

At 1400, Kitson decided to turn back and head to the 17,200 foot camp. Kitson was experiencing headaches and felt that his condition would worsen if he continued to climb higher. Trevillyan and Holmes continued on to the “football field” at 19,600 feet. Holmes said that at 1630 the weather closed in and the visibility became poor. They were descending from the “football field” when they got off route due to the poor visibility. Holmes realized that after sliding on the steep snow for about 50 feet and stopping that they were on the wrong route. Holmes said that at 1800 he and Trevillyan got together to discuss their predicament. They both decided at that time they needed to traverse off the snow slope they were on and attempt to get back on the West Buttress. The weather at the time was extreme, with ambient temperatures at -10 F and winds gusting at 30 MPH. After talking several minutes, they started descending and traversing when a snow slab under their feet gave way and both Holmes and Trevillyan began falling and then tumbling, smashing through several rock bands.

Holmes recalls waking up at 2130 with Trevillyan lying on top of him with their climbing rope and other gear tangled and wrapped around them. Holmes checked Trevillyan for a pulse and other vital signs. Holmes, a licensed British Army Medic, stated that Trevillyan failed to respond, was blue in skin color, had no signs of life after shaking him for several minutes and yelling his name, and had no pulse. After several minutes Holmes placed his pack below Trevillyan for a marker in case his body could be recovered. Holmes began shouting and attempted to crawl for help. Holmes said he was totally disoriented and unsure of his whereabouts.

At 2200, Climber Chris Eng of the “Eng Expedition” was looking for his partner when he heard Holmes shouting and started climbing toward him. Eng, who was totally disoriented also because of whiteout conditions, had been searching since 0800. He had followed a wanded trail to the bottom of the Messner Couloir and found two ski poles with large baskets. He assumed he was at the bottom of the fixed lines at 15,200 feet. Eng climbed toward the shouting and said that Holmes could barely walk when he first observed him. Climber Penn Burris found Eng and Holmes and started to lead them both back to the 14,200 foot Ranger Camp.

At 0100 on May 30, Burris, Eng and Holmes arrived at the 14,200 foot Ranger Camp. Holmes was examined by Dr. Ken Zafren and was kept at the medical tent overnight.

At 0930 on May 31, Holmes was flown by the NPS LAMA helicopter to the 7,200 foot Kahiltna base camp. He was then transported by a Pavehawk Air National Guard helicopter to an Anchorage hospital where he was admitted for several days. Trevillyan’s body was recovered and flown off the mountain.

Analysis

Trevillyan and Holmes paid a heavy price for descending the Orient Express by mistake. They also committed another error that has injured many and has taken the lives of 29 climbers to date on Mount McKinley: they were roped together, descending on steep terrain, and had no fixed or running protection to stop their fall in case they could not self-arrest. (Source: Daryl Miller, Mountaineering Ranger)

FROSTBITE, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

On May 31, a guided group of five clients led by Blaine Smith and Willy Peabody of Alaska Denali Guiding, was forced to spend the night out in a storm at 19,000 feet on

Mount McKinley. Due to this emergency bivouac four of the clients suffered second, third, and fourth degree frostbite on hands, feet and noses and required a National Park Service helicopter rescue. Several of the clients suffered tissue loss resulting from their frostbite.

Analysis

Rapidly deteriorating weather conditions at the higher elevations on Mount McKinley have historically been contributing factors to serious accidents. This particular event led to the first fatality of the season. According to Ranger Roger Robinson who was stationed at the 14,200 foot camp, "The storm moved in very fast to 14,200 feet, movement in and out of the camp was nearly impossible due to strong winds and zero visibility."

The decision to make a summit attempt on that morning was based on years of mountain experience and twelve previous summit trips that Blaine Smith had led. Ten groups successfully reached the summit on May 29, and one decided to turn around at the "football field." Adrian Clarke was descending from his first summit of Mount McKinley when he passed the ADG group on Pig Hill. Clarke reported that he was surprised to see a guided tour still ascending in the marginal weather. The most ominous precursor to the severe weather was the wind shift from a northerly to a southerly. This change did not occur until the party was on the summit ridge. It is not always possible to wait for a bluebird day to make a summit attempt; hence, decisions must be made by evaluating the conditions and the group at hand.

One action that may have enabled the group to descend to Denali Pass more quickly would have been to place more wands at closer intervals on their ascent. If Smith had forced on into such conditions or they had not had the tools to shelter themselves, this incident would have been more serious. To the credit of the guides, there were no fatalities. (Source: Joe Reichardt, Mountaineering Ranger)

FROSTBITE, WEATHER

Alaska, Mount McKinley, Muldrow Glacier

On June 4, at 1130, Wendt Andreas (34) of the High Dreams expedition checked in at the 14,000 foot Ranger Camp. Andreas had frozen all his fingers on both hands. His companions Mario Bornschein and Holger Kloss also sustained first degree frostbite to their fingers, but did not need to be evacuated.

The High Dream expedition planned a traverse of the mountain, starting from the Muldrow Glacier and descending the West Buttress. On the way up the Muldrow Glacier route, the group was moving up in good weather when a quick forming storm caught them on an exposed section of the route. They were forced to put up their tent for protection from the wind. The tent pole broke during the storm, and the group was forced to move until they could dig a snow shelter.

It is believed that all three sustained their frostbite injuries during their forced movement from the tent site, and while digging their snow shelter.

The three climbers went up and over Denali Pass and down the West Buttress route to the 14,000 foot Ranger Camp. At the Ranger Camp, patrollers evaluated and treated Andreas. A helicopter evacuation was requested to avoid further trauma to Andreas' hands. Andreas was flown to base camp (7,000 feet) where Doug Geeting Aviation flew him to Talkeetna.