

Analysis

The North West Basin Variation to the West Ridge of Mount Hunter is popular because it offers a shorter approach to the ridge, and avoids a rock band on the original route. The route is also detailed in a climbing guide. The enticement is there, and may lure climbers onto dangerous ground. Debris from the ice fall on the lower half of the basin was observed from the air throughout the season. This debris crossed the route used by climbers. The runout from this ice fall should be avoided. The basin faces the North West and acts as a catchment for wind deposited snow. The angle of slope in the basin fits the criteria where avalanches are most likely to occur.

The precipitation during the unstable weather cycle loaded the basin, and in combination with the wind, created a slab. The Carson expedition suspected the slope might fail. They attempted to climb above where the slope failure might occur. The signs were there indicating avalanche conditions. The Carson party underestimated the hazard and accidentally triggered the avalanche. Whether anchors would have prevented the long fall is unknown. (Source: Kevin Moore, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

AMS—POSSIBLE HACE, RAPID ASCENT

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On May 7, 1994, the Italian expedition “Sesia 94” departed from the 7,200 foot Kahiltna Base Camp and arrived at the 14,200 foot basin on the West Buttress on May 11. Mautezio Fasano (35), was the expedition climbing doctor and member of a 12 person team whose mission was to remove the body of Italian climber Giovanni Calcagno who died at 15,500 feet on the Cassin Ridge. “Sesia 94” split into several teams, with one team attempting to climb the Cassin Ridge. Fasano was on a four person team which was attempting to climb to the summit via the West Buttress in five days. The team departed at 0600 on May 13 and reached the 16,000 foot ridge at 0830. After reaching the 16,200 foot camp, Fasano was unable to balance himself and experienced severe headaches. The team members alerted the rest of their team at 14,200 feet, which in turn reported the incident to the ranger camp. The ranger patrol advised the expedition to lower Fasano as quickly as possible and bring him to the NPS medical weatherport. Fasano was treated for acute AMS and possible HACE inside the Gamow bag. He was non-ambulatory and also put on oxygen through the night and transported on May 14 by the NPS LAMA Helicopter to Anchorage.

Analysis

This Italian team was very strong and well organized, but underestimated both weather and altitude. Fasano was in excellent physical condition, and along with his teammates had no problem climbing up to the 16,200 foot camp. They were briefed at Talkeetna concerning moving 1,000 feet per day, and the weather patterns. Fasano was extremely lucky in that his expedition could help lower him in good weather. This same expedition called for a rescue on the Cassin Ridge several days later after losing their tents and climbing gear due to high winds. It is also interesting to note that they are all rescue guides in the Alps. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

GRAND MAL SEIZURES

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On May 16, 1994, John Merrigan (43) was climbing Mount McKinley when he began experiencing what appeared to be Grand Mal seizures at 7,800 feet on the Kahiltna

Glacier. He was evacuated at 0745 on May 17 by the Alaska Air National Guard helicopter and transported to Providence Hospital in Anchorage.

Analysis

John Merrigan's physician approved his climb on Mount McKinley and his previous medical condition was made known to his guides. Any prior condition would have been difficult to diagnose. Upon his return, Merrigan was given a clean bill of health. (Source: Roger Robinson, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

(Editor's Note: Persons with a history of such conditions as seizures and diabetes, and who are on medications, need to be aware that changes in levels of physical activity and high altitude can have an unstabilizing effect.)

HYPOTHERMIA, DEHYDRATION, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley

On May 18, 1994, Paul Laeremans (39) and Ingrid Baeyens (38) of the German AMICAL expedition, along with other members of their expedition, began descending the West Buttress route from 14,300 feet. Weather conditions were poor, with high winds and sub-zero temperatures. As the group descended around Windy Corner at 13,300 feet, poor visibility and whiteout conditions developed.

At 1700 and 12,500 feet, the group was unable to continue and began digging a snow cave to provide shelter from the weather. Laeremans and Baeyens were extremely fatigued and cold, and got into their sleeping bags, which became wet from blowing and drifting snow. The remainder of the group continued digging through the night, finishing the snow cave by 1000 on May 19. By this time Laeremans and Baeyens were shivering and becoming hypothermic.

On May 19 at 1245, the AMICAL expedition contacted Kahiltna basecamp and reported two hypothermic persons and requested assistance. At 1530 NPS volunteers Colin Grissom and Craig Leuben descended from the NPS 14,300 foot camp to the AMICAL camp. At 1720 Grissom reported two hypothermic patients and requested a helicopter evacuation. The NPS LAMA helicopter was in the area working on another rescue mission. Laeremans and Baeyens were helicoptered out at 1742. At basecamp Laeremans and Baeyens were assessed by NPS volunteers Dr. John Mullen and Jon Tierney. They were mildly hypothermic and were rewarmed in the basecamp weatherport.

At 1807 Laeremans and Baeyens were flown to Talkeetna in a fixed wing aircraft by pilot Doug Geeting at their own expense. In Talkeetna, Laeremans and Baeyens were treated and released by Talkeetna Ambulance Service.

Analysis

The AMICAL expedition began an unauthorized commercially-guided expedition. The expedition's guide, Rainer Bolesch, was not permitted to enter Denali National Park. The remaining 14 members, all experienced mountaineers, continued with the climb. Laeremans and Baeyens both had extensive mountaineering experience in the Himalayas and the Alps. Whether or not the presence of the guide would have prevented the problems that the AMICAL expedition encountered is uncertain. Certainly, one guide has very limited effectiveness in managing activities and insuring safety in a group of 14 climbers in the Denali environment. The maximum client to guide ratio allowed for the authorized guided trips on Denali is four to one.