

## AVALANCHE

### Alaska, Mount Hunter

On May 15, 1987, the two-man “Over-the-Kahiltna Gang” expedition registered at the Talkeetna Ranger Station for a climb of the west ridge of Mount Hunter. Expedition members were Ben Benson (29) and Frank Jenkins (37), both from Anchorage. On May 28, about 0530, Benson and Jenkins were approaching the summit of Mount Hunter (4415 meters) when they triggered a soft-slab avalanche which swept both men several hundred meters down the slope they had just ascended. Jenkins was almost completely buried during the slide, but after considerable effort and between 30 and 45 minutes, he was able to dig himself out. Jenkins was then able to follow their climbing rope to locate Benson, who was completely buried. Another 10 to 15 minutes was required to extricate Benson’s head and chest. Jenkins determined Benson was dead. The weather was severe and Jenkins was forced to begin an immediate solo descent of the difficult west ridge. Jenkins was eventually able to reach another climbing party at about 3200 meters on the west ridge. Poor weather prevented their descent to the Kahiltna Base Camp until May 29. Snow has covered all evidence of Benson’s body and has prohibited recovery efforts. (Source: Bob Seibert, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

### Analysis

Even though Benson and Jenkins began their climb concerned about avalanche dangers, they quickly dismissed those hazards when they encountered solid snow conditions on the lower portions of the route.

Even after several consecutive days of significant snowfall and strong winds, and triggering a slab avalanche earlier on the day of the accident, the climbing party did not realize there was an avalanche hazard. After the accident, Jenkins stated that when he and Benson disagreed about the final route to the summit, Jenkins’ reasoning to use the ridge was based upon time they might spend in a belay stance rather than less avalanche hazard. The climbers simply did not think there was an avalanche hazard. Other observations:

- Jenkins had removed his pack and disconnected the straps from his arms to his ice ax. He was able to “swim” during the slide. This may have had a significant effect upon Jenkins’ final position in the snow. In contrast, Benson was wearing his pack, including waist belt, and had an ice tool attached to both wrists. Benson’s final “spread-eagle” resting position indicates the extra drag of the tools and pack may have been instrumental in determining his final position.
- Both climbers had received basic avalanche awareness training through Anchorage Community College. (See Pioneer Peak accident, March 16, 1987).
- Jenkins had received basic first-aid training with the military many years before. He never had advanced medical or CPR training. He indicated he never gave thought to CPR. Even though it was probably too late, an effort to initiate full CPR would have probably been appropriate. The few chest compressions were not given in conjunction with supplemental breaths.
- Benson had been described as a very strong-willed individual who would be very difficult to turn from a specific direction once he had made a decision. Jenkins was an opposite personality who did not like to argue. Benson’s fateful decision to take the direct route up the slope rather than continue the additional 100 meters to the summit

ridge sealed his fate. (Source: Bob Seibert, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

## **HAPE, CE, ASCENDING TOO FAST**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley**

During May and early June, members of three separate foreign climbing teams were diagnosed as having High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE).

Victor Grosley and Thomas Jannik (46), Yugoslavian climbers with extensive high-altitude experience, were delayed in their arrival to the mountain due to lost luggage. In an attempt to make up lost time, they climbed 1500 meters in less than 48 hours. At the 4500-meter level, Jannik was extremely ataxic, with symptoms of HAPE and Cerebral Edema (CE). Ranger Scott Gill organized a sled evacuation, and around the 4000-meter level, Jannik was able to continue the descent on his own.

Sachikie Takada (37) was a member of a three-person Japanese expedition to the West Buttress. By May 23, they were at the 5200-meter camp when they decided to descend to the 4300-meter camp because of weather and Takada's condition. A French expedition noticed her and sledged her to the medical facility, where even after 24 hours of oxygen and Diamox, she was still nonambulatory. Her partners showed little concern and were reportedly of no help in getting her to the medical tent.

A West German party of two made a five-day ascent of the West Buttress. Hubert Eggert (26) descended before reaching the summit, returning to the 5200-meter camp while his partner continued to the top with another team. The next morning, Eggert was semiconscious and did not respond to stimulation. He had to be lowered to the 4300-meter camp where he was put on oxygen and Decadron. He had to be flown out to Anchorage the next day. (Source: Roger Robinson, Scott Gill, and Bob Seibert, Mountaineering Rangers, Denali National Park)

### **Analysis**

Foreign climbers continue to account for the large percentage of HAPE and CE cases on Mount McKinley. Their level of experience and the very thorough briefings they get in Talkeetna do not seem to make a difference. The driving factor seems to be the brief time period they have to complete the climb. A two-to-three-week summer vacation, four days of which are taken up traveling to and from Alaska, is barely enough time to climb Mount McKinley under ideal conditions if one is not acclimatized to altitude. Short of denying access to the mountain, the Denali National Park Rangers have done more than enough in terms of orientation and education regarding this problem. (Source: J. Williamson)

## **SNOW BLOCK COLLAPSE**

### **Alaska, Mount Johnson**

On June 4, 1987, Charles Sassara (?) and Dave McGivern (?) were climbing up the icefall just to the north of Mount Johnson which is located in the Ruth Gorge. The pair was doing an alpine ascent from their base camp.