



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow, Climbing Unroped

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mt. McKinley, West Buttress

Steffen Machulka (49) was a member of the three-person German climbing team "Die Bahner." On May 18 the team was on the eighth day of the expedition and was moving from the 14,200-foot camp to the 17,200-foot camp on the West Buttress. The team climbed unroped up the fixed lines with Machulka in the lead position. National Park Service (NPS) rangers were also moving to the 17,200-foot camp and were close behind.

Around 4:30 p.m., Machulka crested the ridge at 16,200 feet, detached from the top of the fixed line, and set down his climbing pack. According to team member Klaus Dieter, who witnessed the accident, Machulka's climbing pack started to roll down the slope toward the Peters Glacier and he jumped after it. Dieter states that within seconds Machulka was out of sight.

At 4:40 p.m., NPS ranger Kevin Wright arrived at the top of the fixed lines and the accident was reported to him. The National Park contract helicopter 3AE was at base camp conducting training with NPS staff, so Wright requested an aerial reconnaissance of the accident site. Wright and his team began descending the slope toward the Peters Glacier but were unable to locate any sign of Machulka.

At 5:17 p.m., NPS helicopter 3AE launched from base camp to reconnoiter the accident site, with ranger Dave Weber onboard. Shortly after arriving on the scene, they spotted a body at approximately 15,100 feet. The helicopter performed a toe-in hover operation, allowing rangers Weber and Taysom to exit the aircraft and assess Machulka's condition. He showed signs of massive head trauma incompatible with life and was pronounced dead at 5:50 p.m. His body was loaded into the helicopter and transported back to Talkeetna that evening. (Source: Mik Shain, Mountaineering Ranger.)

Images

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