



AAC Publications

Stranded – Suspected Altitude Illness

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Longs Peak

On Thursday, June 2, 10 soldiers from Fort Carson in Colorado Springs attempted to climb Kiener's Route on the northeast face of 14,259-foot Longs Peak. The soldiers, part of the 10th Special Forces Group, were engaged in a mountaineering exercise. Kiener's Route is a long snow and mixed climb, with the most difficult terrain above 13,000 feet, and generally has late-winter climbing conditions in early June.

The military group contacted park personnel when some of their party became "distressed," likely with altitude illness. They decided to spend an unplanned night at around 13,000 feet, and the following morning the stricken soldiers were helped to the summit by their team, where they were all evacuated by a civilian helicopter (contracted by the National Park Service) which made "seven or eight" trips to the top, according to ranger Mark Pita. More than 40 SAR personnel affiliated with the national park were on call to assist the soldiers to the summit if needed.

ANALYSIS

Acute mountain sickness (AMS) can strike nearly anyone who climbs too high too fast. Although it's not certain this is what "distressed" the stricken soldiers, they had rapidly reached a point about 7,000 feet higher than their base in Fort Carson. Normally, the definitive treatment for suspected altitude illness is to stop climbing or descend until symptoms resolve. However, the descent from this elevation on Kiener's Route can be challenging and time-consuming, and the team included trained medics who were able to provide treatment and observation. In consultation with rangers, they decided the soldiers were capable of continuing up the steep upper face to the at summit, where a helicopter evacuation would be relatively easy to manage. (Sources: Rocky Mountain National Park rangers, news reports, and the Editors.)

SYMPTOMS OF AMS

Acute mountain sickness (AMS) may be present if a person who has climbed rapidly to a higher elevation develops a headache plus any of these symptoms:

- Gastrointestinal issues (nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite)
- Fatigue/lassitude
- Dizziness/lightheadedness
- Insomnia or difficulty sleeping

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