



Avalanche and Long Fall

Alaska, Kahiltna Queen, West Face

On May 28, a 30-year-old male skier fell 700 meters after triggering an avalanche on Kahiltna Queen (a.k.a. Humble Peak). The patient and two companions (all very experienced ski mountaineers) had summited the 12,380-foot peak around noon by the west face, the most commonly climbed route.

They reported that the snow “felt safe.” They successfully skied the most technical sections without rappels, but as the patient skied the narrows near the top of the route’s initial couloir, he triggered a small avalanche and was carried all the way down the 50-degree couloir to the base of the mountain. NPS rescuers responded via air and ground. The rangers suspected injuries to the upper spinal column, and the patient was flown to Talkeetna for further care. Fractures of two cervical vertebrae and multiple ribs were later confirmed.

ANALYSIS

The consequences of climbing or skiing falls in big, remote mountain ranges can be severe. This skier was extremely lucky to have survived this fall. As always, it is paramount to remain vigilant with one’s avalanche assessment and safe travel practices. The variable snow conditions and dynamic snow depths found in confined couloirs can cause a skier/snowboarder/climber to trigger an avalanche at a shallow point unknown to the party. This party also reported being hit by a small sluff avalanche while awaiting the rescue. Although injuries may prevent safely moving a patient before a full team of rescuers arrives, the hazards of waiting for help in an exposed location should be weighed. (Sources: Denali Mountaineering Rangers, patient’s report, and the Editors.)

Images



The west face of Kahiltna Queen (a.k.a. Humble Peak). At approximately point X, a skier triggered a small avalanche that caused him to fall to the bottom of the face.

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