



AAC Publications

Deadly Rockfall At Thumb Rock

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Liberty Ridge

At about 8:30 p.m. on May 29, a climber called 911 to report a large rockfall around 10,800 feet at Thumb Rock, high camp for the Liberty Ridge route. The climber relayed to dispatchers that Arleigh William “Bill” Dean (46) had been killed and two other climbers were seriously injured by the rockfall. Weather and the late hour kept rescuers from conducting a rescue until the next day.

The injured and deceased were members of three separate teams attempting Liberty Ridge. The first team arrived at Thumb Rock around noon. Dean’s team followed at about 2 p.m. The last group showed up at 3 p.m. They spaced their three tents three to four feet vertically from each other on a slope, with Dean’s tent in the middle. The afternoon was hot, with slushy snow, sliding snow, and multiple rockfall incidents. All six climbers were inside their tents when the rockfall occurred just before sunset.

A climber in the lowest tent said he was listening to music but had left one earbud out to listen for rockfall. He’d even joked about wearing a helmet to bed. As the sun waned, he heard yelling and felt rocks graze his back and neck. Dean’s tent was pushed partially on top of the lowest tent. The uninjured climbers exited their tents and began to treat those who were hurt. One climber called 911, and another hit the SOS button on his Garmin device. After learning rescuers would not be coming that night, they wrapped the injured climbers to keep them warm and stayed awake to watch for more rockfall.

The next morning, low clouds complicated the rescue operation. A helicopter airlifted the first injured climber around 12:30 p.m., transporting him to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. The next climber was lifted from the scene about 2:10 p.m. Just before 3 p.m., Dean’s body was flown off the mountain. The uninjured climbers began descending from Thumb Rock around 11:15 a.m. and were evacuated from the Carbon Glacier at about 4:30 that afternoon. (Source: Mt. Rainier National Park incident report.)

ANALYSIS

This route is known to be committing, with rockfall and falling ice quite common. (See “Danger ones: Mt. Rainier” in ANAC 2014.) In May 2014, six climbers were swept to their deaths from the ridge while sleeping, presumably by rockfall or a snow slide. Although it’s difficult to protect against rockfall at Thumb Rock, it’s sometimes possible to build or enhance protective walls around tents. Weather also played a role in this accident. The climbers reported slushy conditions and rockfall, and the snow hadn’t frozen the night before. The park service recommends against attempting Liberty Ridge if the freezing level on Mt. Rainier is above 14,000 feet. Very strong climbers with good climbing conditions may consider camping at Curtis Ridge and then approaching and climbing Liberty Ridge in a single day (normally two days for most climbers), thus minimizing the exposure to falling rock and ice. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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