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AVALANCHE, CLIMBING UNROPED, PLACED NO PROTECTION

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount Barrill, Japanese Couloir

On Tuesday evening, May 15th, Andre Callari (33) and Brian Postlethwait (32) set out from their basecamp on the Ruth Glacier to climb the “Japanese Couloir” route on Mount Barrill. Several other parties on the glacier watched them begin their climb. On the 16th the weather was good and there were no sightings of Andre or Brian. On the 17th a team of two ascended half of the Japanese Couloir early in the morning, but chose to retreat due to soft, wet snow conditions. This team reported that Brian and Andre’s skis were still at the base of the route. Also on the 17th, a ranger team patrolled from the climbers’ basecamp up-glacier around Mount Barrill to the Don Sheldon Mountain House. This entire day was foggy with visibility limited to 300 feet. During this patrol, Ranger Joe Reichert interviewed three groups that had seen the duo begin their climb of Barrill. All of these reporting parties expected to see the team return by late on the 16th or the morning of May 17th, so Reichert alerted the Talkeetna Ranger Station that there was an overdue party on Mount Barrill.

On May 18th, the weather cleared enough in the evening to allow the NPS rescue helicopter to fly into the Ruth Glacier. Rangers John Evans and Reichert flew to investigate at 2100. The remains of the two climbers were quickly located in wet avalanche debris at the base of Mount Barrill’s South Face.

On May 19th, the NPS Lama helicopter returned and inserted NPS Mountaineering Rangers Evans and Reichert on the avalanche cone via a step-out operation. One at a time the deceased were flown back to base camp where they were transferred to Talkeetna Air Taxi and flown out to Talkeetna. On this day the ranger team also packed up all of Andre and Brian’s basecamp equipment so that it could be returned to the next of kin.

Analysis

The storm that dropped most of the snow involved in this avalanche occurred on May 14th during the day and into that night. On May 15th, the predominant east facing couloir on this route shed most of this new snow in a wet avalanche. Observing that the slide had already occurred, the climbers decided to climb the route. However, where this gully intersects the south ridge, the route traverses on a south and western aspect slope in order to circumvent a gendarme. This is where the fatal avalanche occurred and this slope, being at a higher elevation and different aspect, had not yet stabilized from Monday’s storm.

The learning point from this accident is that climbers must re-evaluate snow conditions as terrain and aspect change. Had the climbers chosen to travel roped and place protection, the consequences of the avalanche might have been different. (Source: Edited from a report by Joe Reichert, Ranger)

FALL INTO CREVASSE—UNABLE TO SELF-RESCUE

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

On May 25 about 1900, Val Todd (61) fell into a crevasse at the 7,500-foot level, about 2.5 miles out from basecamp on the Kahiltna Glacier. He dragged his companion, Berlin Nelson (61), until the fall was held by a combination of Nelson, rope drag, and a snow bridge approx 60 feet down. Nelson secured the rope and after determining that Todd was all right, dragged out his sled and pack. Todd was unable to extricate himself due to cold and tiredness, Nelson was also unable to rig a system to haul out the 235-pound Todd, so used their satellite phone to call for assistance.

The initial call went to their service, Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT). TAT notified basecamp by telephone, and they in turn notified Talkeetna. After further telephone conversation with Nelson, it was decided that a Ranger response was necessary and that the NPS contract Lama would ferry Ranger Evans and two VIP's (Volunteer in Parks) from Base Camp to the scene in order to carry out a rescue.

The Lama arrived at Base Camp at 2115 and picked up Ranger Evans' team to transport them to the scene. The injured team was located fairly easily and by 2125 the Lama was able to land close by (~100m) and the team disembarked and roped up to move to the scene while the Lama returned to basecamp. After assessing the situation by observation and talking to Nelson and Todd, it was decided to rig up a 9:1 haul system in order to extract Todd.

Once Todd was on the surface it could be seen that he had received a blow from his sled causing lacerations around his face, so it was decided that the best thing was to evacuate him and Nelson to basecamp via the Lama for further evaluation. Ranger Evans and the two VIPs were also extracted by the Lama. After further evaluation, it was deemed better for Todd to be flown back to Talkeetna with the Lama and to seek further medical care to clean and suture his wounds.

Analysis

This was a case where the lead climber Nelson had crossed over a hidden snow bridge safely when Todd, with no notice, broke through. The fact that Todd was quite heavily loaded, as well as being a heavy man, led to Nelson not being able to hold the initial fall, so luck was with both of them when Todd landed on the ledge. This arrest might have been helped had they