



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – No Backup

Washington, North Cascades National Park, Torment-Forbidden Traverse

On the morning of July 21, Susan Bennett, 61, and three partners set out to climb the Torment-Forbidden traverse. They completed the south ridge of Torment, and after a bivy on the ridge between Torment and Forbidden they got a late start the next morning due to overnight rain soaking their gear. They were moving toward Forbidden before noon.

At the notch below the west ridge of Forbidden, the climbers left some of their gear, planning to return this way from the summit before descending into Boston Basin. The climbers broke into two teams, and Bennett's team reached the false summit just as the other team was descending from the true summit. After Bennett and her partner hit the summit, they downclimbed the west ridge until the top of a 5.6 pitch. Because they were wearing mountaineering boots, they decided to rappel this section instead of downclimb. They set up a rappel from an existing anchor, using their doubled 8mm to 8.2mm rope. After throwing down the ends, Bennett's partner noted that they had not tied stopper knots and wondered aloud if they should fix this error, but Bennett expressed fear that knots might get caught in the rocks. She had an autoblock cord clipped to her harness, but apparently did not use it for this rappel.

At approximately 4:30 p.m., Bennett started to rappel at a 45° angle from the anchor, apparently attempting to stay on the ridgeline. At a stance about 25 meters down, she lost her footing and began to pendulum. Her partner could not see what happened, but later said he thought Bennett had impacted with the rock slab and was knocked unconscious. After she re-entered his view, the partner saw Bennett start to slide slowly down the rope, and he yelled for her to grab her brake line. She didn't respond and slid off the end of the rope. She struck a ledge and then began a long tumble over the north face of the mountain. Her helmet broke into several pieces and she disappeared into the clouds near the glacier.

In poor visibility, the other two climbers heard Bennett's partner yelling that she'd fallen. They said they would come up to assist him after calling for help. At the notch, they located an inReach device in Bennett's pack and activated it. Once they were all together, the group debated trying to descend to the north to look for Bennett, but felt they did not have the equipment nor time to make an effective search (it was now 5:30 p.m.), and they knew a search and rescue effort already had been initiated. Instead, they descended together toward Boston Basin, carrying Bennett's gear, until they met a National Park Service helicopter. Bennett's body was spotted about 30 feet down in a crevasse on the Forbidden Glacier around 7,100 feet. (Source: North Cascades National Park incident reports.)

ANALYSIS

Bennett was an experienced climber and past instructor with the Mountaineers. It is not clear why she skipped safety precautions (third-hand backup, stopper knots) that she usually used, including during a previous rappel on this same trip. To address concerns about stopper knots getting stuck, they could have carried the rappel rope in coils with them (using "saddlebags" or a similar technique) as they descended and then untied the stopper knots once they were off rappel. Although the official reports do not suggest this, it's possible that Bennett was feeling rushed by their late start, the deteriorating weather, and the fact that their climbing companions were moving faster, and thus took unusual shortcuts with the rappel. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

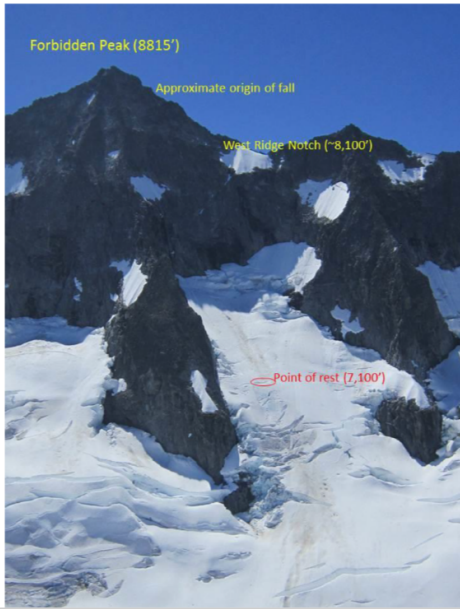


Photo-diagram of the accident scene on the west ridge and north face of Forbidden Peak.

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