive load of haulbags would require several trips, and the prospect had become virtually impossible under the circumstances.

We carried camp to Sam Ford and the police took Dempster and Wilson to Clyde River. Four days had passed since the accident. Cowan, Shipman, and I waited for three more days for our outfitters, who told us that the unusually rainy spring had come early in the Arctic. We were the last remaining people in the region. A month had passed.

The Inuit gave us permission to name the mountain in Wilson's memory. I will remember Drew for his simplistic approach to life, sense of humor, amazing climbing skills, and his sharp intellect. I remember once, while discussing plans before the climb, I referred to it as a "project." Drew said, "I don't see this as a project. I'm just here in this beautiful place, under a beautiful wall, having fun climbing every day." I realized that the word did imply a sense of uneasiness and duty, but for Drew Wilson, life on the wall was the life he loved most. (Source: Peter Dronkers)

*(Editor's Note: This is the first report of several on rappel failures in this year's report. See analysis of California's September 14 accident, page 40.)*

## **FAILURE TO FOLLOW ROUTE—STRANDED**

### **Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Edith, South Ridge**

On May 14, two male climbers (38 and 26) got lost while climbing the South Ridge of Mount Edith (2,554 meters) just west of Banff. They did not have very good information on the location of the descent route, although they had read about the route itself in a local alpine climbing guide. They began to rappel before reaching the summit, but ended up getting stranded above steep overhanging terrain on the Southwest Face. They were able to call for help on a cell phone. Warden Brad White said he initially spoke with one of the climbers by cell phone to try and nail down their location; however, where they were was nowhere near the descent route.

### **Analysis**

People often research the route itself, but should also be doing some research on the descent route before heading out climbing. In this case they managed to find some features that kind of mapped their description of the descent. But by not having a real good understanding of where on the mountain