

the fall ripped out the piece. Roped teams must be proficient at self-arrest, and group arrest. (Source: Jeff Scheetz, Portland Mountain Rescue, and an article from *The Seattle Times* on June 18)

FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING ROPE UNDER LEG, FATIGUE

Oregon, Smith Rock State Park, Five Gallon Buckets

On October 29, Matt Amling (21) of Portland traveled to Smith Rock State Park with his climbing class from a Willamette Valley Community College. The class was working on Five Gallon Buckets, a 5.8 climb rated four stars by Jonathan Thesenga in his new guide *Smith Rock Select*, published in 2006 by Wolverine Publishing, Newcastle, CO.

Matt was lead-climbing his final pitch of the day. He notes that he was pretty tired and was just about to clip the top anchors when his instructor warned him that his climbing rope was under his leg. At that moment, Matt lost friction with the crag and fell. He dropped about ten feet, ending up jerked upside down. His head banged hard against the rock, he recalls. He was not knocked unconscious, but he received a cut on his forehead, perhaps from his helmet, that later required stitches. He was bleeding profusely.

The instructor called 911 from a cellphone. Matt was lowered to the ground and was helped down the climber's trace to a waiting State Park ATV which transported him up the steep trail to waiting Paramedics from Redmond Fire Department.

The Paramedics cleaned the cut and applied a temporary bandage and agreed that he could be transported by the Instructor in a private car to the ER, thereby saving the high cost of ambulance service. He was stitched up at the ER and released.

Analysis

Five Gallon Buckets is completely bolted and is a very popular Smith Rock top rope climb. If one allows the rope to pass under a leg and then falls, he or she may be jerked upside-down at the end of the fall. Keep the climbing rope in front of your legs. If Matt had not been wearing a climbing helmet, he feels he might have died.

This mishap is one of five reported minor accidents to sport climbers at Smith Rock in 2006. There were several un-reported accidents that were resolved unofficially by the injured climbers and their friends. (Source: Robert Speik)

STRANDED, LATE START, WEATHER, EXPOSURE, PROBABLE FALL ON SNOW/ICE (TWO), AND HYPOTHERMIA (ONE)

Oregon, Mount Hood, Cooper Spur

This high profile accident used such technological search tools as airborne

thermal imaging, unmanned drones, and cellphone localization. It received national media coverage for more than a week. The writer has attempted to limit conclusions on facts and observations obtained through interviews and correspondence with on-scene rescuers. However, until more clues are uncovered with the melting snowpack, some uncertainty remains. Presented here are the most probable scenarios consistent with all known facts.

On December 6, three highly experienced climbers, Kelly James (48), Brian Hall (37), and Jerry Cooke (36), drove to the Cooper Spur winter trailhead and hiked the ski trail to the warming hut at Tilly Jane Campground.

Other visitors at the hut described the group as well equipped for their climb (stove, fuel, bivy gear, shovel, etc). On the way from Hood River, they left a note at a USFS ranger station with their plans to climb the North Face Gully and descend the route. On December 7, the party probably ascended the lower Cooper Spur route, thereby accessing the Eliot Glacier. It is likely that they bivouacked on the glacier before reaching the bergschrund start of their North Face route. On December 8, the group summited late in the day. From the summit, faint tracks led down the upper portion of the Wy'east route (ridge above Steel Cliff) several hundred yards before turning east down the fall line. About 500 feet below the crest, the party constructed a three-person snow cave, providing shelter and rest while waiting for better visibility before continuing their descent the next day. After traveling approximately 300 yards from the snow cave, the party reached the upper couloir of the Cooper Spur route. The North Face Couloir route merges here also. At this point, they may have recognized their previous climb and thus the starting point for the descent of the Cooper Spur route.

At this exposed 50-degree slope, they placed a snow anchor (two pickets and webbing) and dug a belay/rappel platform adjacent to a rock outcropping. It appears that a falling accident involved two climbers (Hall and Cooke). The searchers found two ice tools, two short pieces of 7.5 mm climbing rope (about 40 feet), a single glove, and a foam pad on the belay platform.

On December 10, the party failed to meet friends waiting at Timberline Lodge and the Hood River County Sheriff was notified. At 3:45 p.m., Kelly James placed a four-minute cell phone call to his wife in Texas indicating that he was in a snow cave near the summit while his two companions were descending the mountain to seek assistance. The call ended abruptly, causing concern. Sensing distress, James' wife called authorities to report the incident. The content of the call was described as "disorganized" and was "not good information" according to a sheriff's deputy. Eight days later, James was found deceased, lightly clothed in the large snow cave with minimal equipment (no sleeping bag, no bivy sack, no insulating pad, no stove). The

cave did contain his backpack, cellphone, ice tool, crampons, harness, and belay/rappel device. A subsequent medical examiner report stated that he died of hypothermia, but no other injuries were discovered. The other two climbers were not found and are presumed dead.

Analysis

Photographs retrieved from a camera found in the snow cave suggest that the party was on the face late in the day due to a slow start. The pictures also indicate that the party was traveling light, suggesting an equipment cache below the start of the climb. The absence of a summit photo also suggests summit arrival after dark. From footprints found on the summit area, it appears that the party could not find the start of the Southside descent route (rimmed rock formations known as the “Pearly Gates”) due to poor visibility (snow spindrift or ground /fog) or the loss of daylight. They ended up descending the upper Wy’east route.

After several hundred yards, the group decided to descend the Cooper Spur route instead. This decision was likely prompted by the milder winds experienced on the easterly (leeward) exposure. After leaving the windy crest, they dug a large snow cave, seeking shelter and awaiting a break in the storm. Faint tracks suggest that at least one climber explored the area below the cave (top of Black Spider Couloir system) probably looking for a safe descent route. Winds did not drop significantly until about 5:00 p.m., so it is likely they remained in the cave until Sunday morning. They probably left the cave about 7:00 a.m. Sunday to continue their traverse/descent via the Cooper Spur route. At the anchor site, the two pieces of cut rope, ice tools, one glove, and steep terrain all suggest a catastrophic falling accident. A small avalanche could also produce the same effect.

The initial scenario carried by the media involves the intentional separation of the party at the snow cave. James, presumably in a weaker state, was left behind while Hall and Cooke descended to get assistance. This corresponds with the message James gave his wife. However, it is difficult to explain why a 911 call was not placed, since there were at least two phones in the party.

Leaving a fellow climber behind is a desperate action, and the obvious admission that a self-rescue was not possible. The snow cave was later shown to be cellphone friendly, at least for James’ phone. Another inconsistency is the foam pad found at the belay/rappel anchor site. It seems unlikely that both Hall and Cooke would intentionally leave James lying on a snow cave floor without the very important insulating pad. The absence of any physical injury of James also does not support the “injured climber left behind” assumption, although he could have been suffering more than the others from exhaustion, hypothermia, or altitude sickness.

A different scenario which may better fit the facts supposes that the entire party left the snowcave seeking the Cooper Spur descent. At this point, the climbers may have optimistically expected self-rescue, so no 911 call was placed. A belaying or rappelling accident, avalanche, or perhaps an unroped fall by Cooke and Hall could have left James stranded at the belay/rappel anchor.

High winds, hard ice surface conditions, or unstable snow may have caused such an accident. As the sole survivor, James would be emotionally distraught, perhaps irrational, and may have forgotten his insulating pad as he returned to the snow cave.

The weather experienced by the party was predicted. During the approach, the party enjoyed fair weather. While on the North Face on Friday the climbers experienced cold temperatures (as low as 15 degrees F) and no solar heating for the entire ascent. Winds were estimated at 10–20 mph. Very early Saturday morning brought colder temperatures, several inches of snow, and higher winds.

Later in the day, summit wind estimates picked up to 35 mph sustained. On Sunday morning, the temperatures increased to about 20 degree F and the winds abated to about 20 mph. However, the arrival of a second storm front in the afternoon raised summit winds to about 45 mph sustained. Since the arrival of the first storm on Friday night, it is likely that the summit was engulfed in ground fog with very limited visibility. On late Sunday a severe storm system hit the mountain preventing searchers from approaching the summit for a full week.

The route conditions during this climb are believed to have been good. Aerial photographs taken one week later (after the major storm) suggest that there was adequate consolidated snow cover and sustained sub-freezing temperatures needed to cement the volcanic rock and provide purchase for crampon points and ice tools.

It is not known why the party started the climb so late in the morning, as they allowed themselves one-and-a-half days for the approach from the trailhead. Retreating from this route would be difficult and would involve many roped pitches of down-climbing or rappelling, which is slow even for a party of two. Once on the route, proceeding to the summit was likely viewed as the fastest way off the route. The fault in this logic is that getting off the mountain can be much harder than completing the ascent route.

While experienced climbers are capable of surviving weeks in snow caves if they have appropriate equipment (extra food, stoves, bivouac gear), such equipment may slow the speed of approach ascent and retreat. This may cause an increase in overall risk to the climbers when timing or a time limitations are necessary to safely complete a climb. Winter climbing conditions

can be particularly difficult due to the short days, low temperatures, frequent and long duration storms. For this particular accident, it appears that all of the bivy gear was cached below the technical route and did not contribute to the survivability of the party. “Travel light” practitioners assume the risk associated with delaying action of injuries or storms. It appears that James was only able to survive in the snow cave for three to four days with his minimal equipment.

Climbers carrying cellphones are not always capable of reporting distress situations, especially in wilderness environments lacking urban cell coverage. In this case, the cellphone message appeared to be too late and non-specific to be useful. Also, radio-location of cellphone signals was not precise enough to be helpful. For those climbers who feel the need to rely on high technology, a Personal Locating Beacon (PLB) will provide fast and accurate location information to relevant authorities. Alternatively, a GPS-assisted cellphone (called Enhanced E911) could also help in situations where only a single cell tower is accessible.

As a direct consequence of this high profile search, the Oregon state legislature proposed bills which mandate electronic signaling devices (Personal Locator Beacons, Mountain Locator Beacon, GPS receiver with cellphone, and/or two-way radios) for all climbs above 10,000 on Mount Hood. Most local rescue personal and climbers encourage the use of such equipment but do not believe its use should be required. For this particular accident, the stormy weather delayed reaching even known locations in the summit area, so electronic signaling would not likely have affected the outcome. (Source: Jeff Scheetz, Portland Mountain Rescue)

(Editor’s Note: Robert Speik, one of our sources for reports from Oregon, has an interesting website readers may wish to access. It is as follows: <http://www.traditionalmountaineering.org>)

FALL ON SNOW, CLIMBING UNROPED

Utah, Mount Olympus

On January 21, a group of seven climbers from the Korean Alpine Club of Utah started an ascent of Mount Olympus from the Pete’s Rock trailhead. Their plan was to snowshoe to the South summit via the Tolcat Trail, then down-climb to the couloir between the two summits and descend the couloir back to the trail.

After summiting, the group began the down-climb to the couloir. This is a 50–70-degree snow climb, with areas of exposed rock and ice. The easiest route descends for about 300 feet and then traverses slightly West before continuing to the saddle between the summits. The climbers had removed their snowshoes and were down-climbing unroped and without crampons.