CANADA

1984

MISSING CLIMBERS—CAUSE UNKNOWN
British Columbia, Rocky Mountains, Mount Robson

On August 17, 1984, Nicholas Vanderbilt (25) and Francis Gledhill (29) ascended the lower slopes of Mt. Robson to the hut 1500 meters above Killey Lake on the southwest side of the mountain. A snowstorm and heavy weather kept them there for three days. At 0500 on August 21, they set out in clear weather for the rock and ice of Wishbone Ridge. That night, lights were seen on the Wishbone Ridge from the Robson Parking lot. It was estimated that their bivouac was at 3300 meters, about 650 meters below the summit. The next day, another climbing party spotted them about 3500 meters. They were climbing in snow on the north flank of the Grand Couloir, southeast of Wishbone Ridge, still under favorable weather conditions. They were never seen again.

A helicopter search was begun after the climbers' safety registration expired on August 27. The participants were RCMP in Valemont, Mt. Robson Provincial Park Rangers, and later Jasper National Park Wardens. Searches were conducted from August 28 to September 1, but poor weather prevented searching effectively above 3200 meters. A sleeping bag was located in the Emperor Bowl, northwest of Wishbone Ridge. The sky cleared on September 2, and the searchers finally had a clear view of the summit and all the approach and descent routes. Nothing was found. Wishbone Ridge was examined once more before the search was called off.

The next summer, park wardens spent the day of July 19, 1985, in a renewed helicopter search for the bodies. The winter snow was gone and visibility was excellent, but no sign of the climbers was found. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

Analysis

The climbers were experienced, well equipped, and well informed, although their experience in the Canadian Rockies was limited. Since Robson is a mountain of some objective danger, accidents cannot totally be prevented. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

(Editor's Note: Publication of this account was delayed a year in the hope that last summer's search would reveal the nature of the accident. This was not to be.)

1985

FALLING ICE, CLIMBING UNROPED, INEXPERIENCE
Quebec, Shawbridge

At 1500 on March 2, 1985, a climber (40) with limited experience was climbing solo on a small knot of ice to the left of Shawbridge Face. She was trying out some new ice tools borrowed from another climber. When she was about five meters off the ground, she was struck by a 20 kg block of ice that hit her helmet and shoulder. The blow knocked her off the bulge and onto the snow slope below, and she rolled down the slope about 15 meters.

Two companions reached her soon after she stopped. She was unconscious on her back

and side, her head pointed down the slope. The companions were worried about a neck injury, and, while waiting for the ambulance, moved her only enough to calm her and make her comfortable. Another climber came by and helped them dig a trench in the snow to support the victim. Down jackets and vests were used to line the trench and were also piled on top of her. After transport to the hospital, it was found that she had a concussion, a broken shoulder blade, colorbone, and ribs. (Source: John Whyte)

Analysis

Climbing conditions were fair in the morning, but the sun came out about 1430, and it started to get warmer. The temperature was above freezing that day, and water could be expected to be running behind the ice. Fortunately, the climber was wearing a hard hat, even though she had remarked that it was uncomfortably warm. (Source: John Whyte and Martin Taylor)

AVALANCHE, FALL, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT
Quebec, Charlevoix Mountains, Montagne Blanche

At 1515 on March 3, 1985, a party of experienced skiers was approaching base camp at the end of a tour around Montagne Blanche. They were on a ski-mountaineering training exercise, but had decided not to ascend the mountain because of high winds, estimated at 70 km/h. They were on a gentle slope around 500 meters elevation, near the tree line, just above a steeper slope that was clear of trees, and which seemed to be inviting a downhill run. One skier (23) started down, followed by a second, Jacques (24), who fell on the slope one third of the way down. Another skier (23) started down, triggering an avalanche near the top of the slope. The avalanche swept over Jacques and buried him before he had time to get up. It then caught the lower skier, but he was carried to the bottom of the slope unharmed. The snow finally came to rest in the form of thick blocks that looked like seracs packed together.

The trip leader closed the slope to further skiing, and organized a search, using everyone present. The searchers lined up facing downhill, and probed with skis, starting from where Jacques was last seen. Within ten minutes, they found one of his skis. They continued to dig. Occasionally they detected something beneath the snow, which, on excavation, proved to be a buried tree. The wind became all the more biting after sunset, with a temperature of -25°C. Three of the searchers had frozen feet. Finally, at 1915, well after dark, the search was abandoned, since there was no longer any hope of finding Jacques alive. The trip leader had retained all 12 people for the search while there was still any possibility of finding Jacques alive, but now he sent two messengers to Anse St. Jean, two hours away.

The next morning, the Quebec Provincial Police sent a helicopter with a search dog and its handler. They found Jacques' body lying face down under two meters of snow in the place where he had fallen, eight meters uphill from where his ski had been found. (Source: Jean Rondeau, Federation Quebecoise de la Montagne)

Analysis

There had been rain the day before the accident, followed by temperatures falling to -20°C the day of the accident. The snow was 1.5 meters deep at the crest of the slope, where it parted, exposing ice-covered rock. The skier was particularly unfortunate to have fallen just before the avalanche swept over him.

Probing with two-meter skis is clearly inadequate when the victim is two meters beneath