

at 19,500 feet. Austin's team climbed up to the football field, attempted to make hot drinks and eat, and then decided that they needed to keep moving. The group started descending the West Buttress route at 0333. Three NPS volunteers met the group at 17,700 feet and assisted them to the 17,000 foot camp where Austin was evaluated. After six hours of rest and rehydration, the party descended to 14,200 feet, unassisted, where Austin made a full recovery. Following several days of rest, the group descended and flew off the mountain on June 5.

Analysis

This was a group of experienced mountain climbers on their first trip to Denali. A one-day summit attempt from 14,200 feet is a very difficult and committing climb. It appears that this group underestimated the time and energy that they would need to complete their proposed route in a single day. High altitude, fatigue and dehydration combined caused Bennett Austin to become sick. Prior to this attempt, the group had climbed to 17,000 feet on the West Buttress and had been on the mountain for eleven days with no signs of altitude sickness. (Source: Joe Reichert, SCA)

FALL ON SNOW, UNSTABLE SNOW CONDITIONS, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, FATIGUE, VARYING LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE

Alaska, Mount Hunter

On June 8, 1994, Patti Saurman (31), Chris Walburgh (28), David Saurman (30), and Don Sharaf (28) flew to the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier and skied to their camp at 6,700 feet on the branch of the Kahiltna Glacier southwest of the Southwest Ridge of Mount Hunter.

On June 9 they slept in camp during the day to avoid the mid-day sun. In the evening the group departed camp and skied to the start of the Southwest Ridge route. Snow conditions on the glacier were soft and mushy.

At 2215 the team began climbing up the initial couloir from approximately 7,000 feet. Walburgh led the rope team, placing snow pickets for running anchor points, followed by Sharaf, David Saurman, and Patti Saurman. They were roped together with 75 yards of climbing rope. The terrain was approximately 45 to 55 degrees. The bottom of the couloir was covered with recent avalanche debris. A hard but breakable snow crust three to four inches thick overlaid deep, soft, wet snow. Snow conditions required the climbers to kick two to four times to get secure foot placements. They climbed using a single ice axe and were not wearing crampons or helmets. Sharaf reported that Walburgh was climbing very slowly. After climbing for four rope lengths, Sharaf took the lead from Walburgh.

After Sharaf began climbing, the team was hit by a small amount of loose snow and rock, but nobody was injured. Sharaf continued climbing to a small rock band, hoping to gain protection from further rock and snow fall. He encountered very soft and rotten snow conditions as he approached the rock band. After reaching an anchor in the rock band, the other three climbers were belayed up.

The climbers rested at the rock band for a short period of time until 0451 on June 10. They were at an elevation of approximately 8,400 feet, according to Sharaf's altimeter. Sharaf felt that they had made very slow progress to this point.

Patti Saurman began leading out from the rock band but returned to put on her crampons, as did the rest of the climbers. Sharaf stated that she then "led out fairly confidently, but slowly." She was followed by David Saurman, Sharaf, and then Walburgh, and climbed for approximately 75 yards and placed one snow picket as a running anchor

point when Walburgh left the rock anchor. Patti continued climbing for another 25 to 50 yards, and David Saurman passed the anchor point. Sharaf heard a scream, looked up, and saw Patti Saurman sliding out of control and unable to self-arrest. Sharaf yelled, "Patti's falling!" and kicked his feet into the snow and sunk his ice axe to brace himself. He saw David Saurman pulled from his stance, and the snow picket plucked from the snow. Sharaf then felt the climbing rope tighten as he was ripped from his stance immediately. Walburgh also was unable to arrest the team's fall, and the four climbers tumbled approximately 1,700 feet to the bottom of the couloir. Sharaf speculates that they tumbled over the 20 to 30 foot high rock band. The fall occurred around 0530.

The four climbers slid over a bergschrund at the base of the couloir and stopped on top of old avalanche debris. David Saurman was highest, with Sharaf next and Patti Saurman and Walburgh below him. They were all tangled in the climbing ropes and within 20 to 30 feet of each other. Sharaf believes he was conscious during the fall. David Saurman was conscious immediately after the fall, had obvious facial injuries, and was muttering obscenities incoherently. Sharaf untangled him from the rope and attempted to place a sleeping pad under him. Patti Saurman and Walburgh were semi-conscious and moaning, and had obvious facial injuries. Sharaf covered them with sleeping bags but did not untangle them from the ropes. He felt an urgent need to summon help, and started descending from the accident site at approximately 0630. He felt pain and crepitus in his right lower leg and suspected that he suffered from a fractured fibula.

Sharaf descended slowly until approximately 0830 to 0930, reaching an area near the main branch of the Kahiltna Glacier. He stamped out "HELP" in the snow, but was unable to make contact. At 2130 Sharaf was spotted by pilot Kelly Mahoney of Doug Geeting Aviation. Mahoney relayed a report of a lone climber in distress to the NPS LAMA helicopter, which was *en route* to Kahiltna Basecamp. The NPS LAMA helicopter, piloted by Bill Ramsey, landed and picked up Sharaf around 2200 and transported him to Kahiltna Basecamp.

Sharaf reported the accident to Ranger Jim Phillips at basecamp, stating that there was one conscious and two unresponsive victims at the bottom of the Southwest Ridge of Mount Hunter at 7,000 feet. Sharaf was assessed and questioned by Jim Phillips. Sharaf had facial lacerations and pain in his right lower leg. Sharaf was flown to Talkeetna and transported to Valley Hospital in Palmer. He had sustained a fracture and sprain in the right ankle, trunk lacerations, and facial lacerations.

Phillips reported the incident to the Talkeetna Ranger Station at 2219. Mountain guide Jack Tackle was recruited to assist with rescue operations.

Phillips and Tackle flew to the Southwest Ridge in the NPS LAMA helicopter. Pilot Jim Okonek flew over in an airplane owned by K2 Aviation. At 2240, Phillips observed David Saurman lying in the snow at the bottom of the Southwest Ridge couloir waving his arm. Patti Saurman and Chris Walburgh were observed lying on old avalanche debris approximately 100 yards above David Saurman, but there was no movement. The LAMA helicopter landed next to David Saurman, and due to the dangerous location, he was immediately loaded into the helicopter. Saurman was unable to speak or open his eyes due to major facial swelling and abrasions. Saurman was flown to Kahiltna basecamp, loaded into a toboggan, and moved to the basecamp shelter where he was cared for by basecamp manager Annie Duquette. Duquette reported Saurman to be very hypothermic, and he was rewarmed by Duquette in a sleeping bag.

At 2255 Phillips and Tackle returned to Mount Hunter in the LAMA helicopter. They climbed up to Patti Saurman and Walburgh and did medical assessments. Saurman and Walburgh were both lying on the snow surface, suffered from obvious multiple trau-

matic injuries, were pulseless, had no spontaneous respirations, and had major blood loss. Patti Saurman and Walburgh were presumed dead. Equipment and climbing rope was strewn across the snow surface. The snow surface and old avalanche debris was soft and wet. The air temperature was 32° F. The accident scene was photographed by Phillips. Due to exposure to further avalanches in the couloir, diminishing daylight, and questionable weather stability, Phillips and Tackle departed the accident site in the LAMA helicopter and returned to basecamp.

At 2357 the Pavhawk helicopter departed basecamp and transported David Saurman to Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage. He had sustained a severe concussion, trunk lacerations, and facial abrasions.

The bodies of Patti Saurman and Chris Walburgh were recovered and flown out on June 9.

Analysis

The exact cause of Patti Saurman's fall is unknown. Certainly the team was climbing with questionable snow conditions. Sunny and warm weather on the days preceding the accident created a weak isothermal snowpack. They chose to begin the climb despite evidence of recent large-scale avalanche activity and recommendations both in Talkeetna and at Kahiltna base not to attempt the route because of the snow conditions. We can, however, rule out a large avalanche as causing her to fall. Saurman and Walburgh, and all the group's equipment, were found on the snow surface with nothing buried. Before the group rested at the rock band, they were hit by a small amount of loose snow and rocks falling from above. Sharaf speculates that Patti Saurman may have been hit by some falling loose snow or rock, although he does not remember seeing it.

Snow conditions in the couloir consisted of a three to four inch thick frozen crust over soft, loose snow. Sharaf stated that at times the crust would break away under the climber's feet, compromising their footing and balance.

The weak snow conditions present did not provide for secure, strong snow anchors. Sharaf stated that at times they used snow pickets buried horizontally, which seemed secure. He thinks, however, that based on how quickly Saurman placed the snow picket, it was placed vertically in the snow. Clearly, one snow picket placed in soft snow is inadequate to protect a rope team of four climbers on a 50 degree slope.

Fatigue may have been a contributing factor to the fall. Sharaf described their backpacks as being moderately heavy. Fatigue, combined with the weight of her backpack, may have impaired Patti Saurman's ability to perform a self-arrest. Sharaf stated several times that their progress was very slow. It had taken approximately seven hours to climb 1,500 vertical feet. Given their slow pace, Sharaf wondered several times if they should continue, but this concern was never vocalized among the group.

It should also be noted that this was Patti Saurman's first climb in Alaska, and her first climb in over a year. (Source: Jim Phillips, Mountaineering Ranger, Denali National Park, and Jed Williamson)

FROSTBITE, EXPOSURE, WEATHER, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT

Alaska, Mount McKinley

Victor Pomerantsev (52) departed June 12, 1994, for a solo climb of the West Buttress of Mount McKinley. He climbed quickly, arriving at the 16,200 foot level on June 15.