



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall – Unroped Fall

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress Route, Squirrel Point

On June 2, the 14,200-foot ranger camp on Denali received a radio report from a guide at the 11,200-foot camp that Alex Chiu (41), a ski mountaineer, had fallen from the area of Squirrel Point (12,000 feet) toward the Peters Glacier and was missing. Chiu was one of a party of three ski mountaineers and had been unroped. His two partners constructed an anchor and lowered over the edge, but high winds and low visibility from blowing snow prevented them from seeing or hearing him. Chiu's partners descended to 14,000-foot camp and sought assistance. The NPS was alerted, but their ground response was placed on hold due to the severe conditions.

The two partners continued descending to the 7,800-foot camp. Chiu carried an emergency satellite device, and the device manufacturer confirmed his last location was on the Peters Glacier, 3,000 feet below where he was last seen. There was no movement recorded for four hours, and he did not respond to satellite messages.

Early on the morning of June 4, a weather window allowed the NPS helicopter and two rangers to approach the Peters Glacier from the north side of the Alaska Range. The rangers determined that Chiu was deceased and recovered his body. Park officials stated it is likely he slipped and fell onto the rocky face of the Peters Glacier.

ANALYSIS

Squirrel Point, on the West Buttress route, is between 11,000 and 12,000 feet. It has been the site of more than 15 fatal falls since 1980. The terrain is deceptive, with a traversing descent that appears moderate, while the slope below actually steepens abruptly. A fall can quickly become unsurvivable. Ski mountaineers are vulnerable at this location, as skis and ski boots can make precise footing on icy or wind-affected snow more difficult than crampons and boots. Chiu was unroped at the time of the fall. On terrain with this consequence, this decision eliminated any chance of a partner arresting a slip.

Chiu's inReach location data was instrumental in confirming the outcome and focusing the recovery effort. This underscores the value of carrying a two-way satellite communication device on remote objectives. It did not, however, provide the real-time alert that might have enabled a rescue; the device's SOS function was never activated. Climbers and ski mountaineers on the West Buttress should assess the consequence of a fall at every section of the route, and rope up accordingly—particularly on the descent, when fatigue compounds the risk of an uncontrolled slip. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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