fall of one member might potentially lead to the sweep of an entire rope team, running protection, such as pickets, should be used. Also noteworthy is the fact that more than once on Mount Rainier, the smallest person on a roped team has pulled numerous larger teammates off the mountain.

Wedberg's team fortunately came to rest without life-threatening injuries. More than likely, Dupuis and Hernstedt experienced a similar sliding incident with more serious results. The position of the bodies and the entanglement of rope strongly suggest that the climbers slipped and fell somewhere above the ice cliff. They were dressed for cold weather and were wearing headlamps. Based on their last known location, time, and clothing description, it suggests that they were descending when the accident occurred. (Source: Mike Gauthier, Climbing Ranger)

(Editor's Note: See similar incidents—one on Mount Hood in this issue, one in ANAM 1998 in Alaska on Ptarmigan Peak.)

FALLING ROCK, WEATHER, LATE START—CLIMBING TOO SLOWLY

Washington, Mount Ranier, Liberty Ridge

Around 11:30 a.m. on June 25, Mount Rainier Park Communications received a 911 call from a team of three climbers requesting a rescue from 9,700 feet on Liberty Ridge. The team reported that one of their members, Jessie Whitcomb, had been struck by a rock in the head while ascending lower Liberty Ridge. The force of impact was so great that it destroyed the helmet and knocked Jessie unconscious.

The Whitcomb team had left White River Campground and spent two days getting to the base of Liberty Ridge. Hoping to make Thumb Rock by then, they instead elected to bivy near 9,200 feet on the ridge and continue climbing the next day. The team left the bivy site around 9:00 a.m. and noticed rockfall right from the start. While attempting to regain to the ridge-crest, Jessie was hit. He doesn't remember exactly how the incident occurred, but his father noted that rockfall was prevalent in the specific area the team was forced to cross.

Though Whitcomb was knocked out, he regained some level consciousness as his father helped move him to a safer location. The team then waited, calling for help, which took nearly two hours because of poor cellular service.

The Park Service initiated rescue efforts by flying climbing rangers Stefan Lofgren and Nick Giguere to the base of Liberty Ridge via a US Army Reserve Chinook helicopter. The two were inserted via cable-hoist (Jungle Penetrator) at 8,900 feet on the Carbon Glacier. From there, they climbed with medical and rescue gear to the accident site on the ridge. Once on scene, they provided patient assessment and stabilization, determining that Whitcomb needed to be evacuated immediately. The patient, however, could not be hoisted from that location and had to be lowered 900 feet to a safer landing zone on the Carbon Glacier.

Additional rescue personnel, comprised of NPS climbing rangers and RMI guides, organized and prepared for the technical lowering. A smaller helicopter (a Bell Jet Ranger—87L) was to ferry and insert the additional rescuers on the Carbon Glacier. RMI Guide Dave Hahn was flown from the NPS heli-base to Camp Schurman to pick up Lead Climbing Ranger Chris Olson. Those two comprised the second team of rescuers. After picking up Olson at Camp Schurman, 87L circled north around the mountain and attempted to insert the team on the Carbon Glacier. While doing so, the helicopter crash-landed.

Rangers observed the ship as it attempted to land on the glacier slope. When the helicopter did this, the skids underneath the ship began to slide. Something struck the ship in the rear and the helicopter quickly rose from the ground. It then began rotating to the right, crash-landing downhill roughly 40 feet away. Thankfully, all occupants walked away from the crash unhurt; however, the ship was badly damaged. The tail boom wrapped around the body, the rotors fell apart and the transmission crashed through the passenger compartment nearly hitting Olson and dousing him in engine fluids.

Remaining rescue personnel were quickly redirected to the Chinook helicopter for Jungle Penetrator insertion. Rich Lechleitner and Brian Hasebe inserted at 87L's crash site, while the pilot of the 87L was extracted. Olson, Hahn, Hasebe and Lechleitner then continued to the climbing accident site to help complete the rescue of Jessie Whitcomb.

From there, Lofgren directed the technical evacuation, which required a 900-foot, high-angle lowering through icefall and rockfall hazards as well as a bergschrund crossing. Once the patient, his partners, and rescue team were on the Carbon Glacier, the Chinook Helicopter returned and hoisted them all off the mountain. The patient was flown to Madigan Army hospital at Ft. Lewis and has since made a full recovery. The helicopter was never salvaged from the accident site because of its high exposure to avalanche, icefall, and rockfall hazards.

Analysis

Temperatures were warm that day and the snow on the lower ridge was soft. On such days, it is strongly recommended that climbers leave early. Alpine starts apply when traveling on loose rocky ridges or over glaciers with lots of crevasse slots. Many challenges exist on the Liberty Ridge route far below high camp.

Warm temperatures on Mount Rainier also mean rockfall, which the Whitcomb party noted. Wearing a helmet can only do so much when confronted with baseball and larger sized rocks. Thus, pace also becomes more important. The ability to move rapidly can help with success and safety. Many teams ascend Liberty Ridge too slowly. Siege climbing the route has again and again proven dangerous. In this case, the Whitcomb Party's pace was slow. This increased their amount of time in rockfall hazardous areas. (Source: Mike Gauthier, Climbing Ranger)