



## AAC Publications

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### Fall on Ice – Possible Avalanche

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Liberty Ridge

**On Monday, May 26, an Alpine Ascents International guided party started an ascent of Mt. Rainier via Liberty Ridge.** Led by guides Matt Hegeman and Eitan Green, John Mullaly (Seattle), Uday Marty (Singapore), Mark Mahaney (St. Paul), and Erik Kolb (New York) rounded out the team. They planned to bivouac on May 26 at Curtis Ridge and on May 27 at Thumb Rock on Liberty Ridge. They hoped to climb over the summit on May 28 and descend to Camp Schurman.

The AAI team was spotted as they ascended the route on Wednesday, May 28, by an independent party behind them. That evening, at 6:20 p.m., Hegeman called the company's office to report they were going to camp and that the weather was deteriorating. Additionally, two texts, a SPOT tracking device message, and a picture of the Wednesday night camp were sent to friends of the climbers that night. As confirmed by one of the group's SPOT beacons, they were camping at approximately 12,800 feet, near the top of the Black Pyramid, a large rocky feature that is bypassed by climbing a snow and ice slope on the left. Hegeman reported that all was well with the group and they hoped to summit the next day. These were the last messages received from the team.

At approximately 6:30 p.m. on May 30, Enumclaw police dispatch received a call from Alpine Ascents International reporting an overdue team on Liberty Ridge. At Camp Schurman, ranger Stefan Lofgren located and interviewed the pair of climbers who had just completed the Liberty Ridge and had seen the AAI party two days earlier. They told Lofgren that the larger team left Thumb Rock at about 8 a.m. on May 28, and that they had heard a belay signal yelled from above that afternoon. Around 4 p.m. bad weather moved in, and several inches of snow fell over the following hours. As they climbed the route the next day, the pair discovered a smashed ice axe near the base of the Black Pyramid, as well as a second ice axe planted in the snow and a black plastic bag higher up. They saw tracks but could not determine their age or origin.

An NPS-led search was launched early on May 31, with a climbing ranger team ascending the route and a helicopter team doing aerial reconnaissance. Aerial searchers located a broad debris field of climbing and camping gear (estimated at 0.5 mile by 0.25 miles in area) near the base of Willis Wall, 3,000 feet below the last known location of the climbers. No sign of survivors was observed, either by the ground team that climbed the Liberty Ridge or by aerial searchers. During a second helicopter flight in early afternoon, searchers equipped with avalanche beacons reported multiple beacon signals from the debris field. Again, however, no sign of survivors was observed, and ongoing icefall and rockfall in the area presented an immediate threat to the hovering helicopter or potential ground searchers.

Given the evidence, the NPS concluded that the party had been swept off the mountain, sometime while they were still at their high camp during the night of May 28 or the morning of May 29. Because of the significant risk to recovery teams, the decision was made on the afternoon of May 31 not to attempt immediate recovery of the victims. (Source: NPS Case Incident Record.)

### ANALYSIS

Liberty Ridge is prone to the standard objective hazards of any big mountain climb, including glacier travel, altitude, weather, rock/ice fall, and avalanches. It remains unclear exactly what caused this accident, but it's likely that an avalanche, icefall, or a collapsing ice ledge swept the climbers off the

ridge and down to the Carbon Glacier below the Willis Wall. By all accounts, Matt Hegeman and Eitan Green were climbing guides of the highest caliber. This tragic event reminds us that regardless of how competent trip leaders, partners, or clients may be, the risks inherent in climbing mountains will always be present. (Source: The Editors.)

**Images**

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	68
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Accident reports