

WEATHER, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT, HYPOTHERMIA, FROSTBITE

Wyoming, Tetons

On September 12, 1985, at 0815, a check of climbing registration permits at the Jenny Lake Ranger Station revealed that two parties were overdue from climbs on 9/11/85 of the Exum Ridge on the Grand Tetun. One party consisted of Greg Findley (24), Nils Green (23), and John Atthowe (23). The other was comprised of Glenn Martin, Randy Marcy, Connie Marcy and R. Scott Bowen. The weather on the valley floor at this time was raining and windy, with a constant low cloud cover only about 150 meters above the valley floor. The Lupine Meadows trailhead was checked and the vehicles belonging to both parties were still in the parking lot. Through the clouds new snow was visible on the bottom of the mountains, less than 150 vertical meters above the valley floor.

Plans were initiated to send in a team of two rangers, Renny Jackson and Jim Woodmency, to try and meet the overdue parties. At 0945, Jackson phoned the office of Exum Mountain Guides to get permission to use their hut at the Lower Saddle in the event of a rescue. Jackson spoke with co-owner Rod Newcomb, who related that he had observed climbing parties on the Exum Ridge the previous day about 1400. One was at the Friction Pitch, and the other was at the Golden Staircase. Newcomb made these observations from the Eye of the Needle area. He said it began to snow about 15 minutes later. Jackson and Woodmency began preparing for a climb of the Grand in winter conditions.

The cloud cover began to lift before Jackson and Woodmency were ready to leave. The buttresses on Disappointment Peak became visible, with the ceiling between 3000 and 3250 meters. The Bridger-Teton helicopter was requested, in the hope that the advance team could be flown to the Meadows or higher in Garnet Canyon, which would have saved two to five hours of hiking time.

At 1205, Jackson flew in the helicopter to the entrance of Garnet Canyon, but the ship was unable to go any further. Under full power, the airspeed indicator read 60, but the ship was not moving forward. The ship returned Jackson to Lupine Meadows and Jackson and Woodmency left the trailhead into Garnet Canyon at 1230.

At 1455, Jackson and Woodmency contacted members of the Day/Karasch and Campbell/Herbine parties near the Platforms. The rangers were told that the Martin party was all right and were in their camp on the Moraine. However, Campbell said that five people, a group of three and a group of two, had not returned to the Lower Saddle the previous night after having left the previous day for climbs of the Exum Ridge. The party of two was subsequently identified as being Paul Johnson (40) and Ken Webb (39). They had registered to climb the Exum Ridge, but according to their itinerary, were not due for another day. With the winter-like conditions that they found and the information supplied by Campbell, Jackson started to think that a "major rescue" situation was developing.

Based on this information, seven additional climbing rangers were told to report to the rescue cache and begin putting together their gear so they could follow the advance team in. At 1555, Jackson and Woodmency reached Petzoldt's Caves and found the Findley party's tent empty, except for gear. At 1630, Yellowstone National Park's high altitude Llama helicopter was requested to be on hand in case of a break in the weather. Jackson and Woodmency contacted the Martin party on the lower end of the Moraine at 1710, having encountered winter-like conditions above the Caves, with blowing snow, one meter drifts, and cold temperatures. Martin told Jackson that his group had made the summit the previous day and encountered terrible conditions on their descent. Martin did recall hearing voices close by behind them as they descended, just below the Upper Saddle the previous day.

Jackson and Woodmencey continued up and found the fixed rope below the Lower Saddle covered with water ice. They reached the Saddle at 1750, and encountered poor visibility due to wind driven snow. They had difficulty standing and walking because of very high winds that Jackson estimated to have been around 90 knots. They spent about an hour in the hut at the Saddle melting water and gearing up for a recon of the lower Owen Spalding route descent, based on the Martin party's information that they heard voices in the vicinity of the main Owen rappel off the summit block.

About 1900, Jackson and Woodmencey left the Saddle with full gear for their Owen Couloir recon. They reached a point just below the Eye of the Needle and found no sign of people and got no response to their shouts. It had gotten dark, so they retreated to the hut at the Saddle, descending in darkness. They reached the hut at 1040 and began melting snow and cooking for four people, as Rangers Leo Larson and Randy Harrington were nearing the Saddle.

At 2110, Woodmencey left the hut for the top of the fixed rope to help guide Larson and Harrington up the final way to the Saddle. Woodmencey looked up toward the Grand Teton and saw a light on the south side. He observed three flashes of light from the source, and acknowledged with three flashes from his light.

Woodmencey thought that the light had originated from the vicinity of the Black Dike Traverse, near the base of the Exum or Petzoldt ridges. Woodmencey and Jackson packed light packs to take in trying to reach the light source. They intended to have Larson and Harrington stay at the Saddle, help guide them to the light, and then have them bring any needed equipment. At 2150 Harrington and Larson reached the Saddle.

Jackson and Woodmencey climbed up to the Black Dike Traverse and reached a promontory below the base of the Lower Exum Ridge. High winds and poor visibility with blowing snow made it impossible for Jackson and Woodmencey to see the distress light or to establish voice contact. At the Saddle, Harrington and Larson saw that the distress light was well above the lights of Jackson and Woodmencey, placing it somewhere in the Wall Street Couloir.

The following plan was devised. Harrington and Larson would bring up three sleeping bags and pads, one tent, stove fuel and cook kit, two ropes and a lot of climbing hardware. Woodmencey and Jackson would wait at the Black Dike and divide loads up there when Harrington and Larson arrived. All four would then climb the regular route (via the Owen Couloir and the Eye of the Needle) into the Wall Street Couloir, and then descend to the light source from above. Meanwhile, Rangers Carr and Gagner, who reached the Caves, would move up to the Lower Saddle in support.

At 0118, Carr and Gagner reached the Lower Saddle. About the same time, Jackson established voice contact (faint) below him in the Wall Street Couloir. Jackson, Harrington, Woodmencey, and Larson downclimbed the couloir about 70 meters, set up their last rope for a rappel, and reached Paul Johnson about 0145. They found him seriously hypothermic and almost incoherent.

Between 0145 and 0239, Johnson was cared for initially, and the rangers determined that there was another live person 50 meters below. Woodmencey rappelled down to Greg Findley, who seemed to be in better shape than Johnson. Findley was attached to a shakey nut anchor and was standing with a frozen rope coiled around him. Findley told the rangers that he and Johnson had been in their relative positions for two to three hours. Findley was disentangled from all of his various attachments and then, with a belay from above, was assisted back up to join the rest of the party.

Based on information from Findley and Johnson, the whereabouts of the three other

climbers was determined. Some time between afternoon and dusk, Findley and Johnson had left Nils Green and Ken Webb up above in the couloir. When they left them, both Green and Webb were unable to move due to hypothermia, and both were in a state of semi-consciousness or worse. The third climber, John Atthowe, also suffering from advanced hypothermia, had fallen off the cliff band below Findley's location.

Jackson's assessment of their situation and the above information was that (a) Findley, and especially Johnson, had to be rewarmed immediately if they were going to survive; (b) the two up above, Green and Webb, had been left 7-10 hours before in states of advanced hypothermia, and were probably beyond the team's help; (c) to have people searching above them at night under poor conditions would greatly enhance the rockfall hazard to the six of them; and (d) there was no hope for Atthowe.

The focus of the operation on the mountain the rest of the night, then, became to rewarm Johnson and Findley. Between 0239 and 0530, Johnson and Findley were each put in sleeping bags with rangers on either side, and a large sleeping bag over all four. Jackson tended the stove all night making hot drinks, with everyone trying to stay warm.

About 0530, Jackson and the rest started moving, uncoiling frozen ropes, and getting Findley and Johnson ready. They decided to leapfrog with the ropes that they had (three) on the climb to the ridgecrest leading to the Eye of the Needle, and there to meet Carr and Gagner, who were bringing additional ropes for the rappels down the Owen Couloir. Jackson fixed lines while Harrington, Larson, and Woodmencey escorted Johnson and Findley each step of the way with Gibbs ascenders on icy ropes.

Starting at 0730, additional manpower was flown in to the Lower Saddle, since the morning of the 13th dawned clear with tolerable winds for air operations. Rangers Burgette and Berkenfield were deployed on the Black Dike traverse, and located John Atthowe at the base of the cliff over which he had fallen the previous day. Atthowe was buried under the snow, with only a small area of his body visible. Rangers Gagner and Larson located the bodies of Walter Nils Green and Ken Webb above the Wall Street traverse in the Wall Street Couloir, between 3750 and 3850 meters. The evacuation by sling load of Green, Webb and Atthowe started while Johnson and Findley were still being evacuated down the Owen Couloir. Green was flown to Lupine Meadows at 0930, Webb at 0940, and Atthowe at 1005. Green, Webb, and Atthowe were all transported by the Teton County Coroner to St. John's Hospital. Doctors at St. John's pronounced Green and Webb dead. For a while, doctors thought they detected faint life signs in Atthowe. They rewarmed his body but were unable to revive him.

At 1032, the rescue party reached the Lower Saddle with Johnson and Findley. Both were flown to St. John's, arriving at 1115. By this time, their hypothermia had started to be reversed, but both were suffering from frostbite, the worst of which was Findley's feet. Johnson's camp on the Moraine and Findley's at the Caves were recovered and taken to Lupine Meadows, where all property was inventoried and secured. The operation was concluded at 1700. (Source: Peter Armington, Ranger, Grand Teton National Park)

Analysis

This accident is told from the point of view of the rescuers to provide some insight as to how a response is made to such difficult situations as this. In terms of the climbers and the chronology of events which led to their predicament, another several pages could be presented. The major problems were: (a) they were caught by a severe storm; (b) they were not familiar with the route and this, combined with whiteout conditions, put them off the descent route; (c) the Findley party did not have clothing adequate for the conditions and had no extra

food; and (d) having to share clothing and food adequate for two among five hastened the hypothermia process. (Source: From interviews conducted by Peter Armington, Ranger, Grand Teton National Park)