

smaller slide could have caught them. Large avalanches were occurring on the mountain following the Saturday night storm.

Other observations during the search indicated that large avalanches had run on other slopes in the general vicinity of Liberty and Ptarmigan Ridges. There had been no climbers on these slopes so it was concluded that most slides were naturally triggered events. It seems unlikely that there were any climbers above Casady and Vizcaya, yet this remains unknown. The climbers had indicated when they registered that they had avalanche transceivers with them though neither was wearing one. A transceiver, however, would have provided no protection from such an avalanche.

It is important to note that snowstorms and avalanches do occur on Mount Rainier in the summer. Climbers during all seasons should be prepared to assess avalanche issues. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

## **STRANDED, EXCEEDING ABILITIES, INCOMPATIBLE PARTNERS— POOR COMMUNICATION**

### **Washington, Mount Rainier, Liberty Ridge**

Bruce Penn (43) and Al Hancock (44) departed White River to climb Liberty Ridge on June 13. It took them three days to reach the base. On the third day, while looking at Liberty Ridge, Penn voiced concern to Hancock about the steepness of the route and his ability to climb it.

They spent the day talking about descent, but decided to reevaluate their plan at the base of Liberty Ridge. On the fourth day, June 16, an apprehensive Penn decided to start up the ridge with Hancock setting anchors and belaying every pitch. It took 14 hours for the pair to reach Thumb Rock. Both individuals were exhausted and dehydrated when they finally arrived.

Penn knew that it should only take four to six hours to reach Thumb Rock from lower Curtis Ridge. He was surprised that other climbing parties were not placing protection and climbing the lower ridge without belay. He then realized that their climbing method was not practical for the route.

On the fifth morning, Penn knew that he could not complete the climb and called 911 on his cell phone to ask for assistance. He did not discuss this with Hancock and only informed him after the call had already occurred. That call reached Supervisory Climbing Ranger Mike Gauthier. During the conversation, Penn stated that his team could not go up or down but added that there were no injuries and they had enough food and fuel for a few days. Since there was no obvious urgency and because an active SAR was already in progress on Liberty Ridge, Gauthier informed Penn that they would have to wait for a rescue or assistance.

At 12:44 p.m., Penn called again stating that he "...could not climb up or down from Thumb Rock." Penn again acknowledged that he and his partner



were okay, but that their arms were quite sore, they were dehydrated and that they had bad vibes about the route. Hancock felt that their best option was to continue the climb up and over, but refused to go back down. Penn was unwilling to continue up or down even with additional supplies and gear the NPS offered to drop at their location. It was explained to Penn that another more urgent SAR was in progress and that they would need to remain where they were until more personnel and resources were available.

At 7:30 p.m. Penn again called the Park requesting a helicopter rescue. When told that their rescue would still require a belayed down-climb, Penn seemed unwilling to cooperate. He said, "I just want to be off the mountain."

On the sixth day, arrangements were made with the Oregon National Guard for a helicopter hoist of the pair as rescue and recovery efforts remained ongoing for Casady and Vizcaya. Rangers made two airdrops—food, fuel, and a cell phone—for Penn and Hancock at Thumb Rock.

On the seventh day, an Oregon National Guard Chinook helicopter flew to the scene with three climbing rangers aboard. Ranger David Gottlieb was lowered to Thumb Rock via hoist and assisted both climbers back into the helicopter. The climbers were successfully removed from the mountain that day.

### **Analysis**

Penn and Hancock met on a guided climb of Mount McKinley the previous year. They had not climbed together before, but did discuss and research Mount Rainier and Liberty Ridge extensively. Some climbers often overlook the important aspect of climbing relationships and partner compatibility. The importance of a skills assessment, common goals and similar abilities are sometimes overshadowed by the excitement of summiting the mountain or doing a route.

A commendable aspect of this incident was that the team realized things were not going well and pulled back before getting injured. The NPS recognizes that people commit errors in judgment and make mistakes, but suggests that climbers not proceed when originally presented with questionable situations.

As a reminder, Liberty Ridge requires a substantial amount of physical strength, technical skill, effective communication and comfort with a heavy pack on steep ice for 6,000 feet of climbing. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

## **FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, INADEQUATE BELAY**

### **Washington, Mount Baker, North Ridge**

Elain Fu (33) and I (Stephen Ramsey, 33) were simul-climbing up the ice cliff on the North Ridge of Mount Baker. I was in the lead. At 6:30 a.m., I reached a slightly overhanging lip of ice, about five feet in height. The elevation was about 9,700 feet, and the angle of the face below the lip was