



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Climbing Unroped, Party Separated

Alaska, Denali, Denali Pass

Sylvia Montag, 39, fell to her death on May 5 while attempting to descend from Denali Pass (18,200 feet) to the 17,200-foot high camp on the West Buttress Route. Montag had separated from her partner, Meik Fuchs, as they descended from Denali Pass, where they had camped for two nights in strong winds after an ascent of the Muldrow Glacier Route on the north side of the mountain.

Fuchs contacted the Talkeetna Ranger Station at 11 a.m. on May 5, asking for the lock combination to the rescue cache at the 17,200-foot camp, as he did not have adequate supplies without Montag, who was carrying their tent. He reported that Montag had turned around and decided to go back to Denali Pass, due to either fatigue or bad weather. NPS rangers in Talkeetna gave Fuchs the lock code and instructed him to build a camp. In high winds, he instead pulled gear out of the cache and used the cache box as a shelter.

At 10 a.m. on May 6, Talkeetna rangers were contacted by Augustin Bossart, a friend of Fuchs. Bossart requested a rescue for Fuchs and Montag, and reported that they had become separated, did not have adequate supplies, and that Fuchs had suffered frostbite on all 10 fingertips. Fuchs contacted Talkeetna an hour later with the same information and a request for rescue. Unflyable weather and a lack of nearby climbers or rangers prevented any rescue that day.

On the morning of May 7, weather above 12,000 feet had improved considerably, but a solid cloud layer between 6,000 and 10,000 feet prevented flights from Talkeetna into the range. However, an Air Force Rescue Hercules C-130 was able to overfly the entire upper mountain. The crew was able to locate cloud openings, but none was large enough to facilitate a helicopter rescue. The C-130 did not locate Montag, nor any sign of her near Denali Pass, during its flights from 9:15 a.m. to 4 p.m.

At approximately 4:45 p.m., a local air taxi radioed that weather had improved between 6,000 and 10,000 feet, and that the weather between Talkeetna and base camp was rapidly improving. Helicopter 3AE, with three rangers on board, departed Talkeetna and arrived at base camp at 6:30 p.m. Ranger Dave Weber then flew to Denali Pass and conducted a hasty search for Montag. Weber located Montag face-down, partially buried by snow, and deceased at 17,419 feet, about 800 feet directly below Denali Pass. With a lack of acclimatized rangers available, Talkeetna Incident Command decided to rescue Fuchs and return for Montag at a more opportune time. Fuchs was lifted from the 17,200-foot camp via short-haul rescue basket, unattended, and then assessed at base camp. Helicopter 3AE, three rangers, and Fuchs then flew to Talkeetna, where Fuchs was released from NPS care with minor frostbite. Significant bad weather prevented rangers from getting to high camp until May 22. On May 23, an NPS patrol led by Coley Gentzel was able to locate and extricate Montag's body, which was flown to Talkeetna for transfer to the Alaska medical examiner.

An interview with Fuchs shed some light on the events leading up to the fall. Notably, Fuchs reported that he had not actually seen Montag return to Denali Pass, but that he had assumed she returned to the pass. Based on this information and where Montag came to rest, it is likely that Montag fell while descending. Fuchs also reported that at several points along their ascent route, he was surprised to find himself substantially faster than Montag. The pair had not previously climbed together, and Fuchs had assumed Montag to be the stronger and faster of the two; however, this did not prove to be true. Fuchs and Montag were roped together only on the Muldrow Glacier for crevasse protection. They did not travel roped on Karstens Ridge, the Harper Glacier, or while descending Denali Pass.

[Source: Denali National Park Case Incident Record and NPS press release.]

ANALYSIS

According to Denali National Park, the so-called “Autobahn,” the snow and ice slope between the 17,200-foot camp and Denali Pass, now has seen 12 fatalities—one of the most dangerous places on the mountain. Each season rangers and guide staff install fixed pickets, permanently equipped with quickdraws, along this slope. In the past they were placed every 30 to 35 meters, but the ranger staff plans to place more pickets, narrowing the gaps to about 27 meters, thus allowing a team with a 60-meter rope to be clipped into two pickets at any time. However, the pickets usually are not installed until the first ranger patrol or guided party reaches high camp, generally in mid-May. Moreover, pickets may be buried, removed, or fall out. In other words, climbers cannot assume the pickets will be in place. In this particular incident, the climbers had been moving unroped throughout their ascent and descent of the upper mountain. In such circumstances, even if they had stayed together, there is little Fuchs could have done to stop Montag’s fall. Only a roped team placing protection or clipping fixed pickets is prepared to halt a fall on the Autobahn when self-arrest fails. [Source: The Editors, with information on fixed protection policies provided by Coley Gentzel, Lead Mountaineering Ranger.]

Images



More fatal falls occur along the “Autobahn,” the traverse between high camp and Denali Pass, than any other part of the West Buttress Route.

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