

FALLING ROCK, POOR POSITION

Washington, North Twin Sister

On June 6, 1993, a group of five Bellingham Mountaineers were ascending the South Face to the West Ridge of North Twin Sister on the second day of a Basic Course. They started up a short gully, after just starting the rock portion when two large rocks (bowling ball size) kicked loose between the leader and the second climber. Rock struck the third climber on the foot and broke one toe. Rock then struck the fifth climber on the right rib area, severely lacerated the left hand (20+ stitches) and right forearm (10+ stitches). Rock struck fourth climber and caused loss of balance, resulting in climber tumbling backward 50 feet down the gully. The tumble resulted in numerous bruises and broken left forearm. All injured were given first aid and assisted back to base camp. After resting for a couple of hours, the group hiked back to the trail head. No extra help was needed or brought in. (Source: Sam Houston, The Mountaineers, Bellingham Branch)

Analysis

Protocols for climbing—or descending—in gullies and couloirs include either staying very close (able to touch person in front) to one another or going one at a time to a stopping point that is secure. (Source: Jed Williamson)

FALL INTO CREVASSE, UNCONTROLLED GLISSADE, DESCENDING UNROPE

Washington, Olympic National Park, Mount Olympus

On June 16, 1993, Mason Flint, David Whiting and Paul Hood left the Hoh Ranger Station in Olympic National Park for a planned five day backpack and climb of Mount Olympus, about 20 miles from the trailhead. While trekking to the base camp, they were passed by Dave Skinner, a frequent climber of Mount Olympus and volunteer at the University of Washington Glacier Research Center on Mount Olympus. On June 18, the three climbers left their base camp at 0600 and approached the Blue Glacier where they roped up. After crossing the base of the glacier, they began the ascent toward the Snow Dome, a plateau below the summit spire of Olympus. After a short distance, Hood suggested that the climbers unrope because there was little apparent crevasse danger, and the other two agreed.

After ascending the Snow Dome and following the well traveled route between the Middle and West peaks and around to the backside of Olympus' summit pyramid, the climbers successfully reached the summit around 1300. Just before reaching the summit the climbers passed Dave Skinner who was descending alone from the summit. After spending approximately one hour on the summit, the climbers descended the summit pyramid and wound around the backside of the Middle peak unroped.

Flint led, followed by Hood and then Whiting. Flint glissaded down a short, steep snow slope behind the Middle peak where he realized that they were off the ascent route. Hood and Whiting also glissaded down the short slope while Flint traversed 25 yards west between the Middle and west peaks to check out the route. As there was a clear set of tracks (later confirmed to be Skinner's) and the route was relatively straightforward, the climbers agreed to continue. Flint led an additional 50 yards where he stopped at the edge of a small avalanche slough. The runout of the slough was not visible from that vantage point. While he decided whether to cross the slough, Hood approached

and, possibly mistaking the avalanche slough for a glissade path from earlier climbers, immediately began to glissade down the slope where he disappeared below the surface 15 yards from where he started. This was around 1530.

Flint descended a short distance while calling for Hood until he saw that there was a steep drop-off and probable crevasse where Hood had disappeared. Hood did not respond to repeated yelling. When Whiting caught up and was informed of the situation, he and Flint roped up and descended to the west where Hood fell and where the crevasse came into view. Flint and Whiting walked to below the crevasse and built two dead-man anchors and set up a belay. Whiting belayed Flint to the edge of the crevasse where Flint tried to make visual and/or voice contact. From the edge of the crevasse Flint could not see the bottom because of a slight overhang. After about 20 minutes of attempts to make contact with Hood, Flint and Whiting discussed whether or not to attempt a descent into the crevasse. Although Flint and Whiting had training in crevasse rescue and were familiar with the Z-pulley, they were concerned about the possibility of avalanche or ice-fall.

Knowing that Dave Skinner was at the glacier research station on the Snow Dome, Flint and Whiting decided to descend around 1630, with the hope that the station would have a radio and/or Skinner would have climbing equipment and rescue experience. When they reached the station, the climbers learned that there was no radio and that Skinner did not have climbing equipment or rescue experience. The climbers, joined by Skinner, decided to reascend to the crevasse and again try to make contact with Hood. They reached the crevasse around 1730 and again tried to make contact. Skinner agreed that attempting a descent into the crevasse would be risky considering the chances of ice-fall and avalanche.

At 1815, the three returned to the research station and discussed walking out that night. Because of fatigue, the lateness of the day and the distance (approximately 21 miles), they decided to leave early on June 19. The three descended to the climbers' original base camp, gathered all their gear and began the hike out. Skinner, who travels extremely fast and light, set off ahead and reached the Hoh ranger station at 0530. Flint and Whiting reached the station at 0730. Skinner contacted the Park Service and Olympic Mountain Rescue. A military helicopter carried Skinner and the rescue team to the site of the accident, but a recovery attempt was not made because of failing light. The following morning three flights took six Olympic Mountain Rescue personnel and their equipment to the site, set up anchors and recovered the body. Hood had died on impact of a severe upper cervical spinal cord contusion.

Analysis

The decision to unrope was the pivotal one of the climb. Once that decision was made, other standard safety precautions, such as abstaining from glissading on glaciers and wearing helmets, were harder to enforce. The climbers had helmets but were not wearing them. Although Hood was ostensibly the most experienced climber, we later learned that he had little formal climbing or glacier travel instruction. He had climbed Mount Olympus ten years earlier, as well as numerous other peaks in Washington and abroad. Flint, who had recently completed a climbing course through the Mountaineers, was concerned about Hood's apparent ignorance of basic mountaineering techniques (including the use of prussiks for crevasse self-rescue), but he and Whiting did not feel comfortable questioning Hood's experience. Although Hood made some major judgment errors during the climb, particularly the decision to glissade on the glacier, Flint

and Whiting feel that their reluctance to express their concerns about safety and share the leadership role were also contributing factors. (Source: Mason Flint)

(Editor's Note: Thanks to Mr. Flint for his willingness to share this experience. In a letter to me, he expressed the hope that others will learn from his misfortune so they can avoid similar mistakes.)

FROSTBITE

Washington, Mount Rainier

A party of four attempted a climb of Liberty Ridge from White River on July 10 and 11, 1993. One member, Kent Stephens (32), dropped out from continuing the climb at St. Elmo Pass. The other three, led by Doug Barlow (31), successfully climbed Liberty Ridge and descended to Camp Schurman. While at Camp Schurman, Drew McRoberts (28) began suffering the effects of frostbitten toes on both feet, and after thawing them, was unable to put one foot back inside his boot. He reported that his toes were discolored and painful. The party leader called for NPS assistance.

During the afternoon of July 12, an attempt was made to bring a private helicopter to Camp Schurman and help extricate McRoberts. However, heavy clouds throughout the afternoon and evening prevented any helicopter use. By mid afternoon, plans were made to effect a ground evacuation.

By 1700, a joint NPS and RMI rescue team began climbing from White River to Camp Schurman, arriving at 2100 and remaining until 0600 Tuesday morning. That team then began evacuating McRoberts down the Emmons and Inter Glaciers and were met and assisted by a six-person NPS and Tacoma MRC team which had left White River at 0600 on the 13th. A five-person SCA crew also assisted with the evacuation from the Glacier Basin area. By 1400 on the 13th, the 17 rescuers successfully completed getting McRoberts to the trail head at White River where he was transported to Harborview Medical Center for treatment. (Source: John Wilcox, Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

Analysis

McRoberts' toes may have thawed as a result of his efforts or because of warmer conditions. If it had been possible to keep his toes unthawed, he might have been able to walk out in considerably less time than it took to muster the rescue effort and do the carry out. (Source: Jed Williamson)

FALLING ROCK

Washington, Icicle River Canyon, Snow Lakes

On July 31, 1993, Rolf Sonnerup (28) was climbing on a popular rock face across the road from the Snow Lakes trailhead. His partner was 50 feet above Sonnerup and dislodged a rock that struck Sonnerup in the shoulder and arm, then hit his leg, taking off skin and muscle down to the bone from the knee to the ankle.

Members of the Chelan County HASTY rescue team and Chelan County Mountain Rescue climbed up to reach Sonnerup. Ambulance crews from Leavenworth and Wenatchee, and two Canadian doctors visiting the area, worked on Sonnerup and moved him about 50 feet to where the helicopter could reach him.