



AAC Publications

Hypothermia — Exhaustion, High Altitude Illness, Frostbite

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress Route, Summit Ridge

On May 28, at 1 a.m., NPS personnel received an alert from an emergency satellite device requesting evacuation of three climbers who were near the summit of Denali (Mt. McKinley). The climbers, all from Malaysia, reported they were hypothermic and too exhausted to safely descend.

They had left base camp (7,200 feet) a week and half earlier. NPS patrols and other climbers noted they made a steady push toward the summit without taking much time for acclimatization. The climbers camped at 16,500 feet for one night and paused only briefly at 17,200-foot camp before pushing to the summit (20,310 feet).

After receiving the emergency text, NPS incident command advised the team that rescue at that elevation and at that time of night was impossible. The climbers were encouraged to continue descending under their own power. One climber (male, 48) of the three managed to get to 17,200-foot camp. He was later evacuated by helicopter for severe frostbite and high altitude illness (HAI). The two remaining team members were only able to descend to 19,600 feet before collapsing due to exhaustion and high altitude illness.

Two guided teams were able to assist the sick climbers. The guides dug a shallow snow shelter and lent the distressed pair some additional clothing layers. The two climbers, who were nonambulatory, spent three nights in the shallow bivouac as high winds and cloud cover prevented rescue. Unfortunately, one of the climbers, Zulkifli Bin Yusof (36), died from exposure and HAI. The remaining climber (male, 47) was rescued, uninjured, in a helicopter basket lift on May 31.

ANALYSIS

This incident highlights some key considerations. First, when presented with good weather, many teams will keep going up without proper acclimatization or adequate rest. This often leads to HAI and exhaustion. In this case, the climbers had enough energy to summit but lacked the adequate reserves to descend safely. As Ed Viesturs famously wrote, “Getting to the top is optional. Getting down is mandatory.”

Second, rescue in the mountains, particularly at high altitude, is never assured. These operations present a high degree of risk for both climbers and rescuers. This team’s decision to go for the summit put fellow climbers in the agonizing position of having to abandon them in a dire situation at 19,600 feet. Self-care and self-rescue at high elevation are themselves challenging tasks—dragging a sick or injured climber over miles of terrain to a camp is often impossible. Additionally, helicopter rescue at very high altitude is only possible in ideal weather conditions. Even then, it entails extreme risk. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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