

UNITED STATES

HAPE, FROSTBITE, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On April 24, 1992, Daryl Hinman (44), Tom Roseman (42) and Bob Rockwell (56)—members of the China Lake (CA) Mountain Rescue Group—started out from Kantishna to do a traverse of Mount McKinley, going up McGonagall Pass to the Muldrow Glacier, over Denali Pass, and down the West Buttress. We could climb the summit from Denali Pass. We expected to take three weeks.

The weather was colder than usual, and we crossed a frozen Wonder Lake and the McKinley River with ease. We reached McGonagall Pass (5,720 feet) on the 28th and dropped to the Muldrow. By May 3 we were at 11,000 feet starting up Karstens Ridge, the crux of the climb. Karstens Ridge is a knife edge in places, and ascends quite steeply in others: a lot of exposure. But the snow conditions were good for climbing. Also, we were able to clip into old fixed ropes for some protection in several spots.

On May 7 we started up gentler terrain on the Harper Glacier from our camp at 14,600 feet. Tom Roseman began to experience a serious lack of energy, but had no other symptoms. We attributed it to a touch of acute mountain sickness, and the fact that we had had no rest days in our two weeks on the mountain.

By the end of the next day we had managed only 3,000 feet higher and three miles. Tom was considerably weaker, and now exhibited a high resting pulse. Still, we did not suspect HAPE because he felt fine otherwise: good appetite, no lung sounds or coughing, and his breathing rate was normal.

On May 9, even though it was cloudy with winds of 30 knots and higher gusts, we had to move over Denali Pass. In an unfortunate accident on May 5 we had lost a gallon of fuel, and now had only enough for three or four more days. We needed to be on the west side of the mountain in a descent mode in case this was the beginning of one of the infamous Denali storms.

We started out at noon in subzero temperatures. Tom's lack of energy was worse than before. Resting for 20 hours had not helped him at all. We stopped often and yet the stops did not help. (He stated later that keeping going was the hardest thing he has ever done.)

We reached Denali Pass around 1400 and headed down the steep west side for a place to camp. Even in descending Tom was lethargic. Soon it got icy and only the points of our crampons pierced the snow. After a couple of falls, the longest of which was 180 feet, we anchored and belayed each step of the way. But the anchors were not always secure, and a fall could be a serious event. Miraculously, we were not injured.

Finally, at 2200, we found a filled-in section on a crevasse at 17,400 feet, big enough for the tent. It had taken us eight hours to descend 800 feet! The temperature was -25° F with a wind chill of -87° F. We were cold and exhausted. Tom had a coughing spell and although it was a dry cough, we thought for the first time of the possibility of HAPE. Also, half of his left foot was frostbitten, as were my toes and fingers.

The next day we discussed going for help or continuing up on our own. But even if Tom had been able to move at a normal rate, it would have taken two more days to reach the Kahiltina landing strip. And two more days in subzero weather would have a dire effect on Tom's and Bob's frostbite.

No mountain rescue person ever wants to be the subject of a rescue, and we were especially sensitive to the fact that many climbers on Denali who request help are in fact quite capable of getting out of their predicament themselves. Certainly we felt that as mountain rescue personnel we would be even more expected to do so. Nevertheless, this was a time where discretion was called for, so Hinman went for help at 1030 and hoped he would encounter climbers with a radio. Failing that, he counted on getting to the rangers' 14,200 foot camp in the afternoon.

Daryl passed other climbers but none had a radio. He reached the ranger camp around 1400 and reported the situation. Barely an hour later a Lama helicopter arrived at Tom's and Bob's location and hovered with the front points of each skid on our platform. The main rotor was missing the slope above by only a few feet. Two rangers got out and we climbed aboard. Within minutes we were reunited with Daryl at the 14,200 foot camp! We complimented the rangers on the ultra-fast response. As it turned out, the four-day storm brought four feet of snow at the Kahiltina strip and 100 mph winds on the summit. One ranger described it as the worst in ten years for that season and more typical of December, not May. Six climbers perished as a direct or indirect result of this storm; unfortunately, this was only the beginning of by far the worst year in history for fatalities on Denali.

Then came a second helicopter ride to the Kahiltina, a fixed wing trip to Talkeetna, and another to Anchorage. By 1900, Tom and Bob were at the Humana Hospital emergency room. There, Dr. Peter Hackett examined Tom, and after only a few seconds with the stethoscope, announced, "You've got High Altitude Pulmonary Edema!" Everything now seemed to fall into place, and we breathed a sigh of relief that Tom's HAPE had evidently not progressed to life-threatening levels as we climbed from 15,000 feet to Denali Pass at 18,200 feet.

I stayed in the hospital for two days and will recover completely. Tom left the hospital after a week and a half, and will probably lose the tip of one big toe. Hinman suffered some frost nip but did not require treatment and was able to hike down after four days, once the storm had subsided. (Source: Robert Rockwell)

Analysis

We practiced and trained seriously for this climb. Because we would be on the Muldrow side early in the season, we knew we had to be even more capable and independent. And, we were experienced: Rockwell had been to 24,600 feet, and had climbed Denali before. Hinman had climbed Mount Logan's east ridge (with Rockwell). While this was Roseman's first expedition, he had been on numerous ascents in California's Sierra Nevada; and he was physically the strongest of the three at the start of the climb.

We feel that our preparation—while it did not prevent the problems from happening—kept them from having far more serious outcomes. (Source: Robert Rockwell)

The Muldrow Glacier is rated an Alaskan grade #2 in Jon Waterman's book and because of this very subjective rating, this particular route is sometimes underestimated. Because of the isolation and length of the route, it can be a very difficult and unforgiving climb. The Mountaineering Rangers advised this group to take an extra stove and a CB radio. Having only one stove and limited fuel forced them into a problem of dehydration early into their climb that may have contributed to both their frostbite and high altitude

sickness. Also, with a CB radio they possibility could have made contact when they first started having serious problems. This party was extremely fortunate that a high altitude helicopter was available to respond quickly. Without immediate rescue, their deteriorating condition would have forced a serious situation with a ground rescue. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

FALL ON SNOW, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On May 10, 1992, at 1710, the "West Buttheads" expedition, Timothy Hagan (39) and Paul Kogelmann (33) were descending the headwall from the 16,200 foot camp. They were traveling roped and opted not to clip into the fixed lines. Kogelmann, leading, slipped and fell about 150 feet above the bergschrund. Timothy Hagan was unable to hold the fall, and the team fell 500-600 feet down the headwall. An American team performed first aid and placed Hagan's left arm into a sling. They then continued the descent at a slow rate.

At 1750, rangers reached Hagan and reported that he had suffered a broken left humerus and facial lacerations. At 1755 Hagan was flown in the Lama to the 14,200 foot camp, and then down to Kahiltna airstrip, where he was flown to Talkeetna, then to the Humana emergency room in Anchorage.

Analysis

There have been a number of falls contributed to not clipping into the fixed line on the "headwall" above the 14,200 foot camp. Most of the serious injuries could have been prevented by clipping in. The "West Buttheads" were no exception in this case. Climbers underestimate the angle of the headwall and the quickness required to self-arrest to prevent the team from sliding out of control. By clipping into the fixed line, this team could have avoided this serious climbing fall and a very expensive ride to the Humana ER in Anchorage. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

(Editor's Note: In a letter from Timothy Hagan, we learned that another team member, Kim Hood (37), developed pulmonary edema at 11,000 feet and had to return to Kahiltna Base Camp and was flown out on May 2. Hagan further indicated that the fall from the headwall on May 10 was initiated by Kogelmann, who pulled Hagan off in the process, as he could not effect an ice axe arrest.

Hagan also provided this analysis: "I have learned never to over-estimate the climbing ability of my partner. Also, there are definite cases where it is much safer to climb without a rope! I have no doubt that I could have descended the headwall safely by myself. For some unknown reason, we chose not to clip into the fixed line, probably thinking that it would be more bother than it was worth. (We had used mechanical ascenders during the ascent.) I had planned to clip into one of the fixed anchors if Paul felt that he needed a belay. Nice theory." We appreciate Hagan's candid account.)

STRANDED, FATIGUE, PARTY SEPARATED, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley

"Expedition McKinley" a group from France, spent the night of May 10, 1992, at 17,000 feet on the West Buttress of Mount McKinley, without a stove. A stove had been cached