

any good weather in the Alaska Range, this section of the climb is particularly dangerous. (Source: Nick Hartzell, Mt. McKinley National Park)

CEREBRAL EDEMA, ALTITUDE SICKNESS

Alaska, Mt. McKinley

On June 1, Bruce Hickson (22), Tom Crouch (23), and George Gonzales (26), members of an Air Force training team which had climbed the West Buttress, were camped at 18,000 feet at Denali Pass waiting to climb to the summit the next day. Hickson and Crouch developed acute mountain sickness here and were thought to be suffering from cerebral edema also. A rescue was requested through Rescue Coordination Center via radio. The two were evacuated by an Army CH47 helicopter the next day. Gonzales volunteered to accompany the two in the helicopter. (Source: Nick Hartzell, Mt. McKinley National Park)

Analysis

The team was not unusually fast in climbing to the dangerous altitude. The team used Diamox during the first half of the trip, hoping it would lessen the effects of high altitude. It is possible that, on an extended high altitude stay, Diamox might upset the body's natural efforts to acclimatize. (Source: Nick Hartzell, Mt. McKinley National Park)

CEREBRAL EDEMA, EXHAUSTION, BAD WEATHER

Alaska, Mt. McKinley

On the morning of June 22, while at 14,000 feet on the West Buttress, Charles Prentice (33) complained of headache. His group carried a load to 16,500 and Prentice did as well as the others. Four days after reaching 14,000 feet, the group moved to 17,000 feet. Prentice was slow on the ascent and lost his sleeping bag when it fell out of his pack. Prentice borrowed a sleeping bag shell from another team to use at this higher camp.

The next day the team made an attempt in marginal weather to go to the summit. They turned back because of wind. Prentice moved in with the Japanese team that night because their tent was warmer. He complained of headache and was lethargic and disoriented. Also, he was not in contact much with the rest of the team. The team had three days of very windy weather and were unable to move. During this time Prentice's condition worsened. Prentice was given about one hour of oxygen (left from a previous rescue).

When the weather cleared, Charley Campbell (the guide) decided the team was not strong enough to evacuate Prentice. The team descended, hoping to get help from below. They did not effectively organize a rescue team and descended to base camp to call for a rescue. Prentice, at 17,000 feet with Campbell, was unconscious at times for the next two days. Finally, after what the pilot of the Army CH47 helicopter called a "semi-controlled crash" landing at 17,000 feet, Campbell and Prentice were flown to Anchorage. (Source: Nick Hartzell, Mt. McKinley National Park)

Analysis

The only cure for altitude sickness, in this case cerebral edema, is descent. The team should have begun the descent with Prentice as soon as they suspected illness. By delaying, the team was exhausted by the storm and did not feel capable of bringing the victim down. The usual course cerebral edema takes is to progress from unconsciousness to death.

It is extremely important for a guide to realize the hazards involved in high altitude mountaineering with inexperienced climbers. The client depends to a great degree on the judgment of the guide. In this case, the team was placed in a position where they lacked the strength, experience, and leadership to safely evacuate the victim. (Source: Nick Hartzell, Mt. McKinley National Park)

FALL ON SNOW, DESCENDING UNROPED

Alaska, Chugach State Park

On the evening of August 7, 1978, Mark Figura (24), Bob Mintz (27), and Ralph Duerre (35) were enroute from Eklutna to Girdwood on a glacier trek. Figura was descending the 700-foot Raven Head Wall unroped and fell. He reportedly slid approximately 100 feet down a steep snow gully in a self-arrest position, plunged off the 12-foot upper lip of a bergschrund, struck the lower lip and fell another 30-plus vertical feet to an ice ledge. Although injured and in shock, he managed to climb from the crevasse unaided. It took 20 minutes for his partners to reach him and render assistance. They bivouacked approximately two hours and then helped Figura two miles down Raven Glacier to a point near Crow Pass. Figura was suffering from multiple bruises and lacerations and had lost approximately one pint of blood. Duerre ran for help in Girdwood while Mintz stayed to care for the now immobilized Figura. Alert was given at 12:45 a.m., August 8, with call out taking 45 minutes, plus an additional one hour of road travel to the marshalling area at Crow Pass Trailhead. SAR elements of the Alaska Rescue Group and REACT (commo support) coordinated by Ranger Doug Fessler, Chugach State Park, departed the trailhead for the rescue site at 3:30 a.m. and traveled four miles uphill over Crow Pass to reach the victim at 5 a.m. The victim was becoming hypothermic and was treated with warm fluids, I.V. solution, and lytocrine. Communication was established with Rescue Coordination Center (R.C.C.), Elmendorf Air Force Base, and an Air Force HH-3 helicopter with paramedic on board arrived on scene at 6:15 a.m. to transport the victim to Providence Hospital, Anchorage, for admission at 7:25 a.m. (Source: Rangers D. Fessler and D. Hourihan, Chugach State Park)

Analysis

Figura was fortunate in not sustaining more serious injuries in a fall of this nature. The Raven Head Wall is one of the more hazardous sections of this particular glacier traverse and roped/belayed travel is recommended and, perhaps, would have restricted this fall to a short ride and continued, enjoyable trip. (Source: Rangers D. Fessler and D. Hourihan, Chugach State Park)