

is the tendency to believe that a behavior is correct to the extent that other people are engaged in it” (McCammom, 2002). One of the two guides had also been to the area many times and camped in a similar location on seven previous trips without incident. His decision may fall into the “familiarity” category. “The familiarity heuristic is the tendency to believe that our behavior is correct to the extent that we have done it before” (McCammom, 2002). An additional heuristic that I will add is potentially a calibration problem regarding snow avalanches and ice avalanches resulting from the possible assumption that they behave like the same animal when they do not.

Complex terrain in the Alaska Range demands attention to detail every step of the way, and timing will always be a part of it. Using all of our tools to avoid and reduce exposure will help to reduce the risk but cannot take away all of the risk. The decision to camp in this location worked for many people for many seasons, but not this time. (Source: John Leonard, South District Ranger, and Peter Armington, Investigating Officer.)

(Editor’s Note: Request bibliography from Denali National Park.)

FALL ON SNOW, FATIGUE, FROSTBITE, EXPOSURE

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

On May 12, during a Mountain Trip expedition led by guide Dave Staehli (56), Jeremiah O’Sullivan (40) suffered a fall while descending Pig Hill at approximately the 19,700-foot level, below the summit of Denali. During the fall, he broke his leg and others suffered minor injuries. A different client in the same party had descended with another guide earlier in the day due to signs of frostbite. Staehli and two climbers, Beat Niederer (38) and Laurence Cutler (45) left O’Sullivan near the location of the fall and descended towards the high camp at 17,200 feet on the West Buttress route. Along the way the group was separated and Niederer died from exposure. O’Sullivan was rescued via helicopter. Staehli and Cutler were treated for injuries including frostbite at high camp and flown off on subsequent days.

The forecast for this period of days was for high winds and party to mostly cloudy skies, but both groups observed generally good weather and inaccurate forecasts. On May 11, both groups decided to try for the summit. Mountain Trip 2 (MT2) left high camp at 1121 and Alaska Mountaineering School (AMS 1) left at 1145. When MT2 arrived at Denali Pass (18,200 feet), Staehli noticed that climber Tony Diskin had frostbite on two fingers of both hands and sent him back to high camp with guide Henry Munter. Diskin was wearing gloves and a lightly insulated jacket and reported having had cold fingers and toes all morning.

After receiving an initial call for assistance from Patrick Ormand (Alaska Mountaineering School and AMGA Mountain Guide) at the 17,200-foot camp regarding missing clients high on the mountain from another expedition, a major Search and Rescue operation was

initiated by South District Ranger John Leonard (IC). Mountaineering rangers Joe Reichert and Coley Gentzel were assigned the Operation Chief and Planning Chief overhead positions, respectively. The Rescue Coordination Center (RCC)—a US Air Force operation—was contacted and additional aviation assets were requested and were able to respond to the incident. Ultimately, late in the day, the NPS contract helicopter was able to evacuate Jeremiah O’Sullivan from the Football Field area near the summit of Denali after the strong winds that had enveloped the peak had subsided.

O’Sullivan’s life was most certainly saved through the use of the short-haul technique in what was the highest altitude evacuation using such a method in North America. A short time later Beat Niederer’s body was evacuated from the vicinity of Denali Pass, also utilizing the short-haul technique. Sadly, Beat Niederer had succumbed to unknown injuries and/or the extremely adverse weather conditions that were present. On May 13, the two other members of the party who also had significant injuries were evacuated from the mountain, also using the short-haul technique.

Analysis

Extensive interviews of the climbing team members and other teams on the mountain did not bring to light any significant issues or factors contributing to the events leading directly up to accident on the upper mountain. One climber from another team who was interviewed did note that at several points during his multiple interactions with the Mountain Trip team (MT2), led by Staehli, that many members of the group seemed quite fatigued and it did not seem that they were taking care of themselves. This comment was primarily directed at interaction he had with the team at the 16,200-foot level on the West Buttress, and then as his team passed MT2 along the summit ridge. (Source: John Leonard, Mountaineering Range, and Coley Gentzel, Lead Mountaineering Ranger)

(Editor’s Note: There were 229 climbers on Denali on May 12, including 67 clients, 36 guides, 114 private climbers, and 12 NPS on patrol. An external investigation team had not completed its report at the time of publication.)

FALL ON SNOW – UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST, CLIMBING UNROPED

Alaska, Mount McKinley, Denali Pass

On the morning of May 16 at 0545, the Angolo Dell’ Avventura Expedition team of Luciano Colombo (67), Mauro Colombo, and Paolo Civera left the 17,200-foot camp for a summit attempt. While gearing up to leave, they decided they would not rope up for ascending the Autobahn, but brought their rope in case they felt like they needed it up higher. It took them approximately two and a half hours to climb to Denali Pass, where they took a break for food and water. At this time, the team had a discussion about the weather, which was beginning to get cloudy above Denali Pass. They decided to keep moving up. At Zebra