



## AAC Publications

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### **Unroped Fall While Descending**

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress

**At approximately 11 p.m. on May 19, a 24-year-old male climber was descending the ridge below 17,200-foot camp when he fell roughly 1,200 vertical feet onto the Peters Glacier.** He and his climbing partner had just summited via the West Rib and were descending back to 14,200-foot camp. The fallen climber's partner reported they were a few minutes from the fixed lines, at 16,200 feet, when the fall occurred. The partner was able to see the fallen climber on the Peters Glacier but was unable to make verbal contact. Due to the steep, crevassed terrain below the ridge, the partner made the decision to descend to 14,200-foot camp and notify NPS personnel.

Poor weather at the time of notification prevented helicopter evacuation, and a ground rescue was initiated. Due to the challenging access and remote nature of the patient's location, the ground response team was prepared to spend an extended period of time on the scene. However, the weather eventually cleared, allowing helicopter extrication 20 hours after the fall. The patient sustained a closed head injury and extensive frostbite on both hands.

### **ANALYSIS**

The ridge on the West Buttress Route between the top of the fixed lines, at 16,200 feet, and 17,200-foot camp has been the site of many falls. These have resulted in multiple injuries and fatalities. Guide services and the NPS maintain running protection in areas of high exposure along the ridge. However, the non-technical terrain has lured many into bypassing the running protection to move faster or to pass other parties. It is understandable that after completing a more technical route with higher exposure, like the West Rib, climbers may be more focused on returning to camp than taking added precautions. While this accident had a positive outcome, it could have easily ended in tragedy. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

## Images



Though the West Buttress is considered a “walk-up” in technical terms, it offers plenty of steep climbing. Bypassing fixed lines such as these, located below 16,200 feet, puts other climbers and rescuers in danger.

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