



AAC Publications

Frostbite — Poor Position

Alaska, Denali West Buttress

On the afternoon of May 22, two male climbers left 14,200-foot camp for 17,200-foot camp. The 57-year-old male and 56-year-old male embarked on their climb in spite of weather warnings from rangers and during winds gusting to 40 mph in camp. After a mountaineering ranger explained that wind speeds would be much greater on the ridge above the fixed lines, one climber responded by saying, “The wind doesn’t bother us.” NPS personnel observed the team proceed to take roughly seven hours to ascend the fixed lines. [Editor’s Note: This section typically takes about two hours to get to the lines and another hour to ascend them.]

The team was forced to make camp on the exposed ridge before reaching 17,200-foot camp. During the overnight hours, wind destroyed the team’s tent. The team abandoned their camp and equipment and retreated to 14,200-foot camp on the afternoon of May 23. (The high winds later blew their abandoned backpacks off the ridge.) The team arrived at the NPS tent and requested assistance at 4:55 p.m. The 57-year-old male had sustained frostbite injuries to all fingers on his right hand except for the thumb. NPS personnel assessed, rewarmed, and treated all injuries.

Due to their lack of remaining equipment and the fact that their injuries would prevent adequate self-arrest, this team was evacuated off the mountain on May 24. They were flown to 7,200-foot camp, from which they were able to fly with an air taxi service to Talkeetna.

ANALYSIS

Historically, frostbite injuries account for over 25 percent of the patients treated by the NPS on Denali. Despite preventive educational efforts prior to all Denali climbs, the NPS continues to see debilitating frostbite injuries each season. The high altitude, dynamic storm systems, and arctic cold conditions combine to exacerbate the precursors that lead to cold injury. No climbing day or summit attempt is worth losing body parts.

Climbers must take active steps to warm any cold body parts prior to continuing an ascent. The human body has an extremely difficult time rewarming itself after being overcome by the ambient temperatures and wind chill on Denali. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers and the Editors.)

Images

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