



## AAC Publications

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### Avalanche

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

On July 22, Danish mountaineers Michael Pilegaard (26), Mads Knudsen (30), and Nicolai Bo Silver (26) set out from the 17,200-foot high camp for a summit attempt via a non-standard route up the “Autobahn,” the slope leading from high camp to Denali Pass. They had scouted the route variation the previous day, because they were concerned about the high avalanche danger on the standard route. While approaching their intended route up the Autobahn, they triggered an avalanche at approximately 1 p.m. The avalanche swept them from the 17,600-foot elevation several hundred feet down the slope to a point approximately 650 feet from their campsite. Pilegaard, who was relatively uninjured, was able to drag his two companions back to their campsite, where they waited for two days, hoping the injuries would respond to rest and treatment.

On July 25, after determining Knudsen and Bo Silver would not be able to walk, the trio called for assistance on an aviation radio, hoping to make contact with an aircraft providing scenic over-flights of the mountain. A Talkeetna Air Taxi plane heard the call and notified the National Park Service at 11:30 a.m.

NPS set in action a plan to establish two-way communication with the climbers in order to determine the nature and extent of their injuries, location, and other details surrounding their status and situation. This plan also included dropping the team a supply of food, fuel, and equipment, as nothing was known about their available resources.

The NPS contract helicopter was able to deliver the drop bag to high camp, and two-way communication was established between the team and the incident command team in Talkeetna. The NPS staff formulated a plan to carry out an evacuation of all team members starting at 8 the following morning.

The NPS contract helicopter made three successive trips from base camp to high camp and evacuated all three “Hell Tourist” team members to base camp, where they were transferred to waiting LifeMed air ambulances. The uninjured climber was flown back to Talkeetna and provided a detailed account of the events to NPS personnel. (Source: Denali National Park and Preserve News, July 26, 2012, and Coley Gentzel, Lead Mountaineering Ranger.)

(Editor’s note: A total of 1,223 attempted to climb Mt. McKinley in 2012, and 498 made it to the summit. The 40.7 percent summit success rate is the second-lowest in the last 25 years.)

**Images**

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