

For three days prior to this attempt, warm daytime temperatures and freezing nighttime temperatures provided stable melt-freeze snow conditions on the ridge. Footprints in the snow from an ascent the previous day also allowed for quick route finding through and around the short rock buttresses that characterize the route itself. The team found themselves making good time, reaching approximately 9,600 feet at the top of a major feature called “the S couloir” by 1300. The route brought the team to a traverse on the east side of the ridge where a belay was made about 50-80 feet below the true ridge. It was at this time that a C-130 military aircraft flew over the team twice, causing concern over a possible incident elsewhere in the range. Hilton immediately established communication with the Talkeetna Ranger Station via park radio. The Station confirmed that no incident was occurring. Just seconds after placing the radio back into her pack, Hilton and her team were unexpectedly struck by a large piece of falling ice and snow. Both Oswald and Smith stated they were not hurt. However, Hilton suffered intense pain in her right arm with limited movement. Due to the immediate swelling that occurred, the team climbed an additional 50 feet and rappelled to the nearest bivouac site. After assessing her injuries, Hilton decided it would be ill-advised to continue climbing that day. South District Ranger Daryl Miller was immediately updated of the situation via satellite phone and the Talkeetna Ranger Station by park radio. By morning, Hilton’s condition had not significantly changed, and the team chose to retreat.

Hilton and her team descended the south face and arrived back at camp at the base of Peak 11,300 by 1900. The following morning, the team was picked up by Talkeetna Air Taxi and transported to Talkeetna where Hilton received treatment for her injuries.

Analysis

Being at the right place at the wrong time tends to best describe the incident that occurred during this park patrol in the Ruth Glacier area. Unfortunately, the cycle of warm daytime and cold nighttime temperatures that helped provide ideal climbing conditions on this route also caused the release of the snow and ice that forced this team to retreat. The climbing on Peak 11,300 is mainly concentrated on the ridge itself, which mitigates the exposure to objective danger from above. However, this incident is a good reminder of just how quickly the sun can affect even the smallest patches of snow and cause instability.

FALL ON SNOW, RESCUE HAMPERED BY WEATHER

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

The following account is that of a difficult and intense Denali Search and Rescue operation conducted on the upper slopes of Mount McKinley. The individuals who participated in the rescue operation were Renny Jackson, Chris Harder, Steve Rickert, Jack McConnell, and David Bywater. It is also imperative to mention two British climbers who played key roles in the

rescue operation and without whom it might not have been accomplished: Andy Perkins and Neil McNabb, who were awarded the “Pro-Pin Award” for the 2004 climbing season.

On May 19, Il Ho Cho (40), a Korean climber, reportedly had taken a 50-60 foot fall somewhere above Denali Pass, 18,200 feet on the West Buttress. Cho and his climbing partner were descending when the fall occurred. Cho was unable to move any farther because of his injuries. His partner descended to the 17,000-foot camp to try to get help. Three different Korean climbing parties who were at 17,000 feet made two separate attempts to get emergency supplies back up to where Cho lay. Both attempts were turned back by high winds and whiteout conditions. One resulted in a significant fall by one of the party members.

Given the fact that Cho had suffered a head injury and had spent the night out in the open with very little equipment, his chances of being alive were at best very slim. Jackson assembled an initial response team consisting of Harder, Rickert, Bywater, and McConnell. They left the 14,200-foot camp about 0600, and Perkins and McNabb followed them about an hour later. The Teton group arrived at the 17,200-foot camp after 3.5 hours of climbing. Jackson directed his team to rehydrate and set up a camp while he attempted to obtain information from the several South Korean climbing groups who were also camped there. Jackson contacted Talkeetna Ranger Station by radio. They set up a relay with a Korean interpreter. After lengthy discussions between the interpreter and various members of the climbing parties, Jackson was able to determine that Cho’s position was near Denali Pass. The weather, however, was deteriorating significantly with increasing winds and poor visibility.

After Jackson discussed the situation with Talkeetna, he decided to put together an initial response team of McConnell, Harder, Perkins, McNabb, and himself. Perkins and McNabb began climbing ahead of the others in order to check out the higher route that traversed to Denali Pass and mark a few of the fixed pickets on the traverse as “way points” for our return using a GPS unit. McConnell, Harder, and Jackson followed Perkins and McNabb about 15 minutes later with additional evacuation equipment. McConnell carried it the entire way up. Bywater and Rickert stayed behind at the 17,200-foot camp in order to finish setting up the camp that would prove to be very necessary when the team returned. Once the camp was up, Bywater and Rickert were then to start climbing up to Denali Pass in support of first team efforts.

The five rescuers made the traverse up to Denali Pass over the next few hours. Perkins and McNabb contacted Jackson when they arrived at Denali Pass and said that they believed that they could see a “black object” below on the uppermost portion of the Harper Glacier and requested permission to in-

investigate. Just as Jackson's group arrived at the Pass, he received another very excited radio transmission from Perkins, who indicated that they had found Cho and that he appeared to have a pulse and was breathing. While Jackson was excited by the fact that the patient was alive, this was tempered by the realization of just how difficult it was going to be to evacuate him given the very poor weather conditions and the altitude. Harder began an initial assessment of the patient. Cho had an obvious head injury with a large contusion to the area of his left temple. The rescuers put his legs inside his pack and placed him down on the pads from the inside of Jackson and Harder's packs. The five rescuers then clipped into the sled and began to drag him back up to Denali Pass following the wands that Jackson had placed on the way down.

When they arrived at Denali Pass they were met with the full force of the incoming storm, strong winds and wind-driven snow. Jackson placed the first lowering anchor—an ice ax—stepped on it, clipped in one of their two climbing ropes, and began the first of the many lowerings that we were to do that day. Harder and McConnell acted as litter attendants and traversed over to begin work on the next anchor. Shouting over the wind, Jackson reminded them to move lightly, as we were all on a single ice ax at this point. This leapfrogging method of moving the patient was to be repeated many times over the next several hours. As they down-climbed slowly across, Jackson was aware that the avalanche hazard was increasing. The main problems that plagued the rescuers throughout the day were the poor visibility and whiteout conditions. Many times Jackson was unable to see across the slope to Perkins and McNabb who were in the process of creating the next set of anchors. At some point during the rescue, Rickert and Bywater joined the small group, having come up from 17,200 feet at our request. Bywater was able to replace an exhausted Harder as a litter attendant while Rickert joined Jackson for assistance with anchor construction. The secondary team, having been assembled from climbers at 17,200-foot camp, met up with the main team when they were nearly finished with the main portion of the traverse, which was a great help as well.

The Teton crew (visiting rangers) occupied two tents side by side with Harder and Rickert providing badly needed medical attention to Cho. They were up most of the night with the patient. Clear skies prevailed on Saturday morning, May 21. The Teton crew was in no condition to do much of anything other than continue rehydrating and sleeping throughout much of the day. During the afternoon they rallied and we stomped out a landing zone and prepared Cho for his departure, as best we could. When it appeared that the low-lying clouds had dissipated enough, Talkeetna dispatched the NPS Lama helicopter with pilot Jim Hood towards the mountain. As Hood approached the Kahiltna Glacier, he found that the visibility was not adequate, so he was forced to return to Talkeetna.

For the second time in less than a week, the Teton crew prepared for a 2,500-foot technical lowering of Cho down to the 14,200-foot camp. Rickert attended the patient during the lowering. Two-and-one-half hours after we started, Cho was in the medical tent at 14,200 feet.

This rescue was successful because the many people who were involved, but without the valiant and on-site efforts by the Teton crew, it would have had a different outcome for the Korean climber Cho.

OVERDUE—INADEQUATE COMMUNICATIONS

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount McKinley, Cassin Ridge

On June 3, Ranger Joe Reichert requested a search for overdue climbers Sue Nott and Karen McNeill of the “Best Chilled” expedition climbing the Cassin Ridge. According to Reichert, the party reported they had five days of food and seven days of fuel when they departed the 14,200-foot camp on May 25. By June 3 they had been out for nine days. At 1131, a tent was spotted on the summit by the NPS Lama helicopter. A subsequent flight confirmed that the two climbers who were camped on the summit were wearing clothing similar to that of Nott and McNeill. The party was confirmed to be Nott and McNeill at 1657 when they arrived at the 17,200-foot camp.

Analysis

This is an example of what is often referred to as “preventive” search and rescue. By using the helicopter for aerial searches, climbing rangers did not need to gather resources for a ground search and expose themselves to harsh weather conditions and technical climbing dangers while not certain about whether or not a serious condition did exist for those that were, in theory, overdue. Rangers were able to locate the climbing party quickly and without putting large numbers of resources into the field. The climbers were aware that they were overdue according to the information that they left with the NPS Rangers, yet made no motion for assistance when they encountered the NPS helicopter.

This search may have been prevented if the team had taken their radio. They could have called either the 14,200-foot camp or the basecamp manager at the 7,200-foot camp and asked them to inform NPS personnel that they were doing well and not in need of any assistance. McNeill later stated that, “... when it came down to packing (for the climb), the antenna was misplaced.” The decision to take a radio is a personal one and one that must be weighed by each individual party. As it turned out for McNeill and Nott, this option was eliminated by the misplaced antenna.

The NPS will now take route specific information regarding equipment, number of days of food and fuel, communication equipment and overdue dates at remote duty stations. Climbers who leave this information will be told of the NPS intention to start a search approximately 48 hours after