

## **UNITED STATES**

### **WEATHER, FALL ON SNOW, EXPOSURE**

#### **Alaska, Mount McKinley**

On February 16, 1989, a four-man Japanese expedition flew into the Kahiltna Basecamp to begin a winter ascent of the West Buttress. The group leader, Noboru Yamada (39), was climbing Mount McKinley as part of a quest to climb the highest mountain on each of the seven continents. After two days, one of the men became ill and returned to base camp. The remaining three continued their climb and on February 20 reached the 5200-meter high camp. On this same day, an Austrian team of three (Austrian Mountain Guide Expedition) made a successful climb to the summit and returned to high camp. On the 21st, stormy weather kept both parties in camp. Weather improved somewhat on the 22nd and the Austrians left high camp and descended to 2975 meters. Weather deteriorated and extreme winds enveloped the upper portions of the mountain. These extreme winds, estimated at up to 320 Kph, continued through February 26, then moderated slightly and continued between 95 and 160 Kph through March 9. On March 10, search flights found three objects below Denali Pass that were thought to be the bodies of the missing climbers, but severe turbulence prevented a positive identification. Search efforts were terminated at the end of the day on March 4. On March 13, another overflight positively identified the objects as the bodies of the missing climbers. It is believed that the Japanese team tried for the summit, and were caught in severe weather which contributed to a fall from Denali Pass. (Source: Bob Seibert, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

#### **Analysis**

The Japanese team probably left the 5200 meter high camp during a brief lull in the winds. U.S. Weather Service records show that February 22, the day the Austrians left the high camp and the last day the Japanese team was seen alive, was also the last day of moderate winds. From that point on, winds increased in severity, soon developing into an extremely violent wind storm. U.S. Weather Service estimated winds in the passes to have reached 320 Kph. It is likely the Japanese team was caught at or above Denali Pass by these extreme winds. This was a very experienced team of mountaineers. The Austrian team said they had never seen the Japanese travel using ropes. Yet the team was roped when they fell. The team probably roped up because the visibility was so poor it was the only way to keep track of one another. They were in the general area of Denali Pass when a fall, probably caused by the extreme weather conditions, occurred.

A recovery team found the bodies on March 30 at the 5275 meter level below Denali Pass. They appeared to have fallen, because the rope was wrapped around the arm of one of the men. They were heavily clothed.

This accident has similarities to the first successful winter ascent of the West Buttress by Dave Johnston, Ray Genet and Art Davidson in 1967. They too were caught by a severe wind storm above Denali Pass. They felt they physically could not move through the pass because of the extreme winds. They carried survival gear and were able to bivouac at the pass for nearly a week until the winds subsided. The Austrians carried

only a thermos of hot chocolate. The Japanese traveled without survival gear, so they had no option but to attempt to descend to their supplies at high camp, where they dug a snow cave under their damaged tent site. Nothing was disturbed in the cave, including three unrolled sleeping bags. (Source: Bob Seibert, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park.

## **FALL ON ICE, AVALANCHES, NO RADIO**

### **Alaska, Mount Johnson**

On April 14, 1989, Jim Sweeney (33) and Dave Nyman (31) flew to the base of Mount Dickey to attempt climbs of the Moose's Tooth and the Elevator Shaft, a steep ice couloir on the north side of Mount Johnson in the Ruth Gorge. They established a base camp and began rock climbing on the lower portion of the Moose's Tooth on the "Butterfly Buttress." On the 15th, Sweeney and Nyman continued climbing and encountered bad rock. They decided to attempt the Elevator Shaft on Mount Johnson rather than continue their climb of the Moose's Tooth.

On the 17th, after waiting out a day of bad weather, Sweeney and Nyman skied to Mount Johnson to look at the route and check avalanche conditions. They spent the night at their base camp near Mount Dickey. On the 18th, they skied to the base of Mount Johnson with packs and sleds. They climbed above the icefall on the north side of Mount Johnson and bivied 200 meters up at the base of the wall.

On May 19, they got up at 0500, left their down gear at their bivy site and proceeded to the base of the Elevator Shaft. They arrived there at 0730 and waited until the sun left the face above. They climbed the first three pitches in less than an hour. Sweeney started leading the fourth pitch and placed a picket ten meters up. About 15–16 meters above the belay, Sweeney encountered a difficult section and looked around the area of an ice "window" for any possibilities. He grabbed under the window and leaned out. When he did so, the entire formation on which he was climbing suddenly collapsed. This formation of weak snow and ice was three to four meters wide, ten- meters high and two meters thick. Nyman's anchor, to the side of the coulior, consisted of a screw, a picket and two tools. Everything except one tool held during Sweeney's 30 meter-fall and the ensuing avalanche.

Nyman tied Sweeney off and descended to him. Sweeney lay upside down, unconscious, with a crack in his helmet. He was bleeding from his mouth and nose. When Wyman touched him, Sweeney regained consciousness, but he was not aware that he had fallen. Sweeney had fractured his right hip. They were both in an area susceptible to avalanches from above, so Nyman began lowering Sweeney to the bottom of a snow cone below the Elevator Shaft. The lowering took about six hours. Nyman dug a trench, elevated Sweeney's feet and insulated him from the snow. Sweeney was alternating between extreme lucidity and hallucinations. Nyman ran back to their previous bivy site and took down bags, stove, liquids, and food back to Sweeney. Before leaving the bivy site, Nyman stamped "SOS" in the snow. They had no radio. Nyman was torn between stabilizing Sweeney's injuries and not moving him, and risking further injury to Sweeney by moving him to areas safer from the paths of avalanches. They spent the night in the trench Nyman had dug. They zippered their bags together for warmth; Sweeney was inside a vapor barrier liner inside the bags.

A large avalanche hit Sweeney and Nyman just before dawn on the 20th. Afterwards, Nyman dragged Sweeney about 60 meters further downhill on a 30 degree slope, up