

FALL ON ROCK, UNSAFE POSITION, FATIGUE

Alaska, Skagway, Black Lake

On June 14, Karl (28) was climbing an unnamed, single-pitch sport route rated at 5.9 near Skagway. Just below the top of the route, he had clipped into the final bolt and was preparing to climb through the crux, where the final bolt was just to the right and above the climber, while the second-last bolt was below and to the left. The crux involved beginning just below a small overhang where the climber under-clings, before climbing above the bolt. Due to the varied surface of this rock, it is natural to place the rope behind one's legs when passing through the crux.

When Karl passed the bolt, he found the natural line to the left of the bolt. The result was that his rope went to the right to the final anchor and back to the left to the second-to-last anchor. At this point, the rope was taut and directly below, passing at 45 degree angle between the anchors. Karl was approximately 1.5 above his final point of protection and three meters above the rope passing between the two anchors.

When Karl fell at the crux, his legs were caught in the rope passing between the anchors, causing him to be thrown upside down. While undesirable, this in itself did not result in any injury. Karl was injured when his foot, caught on the rope, smashed upwards into the overhang.

Karl was lowered to the ground and evacuated to a health centre in Skagway, some 5 km away. He was later diagnosed with a fracture of the left talus.

Analysis

Karl had noticed from the ground that a previous climber was forced to attempt the crux with the rope behind her legs. He noted that this was undesirable and potentially dangerous. While at the crux this was confirmed. When Karl arrived at the crux, he was fatigued and did not feel especially strong. Rather than retreating, he attempted the crux knowing he could very well fall and knowing that a fall would be dangerous given the position of the anchors.

The climber should have evaluated his fitness, the configuration of the anchors, and the potential for injury and decided that this move should not have been attempted. Alternatively, Karl could have made a concerted effort to avoid the rope below him while falling. He could have also attempted a different line above the final anchor such that a fall would have avoided the rope. (Source: From a report sent in by Karl)

FALL INTO BERGSCHRUND, FROSTBITE, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

On the morning of June 16th, climbers woke to clear skies and calm winds at 17,200-foot high camp on the West Buttress. At 0800 as many as three

private parties and two guided groups headed out of camp for the summit. At 1300 the weather took a quick turn from clear to obscured skies, winds picked up to 10-15mph, and light snow began to fall. Visibility and winds remained tolerable above Denali Pass (18,200 feet) for all teams to continue their summit push; however, below the pass conditions were much worse. By the time the descending climbers reached Denali Pass, the snow and wind had created a new 5-20cm windslab across the traversing slope that leads from Denali Pass back to High Camp. New snow and whiteout conditions almost completely obscured the poorly marked boot-trail back to camp. All of these factors considerably slowed the downward progress of all the descending teams.

About 0100, Mountain Trip guide Zach Johnson made a FRS radio call to NPS staff at High Camp. He indicated he was unable to find his way back to camp due to poor visibility and asked for assistance. He described their location as somewhere below the traverse from Denali Pass on the upper Peters glacier. NPS staff geared up and began to leave camp when Johnson and a client appeared out of the whiteout having found their own way back to camp.

NPS Ranger Tucker Chenoweth, with the help of AMS guide Leighan Falley and Zach Johnson, left High Camp with a large bundle of wands and headed toward Denali Pass marking the trail as they went to assist the remaining team. A verbal call and response began between descending teams and the NPS team. Descending teams would at times appear from the clouds as if they were floating down the mountain. At 0200 contact was made with Mountain Trip guide Sean McManamy who indicated there were still two rope teams behind him, one of which was having difficulty descending. At this point Johnson joined McManamy and returned to camp to help with their clients. Chenoweth and Falley continued up marking the trail as they went.

About 800 feet above the lower rock band, a team of three climbers was sighted having difficulty descending (Expedition Café Com Leite from Brazil). One member of this team, Cid Vinhate, was having extreme difficulty with the new wind slab and continually lost his footing, almost pulling the other two off their feet. Mittens dangling from his wrist, packed with snow and only glove liners on, Vinhate also had lost his mobility in his hands and could not hold his ice ax. Chenoweth radioed the remaining NPS staff at High Camp for assistance. The NPS team climbed up and short roped Vinhate down to lower angle terrain at the bottom of the traverse. Here they were met by additional staff who escorted them back to camp where they were medically evaluated for altitude and frostbite concerns.

The NPS team moved back up the traverse to contact the only remaining team. About 1000 feet above the lower rock band, the remaining four-person team was spotted. It was decided to wait at the lower rock band and contact

them there. Guide Dave Staheli was the third person on a four-person rope team as they descended. As Staheli and his team moved below the rock band, the last client on the rope slipped and fell. Staheli immediately went into self-arrest and was pulled off his stance. Staheli came to rest about 20 feet downhill on an ice bridge, over a bergschrund. His client fell approximately 15 feet into the bergschrund and out of site. The rope was taught and a single picket was holding the weight of the client and Staheli. Chenoweth went down to Staheli and helped him out of the system as Falley fixed and reinforced Staheli's rope. Using another rope, Chenoweth and Staheli built a raising system and hauled the client out of the bergschrund. At 0500 all parties returned to High Camp and after medical assessment, no injuries were found.

At 1200 a reassessment of Vinhate indicated he had minor frostbite to one hand and that the team was fit to descend on their own. Also evaluated was MT-14-Staheli client Mark Howard, who sustained frostbite to two fingers from the tip to the distal knuckle. He was also able to descend with his team. Both were advised to check in with NPS staff at the 14,200-foot camp.

Analysis

On the morning of June 16th the weather looked promising for a good summit day and teams were lured out. The weather on Denali can change quickly, forcing teams to make difficult and important decisions. These three groups were very high on the mountain as the weather changed, but because the winds and temperatures remained tolerable they continued upward. All teams underestimated the newly snow loaded slopes and the ramifications of the low visibility conditions. Summit day usually takes anywhere from eight to fifteen hours. All teams were slowed down on the decent, the longest day being 20 hours. A day this long creates other problems such as extreme fatigue and increased exposure to weather. Under these conditions one small mistake could mean disaster and often does. Fatigue, difficult slab conditions, and a lack of sufficient wandering on the traverse back to High Camp caused problems for all teams. When the weather changes high on the mountain, it deserves acute attention. On summit day, anything less than a perfect day warrants concern. (Source: Tucker Chenoweth, Ranger, Denali National Park)

EXPOSURE (TOOK GLOVES OFF) – FROSTBITE

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

KAJ Denali 2008 (from Croatia) expedition members Jadranko Mlinaric (40) and Kristina Marjanovic made a summit attempt on June 27th, turning around at Denali Pass. Mlinaric stated that he removed his gloves for no more than ten minutes. But this resulted in frostbite to all ten fingers. The