

UNITED STATES

FALL ON ICE—RAPPEL ERROR

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount Wake

On April 23, Jed Kallen-Brown (23) and Lara Kellogg (38) were climbing the Northeast Ridge of Mount Wake (9,100 feet) in the Ruth Gorge of Denali National Park and Preserve. The pair turned around in the afternoon and began descending the same route. At 1830, while on rappel, Kellogg came off the end of her rope and fatally fell over 1300 feet. Kallen-Brown descended the rest of the route and reached a climbing party in the Ruth Gorge who had a satellite phone. The NPS was notified at 2110 the same day. Kellogg's body was recovered by fixed-wing aircraft on the 24th. She was flown to Talkeetna and transferred to Kehl's Palmer Mortuary.

The following is an excerpt from a statement by Kallen-Brown from an interview at the Talkeetna Ranger Station on the 24th and written documentation he supplied on the 25th: "We began descending and down-climbed to the top of the steep step. At this point she untied before being clipped into the anchor. Not intentional, just happened. I found a good nut, and one 30-meter rappel just barely reached our belay under the overhang. We ate and drank 'bars and water' at this alcove, then fixed one end of the rope to the anchor. The plan was that Lara would rap on the single strand, putting in a couple pieces on the traverse, and I would down-climb. She would either down-climb with me or do a similar rap/down-climb to the top of the first 30-meter step. This had a bulge of good ice at the top that we could V-thread to reach the top of the snow gully.

"I recall pointing out that the single strand 8.5 mm was slippery in her Reverso. We did not put a knot in the end of the rope. She rappled to the traverse, then out of sight. A couple minutes went by, then I heard a scream, 'No!,' that seemed surprised followed by the 'clanking sound' of someone falling, then a thud. As the reality sank in, I tried to calm my nerves. Since she had the whole rack, I couldn't rap if I wanted.

"I packed up the rope and began down-climbing. It was 1830. I came to a Yellow C4 before the traverse, then a Red C3 below it, then a 10-cm screw. Near what must have been the end of the rope, there was a marginal nut. I down-climbed to the top of the step, then made one 30-meter rappel off the ice screw to reach the snow gully. There was an impact mark near a tongue of rock at the bottom of the step. I estimate that she fell 30 meters down 60 to 70 degree ice, then 35 meters of free-fall over the cliff, then about 300 meters of tumbling down the gully. As I down-climbed, I collected tools, screws, and other gear. Her body came to rest near the bottom of the snow cone. I reached it at 1920."

Analysis

Thirteen years, ago almost to the day, two climbers fell and were killed while one was rappelling near the same location on Mount Wake. It should be noted upfront that when rappelling mixed ice, snow, and rock with crampons, the ability to stop and be secure requires added attention and effort. Circumstances of these two accidents are similar, and in both cases, critical accepted rappel procedures were not followed.

A knot was not tied at the end of the rope, which is desirable in many circumstances. Since Kellogg was rappelling in a gully system, there was a greater risk of being hit by falling rocks or ice. If she were to be hit and lose consciousness or control of the rappel, having a knot in the end of the rappel rope could stop the descent.

Kellogg was using the Petzl Reverso (belay/descent control device). Petzl's literature for the Reverso states, "When rappelling on single or half rope, use two strands of rope between 8 and 11mm in diameter, inclusive." She was rappelling on one 8.5mm rope. In a phone call with the US distributor for Petzl, Ranger Roger Robinson asked if a single rope could be used with the Reverso on rappel. He was told that a rope equal to or greater than 10mm could be used, even though they do not provide information on this application. Their literature does indicate that the Reverso can be used with a single rope for belaying, as long as it is at least 10 to 11mm in diameter.

Another safety measure used in these circumstances is to use a sling with an autoblock knot (for webbing) or a prusik knot (for slings) as a back up. She was placing protection, and since she was using an 8.5mm rope that was undersized for her Reverso, the unintentional loss of the rope through it could have occurred while placing the last piece of protection. A back-up system would likely have given her a chance to stop her descent. (There are a number of websites with information on prusik and autoblock set-ups.)

Perhaps it is best to end with a quote from Jed Kallen-Brown: "As I try to piece together the accident, I suspect that she was concentrating on finding gear to belay from and didn't realize how close to the end of the rope she was. Fatigue may have been a contributing factor. I don't know if the slippery rappel system played a part. I do not think she was hit by a rock. I am confident that a knot in the end of the rope would have made the difference. This has certainly caused me to rethink the value judgment that the added security is not worth the hassle of stuck ropes and extra time to tie and untie knots.

"Throughout the day, we were in good spirits, constantly perpetuating one running joke or another. The climbing was enjoyable and the company was unbeatable. Our conversations were never dull. She was always up for a challenge and quite the rope-gun, although she would never admit it. I cherish the time we spent together." (Source: Edited from a report by

Lisa Roderick, Denali National Park, and a report written by Jed Kallen-Brown)

AVALANCHE, CLIMBING UNROPED, PLACED NO PROTECTION

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount Barrill, Japanese Couloir

On Tuesday evening, May 15th, Andre Callari (33) and Brian Postlethwait (32) set out from their basecamp on the Ruth Glacier to climb the “Japanese Couloir” route on Mount Barrill. Several other parties on the glacier watched them begin their climb. On the 16th the weather was good and there were no sightings of Andre or Brian. On the 17th a team of two ascended half of the Japanese Couloir early in the morning, but chose to retreat due to soft, wet snow conditions. This team reported that Brian and Andre’s skis were still at the base of the route. Also on the 17th, a ranger team patrolled from the climbers’ basecamp up-glacier around Mount Barrill to the Don Sheldon Mountain House. This entire day was foggy with visibility limited to 300 feet. During this patrol, Ranger Joe Reichert interviewed three groups that had seen the duo begin their climb of Barrill. All of these reporting parties expected to see the team return by late on the 16th or the morning of May 17th, so Reichert alerted the Talkeetna Ranger Station that there was an overdue party on Mount Barrill.

On May 18th, the weather cleared enough in the evening to allow the NPS rescue helicopter to fly into the Ruth Glacier. Rangers John Evans and Reichert flew to investigate at 2100. The remains of the two climbers were quickly located in wet avalanche debris at the base of Mount Barrill’s South Face.

On May 19th, the NPS Lama helicopter returned and inserted NPS Mountaineering Rangers Evans and Reichert on the avalanche cone via a step-out operation. One at a time the deceased were flown back to base camp where they were transferred to Talkeetna Air Taxi and flown out to Talkeetna. On this day the ranger team also packed up all of Andre and Brian’s basecamp equipment so that it could be returned to the next of kin.

Analysis

The storm that dropped most of the snow involved in this avalanche occurred on May 14th during the day and into that night. On May 15th, the predominant east facing couloir on this route shed most of this new snow in a wet avalanche. Observing that the slide had already occurred, the climbers decided to climb the route. However, where this gully intersects the south ridge, the route traverses on a south and western aspect slope in order to circumvent a gendarme. This is where the fatal avalanche occurred and this slope, being at a higher elevation and different aspect, had not yet stabilized from Monday’s storm.