

FALL ON SNOW/ICE

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Rib

On June 11, two climbers (36 and 39, US) died of injuries sustained during a fall while ascending the West Rib route. Though the origin of the fall was not witnessed, it is believed to have begun at approximately 19,200 feet. The two climbers, who were roped together, were witnessed falling at approximately the 16,000-foot level to the end of their fall around the 14,500-foot level. Subsequent to the report of the fall, a National Park Service hasty team and a group of private climbers immediately responded to the accident site and found that they had died due to injuries sustained during the fall. The bodies were recovered from the scene and evacuated to Talkeetna for transfer to the State of Alaska Medical Examiner.

Analysis

Though it is not now and never will be known what exactly caused this tragic fall, what is known about the two individuals and circumstances involved make the reality of this accident challenging to understand. The facts that are known are that both climbers were experienced and had a history of making the right decisions when venturing into the mountains. On this climb they routinely placed protection on moderate and steep terrain.

It was a beautiful day and conditions were reported to be ideal for climbing. Their ascent rate was within acceptable norms, and neither climber is known to have been compromised by altitude illness. They had food, water, and all the necessary equipment. The area from which they fell is no more difficult than they had previously climbed and the steepness of the terrain was well within their level of skill and experience.

One question that has been asked is why did they not have protection in place. Unfortunately that cannot be answered by anyone except the two climbers. Could it have made a difference? Maybe. It is accurate to say that the decision of when and where to place protection is of a subjective nature and that depending on the given circumstances, a climber may make one decision today and an entirely different one tomorrow, neither being right or wrong. In this case, the decisions of when and where to place protection were made by two cautious and competent climbers who did not define success by summiting, two who took the challenges of mountaineering seriously and did not underestimate the associated risk or the magnitude of climbing Denali.

INADEQUATE FOOD, NO WORKING STOVES

Alaska, Mount McKinley, Cassin Ridge

On June 11, two climbers (38 and 40) attempting the Cassin Ridge requested a rescue when they ran out of food and water and had no working stoves. They called on FRS and reported that they had “no energy and we cannot