



## AAC Publications

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### Avalanche

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mt. Hunter, Mini-Moonflower

**On May 20, Britt Ruegger, 34, and I (age 29) were climbing the Mini-Moonflower Route when a debris avalanche swept the route and hit us as we were rappelling. We'd arrived at KIA (Kahiltna International Airport) on May 8 and proceeded to log some tent time during mixed weather.** We climbed the first three or four pitches of the Mini-Moonflower on May 14 but bailed due to building snow. On May 20 we set out to give it another go.

In base camp that morning there was a trace of new snow, but by the time we were about 30 minutes from the base of the route we observed a foot of fresh snow, likely due to micro-orographic effects and temperature differences. I was a bit uneasy about how much new snow had fallen, but the weather didn't seem bad that day, and no new snow was forecast until the afternoon, which would give us time to climb most of the route.

At the base of the climb I felt some apprehension, but sometimes you don't know until you go. We set off, swapping leads up eight or nine pitches. As we got within a pitch or two of the ridgeline, we decided to pull the plug because it seemed like the weather was turning.

We began to rappel. Above the crux pitch, we threaded the ropes through an in situ V-thread anchor and backed that up with an ice screw. I rappelled over the crux and down to the belay stance I had used on the way up, located in a semi-protected nook. At this point, since I still had more rope available, I had the choice to build a thread there or continue down. I continued another 10 to 15 meters to an angled shelf, making the rappel about 40 to 45 meters. I built a two-screw and quad anchor at the semi-hanging stance and clipped in with my tether. It was around 8:30 p.m. As I was preparing to pull the ropes out of my rappel device, I heard a rumble and looked up to see an avalanche headed at me. I grabbed the anchor and hoped for the best.

The avalanche pummeled me and knocked me off the stance. After it had passed and I got back on my feet, I realized something was wrong. When I reached up to finish removing the ropes from my device, my left hand wouldn't move up to meet my right. Either something carried by the slide or the force of being knocked off my stance had broken my left humerus at mid-shaft. Luckily, my partner was only dusted by the avalanche.

I placed my left wrist in a climbing sling and we continued our descent, which had its own challenges, including a stuck rope. While my partner solved that problem, I activated the SOS on his Garmin inReach device, 30 or 40 minutes after the avalanche. Once we reached the glacier, the NPS helicopter shuttled us to base camp, and in the evening I was flown to Talkeetna and a waiting ambulance. I had surgery later that night.

### ANALYSIS

We don't know what caused the avalanche above us, but we hadn't adhered to the old adage of waiting at least a day after a storm to let the slopes shed snow, and perhaps we were threading the needle in regard to the weather pattern. We didn't really get much sleep the night before, which may have contributed to missing or not paying enough attention to telltale signs during the approach.

**Although we both were carrying Garmin inReach devices, in the debrief with the NPS rangers we learned that, since we were so close to Kahiltna base, carrying a Talkabout-style radio would have allowed direct comms with the rangers at base camp.** (Source: Jared Drapala.)

Editor's note: The Denali mountaineering rangers' report about this incident stated, "This team exhibited exemplary self-sufficiency in both the initial care and rescue of the injured climbing partner."

## Images



The accident site on the Mini-Moonflower route is shown.



Looking down the Mini-Moonflower Route at the stance where a climber was hit by an avalanche during a rappel descent, knocking him off the stance and breaking his arm.

Article Details

Author	Jared Drapala
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	72
Page	28
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Accident reports