



AAC Publications

Avalanche – Proceeded Despite Hazardous Conditions

Alaska, Denali National Park, West Fork of Ruth Glacier, Reality Ridge

In the early afternoon on May 3, a group of three ski mountaineers departed their base camp in the west fork of the Ruth Glacier. This was the first day of clearing following a storm that had lasted more than a week. Their objective was to climb and then ski an east-facing couloir on Denali's Reality Ridge. According to interviews with the team, as the skiers neared the top of the couloir, they began to have concerns about the snow stability. The preceding storm had deposited six feet of new snow in the area.

The team decided to stop their ascent, cross the couloir to a spot where they could put on their skis, and begin their descent. During this transition, a 31-year-old male in the group triggered an avalanche and was swept approximately 1,800 feet down the chute. The skier finally stopped at the bottom of the couloir, fortunately on top of the snow. Although he did not report losing consciousness during this accident, he sustained significant injuries. His partners, who were above him at the time of the avalanche, witnessed the entire event and were able to descend to his location.

Following a brief assessment, the team contacted their air taxi service via satellite phone and began to assist their injured partner back to camp. At 5:45 p.m., NPS rangers were notified of the incident and began planning for a rescue. Operations were streamlined due to direct satellite communications with the skiers, who provided frequent updates on the patient's progress toward camp and current medical condition.

Mountaineering rangers departed Talkeetna by helicopter and made contact with the patient at 7:09 p.m. Once back in Talkeetna, the patient was transferred to an ambulance at 7:47 p.m. and taken to a local hospital. He had suffered a dislocated left shoulder, a fractured jaw, a large chin laceration, and large contusions on the right thigh and right elbow.

ANALYSIS

May 3 was a single day of clearing weather between two large storm systems, lasting eight days and six days, respectively. During each of these storms, significant snowfall accumulated in the Alaska Range, raising the potential for natural and human-triggered avalanches. Although anyone would be eager to get out of the tent and climb or ski after an extended storm, it is paramount to remain vigilant to one's avalanche assessment and safe travel practices, regardless of the external pressures and the human factors that influence decision-making.

This party's decision to carry a satellite phone with them on the climb—and not simply stow the phone at base camp—facilitated a swift and effective rescue. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Denali Mountaineering Rangers
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	72
Page	26
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Accident reports