

There are many factors that allow individuals to recognize the potentially serious consequences of avalanches and yet think that their personal situation is not so dangerous. In fact, studies on cognition have shown that people consistently rate their hazard evaluation skills significantly above average. We all feel we're smarter than average and consequently feel the hazard is not as great for ourselves as it is for others. (Source: Blaine Smith, Alaska Avalanche School/Alaska Mountain Safety Center)

## **FALL ON SNOW, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, FATIGUE**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress**

In 2004, the Humphrey twin brothers Jerry and Terry (55) along with Jerry's son Jeremy, climbed on the West Buttress in late May. Departing on May 24th, Jerry and Jeremy reached the summit on June 4th (11 days), while Terry, who was experiencing the effects of an upper respiratory infection, stayed behind at their 17,200-foot high camp.

The trio returned this year for another climb of the mountain with one of the goals being to have Terry go to the summit. Jeremy signed up as a solo climber with plans to attempt one-day ascents from the 14,200-foot camp. The three departed on April 29th, traveling together up to the 14,200-foot camp where the twins continued on to the 17,200-foot camp on May 8th. This was nearly a month earlier than the previous year's climb. Most years, climbers find colder conditions and more exposed ice. This year was no exception.

On May 7th, Jeremy made a one-day ascent of the upper West Rib and descended via the West Buttress. Below Denali Pass he encountered a short six- to eight-foot section of vertical ice that had formed since last year's season. Jeremy stated that this small step was the most difficult section of climbing he had encountered that day. He expressed these concerns to his father and uncle upon returning to the 14,200-foot camp. As quoted from his trip chronology, he stated, "Very dangerous up there, nothing like in 2004." On May 9th, the brothers took a rest day at the 17,200-foot high camp in preparation for their summit push the next day. On the 10th, both the Humphrey brothers and Jeremy departed from their respective camps for a summit attempt.

The following is Jeremy's account: "I leave camp at 8 a.m. in bitter cold. I climb to the top of the Messner at the Football Field in 4 hours exactly making it 12 noon. I try to call T and J, but get no answer. Two hours later I am on the summit sharing it with two Swiss climbers (Suzanne and Fran). I rest there in cold but sunny weather for about 45 minutes. I am tired and have a headache, but relieved to be heading down. The six-hour dash to

the summit has taken more out of me than I thought it would. I try to call T and J again with no answer. I pass many climbers on the way down, but still no T and J.

“Finally, I encounter Terry and Jerry near the Japanese Weather Station. I estimate the time at roughly 4 to 4:30 pm. I am not happy to see them so low on the route so late in the day. Jerry looks anxious about how far they have to go, and Terry looks exhausted. They are not roped together. I do not mention it. They are using one ax in self-arrest grip and one ski pole in the other hand, a reasonable combo that I use myself.

“Jerry asks me, ‘Do you think we can make it?’ I ask, ‘Why are you moving so slowly?’ Jerry rolls his eyes at me. Terry leans over, out of breath. I tell Jerry, ‘Yes you can make it, but you are moving so slowly you should go down.’ A stupid oxymoron of a sentence brought on by my fatigue and belief that Jerry would bring them through. I point out some clouds that have surrounded the summit. They are not threatening but just obscuring the visibility up there. They would later dissipate becoming a non-factor as seen in the summit pictures.

“Jerry changes the subject, not letting my advice deter them. He is worried about me because I look beat up. My face is sun burnt and swollen from the cold and altitude. They try to give me food and water, but I refuse insisting that they need it more than I do. I am cold standing still in the wind, so I prepare to move on. I wish them luck. I tell them to keep their radio on and be careful. I ask about the route around the Denali Pass bergschrunds. Jerry tells me the first is steep, then turn left and out flank the second one by going almost over to the rocks.”

The following account is provided by Clark Fyans, a guide for Mountain Trip: “On the morning of the 10th, the brothers left for the summit between 11:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. There were approximately 15 climbers ahead of them attempting the summit. One of the climbing groups was a guided Mountain Trip group of 6, led by Clark Fyans. As Clark ascended the traverse from camp to Denali Pass, he fixed pickets to protect his team during the ascent and descent. A total of 10-11 pickets were placed and used in conjunction with NPS pickets placed in previous years. One picket was also placed on the summit headwall.

“Clark’s group reached the summit at 4:15 p.m. and spent about an hour on the top. On the descent from the summit headwall, he encountered a three-person rope team from Zurich heading towards the summit. Clark offered to leave all of his protection in place for them to use on their descent for safety and they agreed. When the Mountain Trip team approached the football field (19,500 feet), they came across Jerry and Terry. Terry continued to move slowly toward the summit as Jerry chatted with the group

for about five minutes. He was very casual and spoke of his plans to climb Everest in 2006. Clark expressed a concern for their slow pace late into the day, and Jerry stated that Terry was moving slowly and was really tired, but they had planned to descend late in the night. Clark explained that he was leaving the protection in for the other climbing team and they would be welcomed to use it. Jerry said it would be of no use to them because they had no ropes or harnesses, only ice axes and crampons. The Mountain Trip group continued to descend and arrived at camp at approximately 7:00 p.m. When the three Zurich climbers returned to camp at about 10:00 p.m., they expressed concern to Clark about the brothers. They said that they were moving very slow and that Terry looked extremely tired. They were last seen as the Zurich climbers descended the summit headwall at about 8:00 p.m. Jerry and Terry repeated to the Zurich climbers that they were expecting to have a long day and to descend late. Knowing that the brothers had a FRS radio to communicate with Jeremy at Camp 3, Clark put his radio on scan for the entire evening in the event that they called for help.”

The three Zurich climbers (Altitude High 2005) led by Andrei Lenkei were the last to see the brothers alive. As they were descending from the summit ridge at 2000, they met Jerry and Terry half way up the final slope to the ridge. Lenkei reported that Jerry looked real strong while Terry was really struggling to make any upward progress. During this brief encounter, Terry was observed stepping around a small crevasse. Jerry was near him continually encouraging Terry with every step. They noticed that Jerry had a pack while Terry only wore his jacket. The Zurich party had concern for their welfare and Lenkei’s personal opinion of this situation was that they should turn back and go down. They asked the brothers about leaving in the pickets on the traverse below Denali Pass and Jerry responded, “Don’t leave the pickets in, take them out. We don’t have a harness or rope.”

It took the Zurich team about four hours to descend and they went to sleep around 1:00 a.m. on June 11. Lenkei reported that he looked up toward the pass at this time and the brothers had not yet come into view.

The following statement is the discussion Jeremy had with his father by radio an hour or two before the accident: “At a time that I can’t confirm or even speculate on, I am awakened by Jerry on the radio. He asks am I OK. I say yes and ask, ‘Where are you?’ I have to ask about 5 times before the radio is clear enough for him to understand. He answers, ‘At the Japanese Weather Station.’ I ask, ‘Are you guys OK?’ He says yes, but the transmission is breaking up, so he will call me in one hour at the bottom of Denali Pass. I am worried about him, but an intense fatigue forces me to sleep. I did not receive another call.”

Clark Fyan’s account continues: “The next morning Clark checked their snow cave to see if they had returned at 8:30 a.m., and when he found it

empty, he called the Rangers at the 14,200-foot camp below on the FRS radio to see if they had made any contact with them. Jeremy, who was also monitoring the radio, stated that he last heard from them at about 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. the previous night. They were at the Japanese weather station just above Denali Pass.

“At 9:00 a.m., Clark spotted two objects approximately 1200 feet below the Denali Pass traverse in the Upper Peter’s Basin. NPS Climbing Ranger Karen Hilton agreed to have Clark first-respond to the objects. Due to the lack of radio coverage between Camp 3 and the Peter’s Basin, a member of the Mountain Trip team, Guy Cotter, would remain at camp and act as a radio relay. Clark Evans and Mark Sedon, also a member of the Mountain Trip team, roped up and carried sleeping bags, two liters hot water, food, and first-aid equipment. About 15 minutes from High Camp, they encountered the two subjects about one meter apart. Jerry was face down and Terry was on his left side, both heads orientated the same direction. No heartbeats were present in either of them. Terry had obvious trauma to his left forehead and his left shoulder. His outer insulated jacket was zipped open, and had on only liner gloves. Jerry also had obvious head trauma. His insulated pants were ripped and around his knees and he had bare hands. They had no ice axes.

“Denali Pass was hard, wind-packed snow with little or no blue ice. There were two large bergschrunds blocking the traditional route. One was located just as elevation is started to be gained, and the other was about two-thirds the way up the traverse. The lower bergschrund had a small bridge that made it easily passable while the upper bergschrund had a two-meter vertical section of very hard snow. One picket was placed just below the vertical section, and another about 5 meters above.

“The bodies were found [on the] fall line of the vertical section of the upper bergschrund. It is assumed that one brother was probably attempting to help the other down-climb the vertical section.”

At 9:45 a.m., Ranger Karen Hilton notified the Talkeetna Ranger Station of the Humphrey’s overdue status. At 11:05, Fyan notified Hilton that the two were confirmed deceased. The weather was flyable so the NPS contract Lama Helicopter was put on standby for a possible recovery of the bodies.

At 2:23 p.m. the Humphrey’s were extracted from the 17,200-foot camp and short-hauled directly to the 7,200-foot basecamp and then flown to Talkeetna.

### **Analysis**

The following observations were made of Terry and Jerry’s last camp in a snow cave at the 17,200-foot camp by Ranger Joe Reichert on June 12th: “The final camp occupied by the brothers was a small snow cave at the 17,200-foot level on the West Buttress. The cave was approximately 50 feet west of the NPS rescue cache. Clark had looked in it on the morning of

June 11 to determine that the party had not returned. When I moved the shovel and snow blocking the entrance, the first items encountered were a rope, two harnesses and the associated climbing safety protection. Under and behind this equipment were their sleeping bags, food, and cooking equipment. All of the gear was dusted with snow that blew in through the entrance that was not completely sealed. It appeared to me that they had initially planned to use the safety equipment and made a last minute decision to leave it behind.”

Analysis by Daryl Miller: “The Descent of Denali Pass has been the primary catalyst for climbing accidents on Mount McKinley. There have been more than 100 reported accidents resulting in eight fatalities since 1960. The snowy and sometimes icy trail that traverses up a 30- to 40-degree slope from the 17,200-foot high camp to the 18,200-foot Pass is very deceptive. Climbers are typically hydrated and at their strongest when ascending the pass at the beginning of their long summit day. The opposite is true on the descent at the end of the day, with some climbers physically and mentally exhausted as well hypoxic and dehydrated.

“At the time the Humphrey Brothers would have been down-climbing, the light would have been extremely flat and near dark on their descent from Denali Pass, with sub-zero temperatures. Because their fall was not witnessed, the exact manner and just how it happened can only be speculated. One theory that would appear to be supported by the fall line in the snow is that the brothers were attempting to down-climb the two-meter steep section and one fell into the other, causing both to fall approximately 1,000 feet.

“It is unclear why the brothers chose not to take their rope and why they didn’t turn around and descend when moving so slowly. It is my professional judgment that these men were more than likely exhausted and had no chance of self-arrest when they fell. In my 24 years of climbing on Denali, my most perilous moment was in 1991 descending Denali Pass after a rescue with another mountaineering ranger. We were both exhausted and hypoxic from managing a lowering of a stricken climber at 19,800 feet. Our descent took almost two hours of roped and careful down-climbing, belaying each other as we descended. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Terry and Jerry who had no way to protect them from a slip or fall. This tragic accident served as a harsh reminder early in this climbing season that Denali Pass is still a very dangerous and an unforgiving section of the climb.”

## **HACE AND HAPE**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress**

On June 8, the “AAI-1-Taylor” expedition arrived at base camp to start their ascent of the West Buttress. The team arrived at the 14,200-foot camp on