

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.

Laeremans and Baeyens reportedly did not eat and drink well for five days prior to this incident. An adequate high carbohydrate diet and high fluid intake are essential for combating the effects of severe cold and extreme weather on Denali.

The AMICAL expedition began their descent from 14,300 feet in very poor weather conditions. The Windy Corner area is notorious for its extreme conditions. It is advisable to wait for weather conditions to moderate before attempting to climb through this area of the route.

Fortunately, the group recognized the potentially serious condition of Laeremans and Baeyens, and took action to find shelter in a snow cave. (Source: Jim Phillips, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

## **HYPOTHERMIA, EXPOSURE, WEATHER, INADEQUATE CLOTHING**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley**

On May 22, 1994, Korean climbers Sang Myeung Lee (25) and Kee Won Kim (27) departed from the 14,200 foot West Buttress camp on Mount McKinley. They climbed the headwall west of the fixed lines to 16,200 feet, reaching the ridge crest in high winds. Lee and Kim failed to return as the weather deteriorated. An NPS search was conducted when weather permitted. The NPS patrol located the body of Lee, which was clipped into the fixed lines at 15,900 feet.

The patrol searched the area for three hours in whiteout conditions and was unable to locate Kim. They descended to the 14,200 foot camp with the body of Lee. A search was conducted using both a helicopter and ground parties for the next several days. On May 25, a guide radioed from 16,200 feet, reporting that Kim was found dead at 16,100 feet in a rock band. Kim's body was retrieved on May 27 and transported to Talkeetna.

### **Analysis**

It is ironic that this fatal accident occurred to Kim, as he had been selected by the National Park Service to educate the climbers in Korea concerning the risks involved in climbing Mount McKinley. Kim had Alaska experience in mountaineering with expeditions to McKinley in 1992 and 1993, reaching the summit each time, and one attempt on Mount Foraker. Lee had climbed various other peaks, including Mount Rainier. Both climbers were in excellent physical condition and acclimated. Prudent judgment decisions pertaining to weather on Mount McKinley require climbers to evaluate their situation constantly. The deteriorating weather along with their slow progress (eleven hours on the headwall) was a warning to descend from their climb. Their decision to continue compounded their predicament as this unforgiving Denali storm quickly encompassed them with 100 mph wind gusts. Wearing no wind clothing, despite the fact they had it in their packs, contributed to their exposure, hypothermia, and ultimately their deaths. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park)

## **ACUTE MOUNTAIN SICKNESS, FATIGUE, DEHYDRATION**

### **Alaska, Mount McKinley**

On the evening of June 1, 1994, Bennett Austin (29) developed a severe case of acute mountain sickness while climbing between 19,000 and 19,400 feet on the West Rib route of Mount McKinley. At 0200 on June 2, a fixed wing aircraft was launched with a ranger aboard to contact the ranger patrol at 17,000 feet on the West Buttress and perform an air drop of emergency gear to the party which was not 150 feet below the "football field"