



## AAC Publications

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### **Avalanche, Weather, Poor Position**

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

On June 12, a four-person rope team triggered an avalanche and was swept a short distance while traveling just below the fixed-lines area on Denali's West Buttress, at the 15,400-foot level. Three of the victims (ages 23, 30, and 32) were members of a University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)-sponsored medical research study that was investigating the effects and uses of melatonin (the hormone that is supposed to help regulate sleep and wake cycles) at altitude. The majority of the work they were conducting was at the 14,200-foot camp. On June 11, the three climbers joined up with a soloist and traveled up to Denali's high camp at 17,200 feet for a one-night acclimatization trip. The team reported that many climbers had asked to join their team; however, the soloist, who works as some sort of mountain professional/athlete, was invited along due to his expertise.

At 6 p.m., Chris Kerrick notified me via Family Radio Service (FRS) that four climbers had been involved in an avalanche and were OK, but might need medical attention. He and his team had assisted the injured climbers upon their return to camp, but were unsure if their injuries merited immediate medical attention. Approximately 30 minutes later, Kerrick informed me that the climbers were in need of medical care, and he and his assistant guides Eli Potter and Matthew Barela were bringing the injured team to the medical tent.

The chief complaints from each were an injured arm, an injured groin muscle and knee, and two more with injured knees. None of the injuries was life-threatening. Neither were any considered immediately serious by NPS volunteers Kevin Del Duca, M.D., and Troy Norman, R.N. EMT-P. Each patient was treated for the various injuries; two climbers returned to their tent, the third was welcomed into a tent by the "Colombia Epopeya A" team, and the soloist remained in the NPS medical tent, having lost his tent and sleeping bag in the avalanche.

On June 14 the three remaining patients' conditions had not improved. All three displayed difficulty walking; two were unable to walk without assistance. On occasion, climbers with similar lower-extremity injuries have been able to walk down with assistance from stronger teammates. Given that all team members had been injured, and that none had improved since the time of their accident, ranger Mik Shain at 14,200-foot camp and Talkeetna-based Incident Commander Joe Reichert decided to evacuate three team members using the NPS contract helicopter 3AE.

Being involved in a medical research study, the UAA team had quite a lot of gear with them at the 14,200-foot camp. Teams "Colombia Epopeya," "Taiwan Holistic High School," "Somos Ecuador," and "Bibendum" all assisted in carrying down their gear.

### **Analysis**

The weather conditions and forecast deteriorated significantly during their brief stay at high camp. The four climbers began their descent to 14,200 feet at 3 p.m. Prior to this time, the weather at high camp had been very windy, cold, and snowy, though ranger Mark Westman observed a minor reprieve in the storm from 12 to 1. By 3 p.m., when the climbers departed, the wind and snow had returned, and conditions were reported by Westman to be "very bad."

One of the climbers later reported to me that the team was unaware of how much snow had fallen

below them. He also reported that the team noticed signs of instability once they were already on the fixed lines, and that they observed a very small slide immediately prior to the large one that hit their team. (Source: Chris Erickson, Climbing Ranger.)

**Images**

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