Accidents in North American Mountaineering
Accident Report Form

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of these reports and the Annual Report of Accidents in North American Mountaineering is to aid in the prevention of accidents. The person filling out the form should be familiar with the circumstances of the accident and, therefore, either the person(s) directly involved should complete or at least review the form. Full narratives and suggestions for future climbers are welcomed. If any persons involved wish to remain anonymous, in the cases where no rescue was involved, the editor will honor that request.

1. Report completed by (names and address or affiliation with accident):
Jeff Scheetz_____
_Portland Mountain
Rescue_____
_____

2. Date of Accident: _December 9-10, 2006_____

3. Geographic Location: _Mt Hood, Oregon, North face Gully/ Cooper Spur routes____-
_____

4. Names (or use a number) and ages of person directly involved:
1. Kelly James_____ Age: 48_____
2. Brian Hall_____ Age: 37_____
3. Jerry Cooke_____ Age: 36_____
4. _____ Age: _____
5. _____ Age: _____

5. Total Number of Persons in Party: __3_____

6. Details of the Accident:
_____see below_____

_____(Use as much space as is needed.)

A. [ ] Rock [X] Snow [**X**] Ice [ ] River [ ] Unknown

B. [ ] Ascending [**X**] Descending [ ] Unknown

C. Immediate Cause (you may check more than one):
[ ] fall or slip on rock
[ ] piton pulled out
[ ] nut or chock pulled out
[X] fall or slip on snow
[ ] failed to follow route
[X] fall or slip on ice
[ ] faulty use of crampons
[ ] falling rock or object
[ ] lightning
[ ] exceeded abilities
[ ] skiing
[X] exposure
[ ] ascending too fast
[ ] avalanche
[ ] equipment failure (be specific)
[ ] stranded

[ ] illness
[ ] loss of control - voluntary glissade
[ ] fall into crevasse/moat
[ ] other (be specific): _____
[ ] unknown

D. Contributory Cause (you may check more than one):
[ ] climbing unroped
[ ] exposure
[ ] exceeding abilities
[ ] failure to test holds
[ ] inadequate equipment/clothing
[ ] inadequate belay
[X] weather
[ ] poor position
[ ] climbing alone
[ ] failed to follow directions
[ ] placed no or inadequate protection
[ ] illness
[ ] darkness
[ ] equipment failure (be specific): _____
[ ] nut or chock pulled out
[ ] piton pulled out
[ ] no hard hat
[ ] party separated
[ ] other (be specific): _____

E. Type of injury (you may check more than one):
[X] fatality
[ ] acute mountain sickness
[ ] abrasion
[X] hypothermia
[ ] laceration
[ ] concussion
[ ] high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE)
[ ] high altitude cerebral edema (HACE)
[ ] sprain
[ ] infection
[ ] heat exhaustion
[ ] psychological
[ ] heat stroke
[ ] fracture
[ ] preexisting condition
[ ] frostbite
[ ] dislocation
[ ] unknown
[ ] other: _____

7. Experience Level: [] none or little (1st year) [ ] moderate (1-3 years) [X] experienced **[**] other

8. Narrative Description of Accident:

This high profile accident received national media coverage for more than a week. It utilized high technology search tools such as airborne thermal imaging, unmanned drones, and cell phone localization.

The writer has attempted to limit conclusions on facts and observations obtained through interviews and correspondence with on-scene rescuers. However, until more clues are uncovered with the melting snowpack, some uncertainty remains. Presented here are the most probable scenarios consistent with all known facts.

On December 7 three experienced climbers (Kelly James, 48, Brian Hall, 37, Jerry Cooke, 36) drove to the Cooper Spur winter trailhead and hiked the ski trail to a planned high bivouac but changed their plans, enjoying the comforts of the warming hut at Tilly Jane campground that night . Other visitors at the hut described the group as well equipped for their climb (stove, fuel, bivy gear, shovel). On the way from Hood River they left a note at a USFS ranger station with their plans to climb the North face Gully and descend the southside route.. On Friday, December 8 the group continued from the hut, caching bivouac equipment on the spur or lower Eliot glacier, and summiting late in the day. From the summit faint tracks led down the upper portion of the Wy'east route (ridge above Steel Cliff) several hundred yards before turning East down the fall line. About 500 feet below the crest the party constructed a 3-person snow cave, providing shelter and rest while waiting for better visibility before continuing their descent the next day (Saturday). After travelling approximately 300 yards from the snow cave the party reached the upper couloir of the Cooper Spur route (north face couloir route merges here also). At this point , they may have recognized their previous climb and thus the starting point for the descent of the Cooper Spur route. At this exposed 50 degree slope, they placed a snow anchor (two pickets and webbing) and dug a belay/rappel platform adjacent to a rock outcropping. It appears that a falling accident(s) involved two climbers (Hall and Cooke). The searchers found two ice tools, two short pieces of 7.5 mm climbing rope (about 40 ft) , a single glove, and a foam pad on the belay platform.

On Sunday December 10 the party failed to meet friends waiting at Timberline Lodge and the Hood River county sheriff was notified. Later at 3:45 PM James placed a four minute cell phone call to his wife in Texas indicating that he was in a snow cave near the summit while his two companions were descending the mountain to seek assistance. The call ended abruptly (possible battery failure?) causing concern. Sensing distress, James' wife called authorities to report the incident. The content of the call was described as "disorganized" and was "not good information" according to a sheriff's deputy. Eight days later James was found deceased, lightly clothed in the large snow with minimal equipment (no sleeping bag, no bivy sack, no insulating pad, nor stove). The cave did contain his backpack, cell phone, ice tool, crampons, harness and belay/rappel device. A subsequent medical examiner report stated that he died of hypothermia, but no other injuries were discovered. The other two climbers were not found and are presumed dead.

9. Analysis of Accident: What knowledge and techniques will help prevent future accidents?

Photographs retrieved from a camera found in the snow cave suggest that the party was on the face late in the day due to the longer approach caused by the lower, comfortable hut stay. The pictures also indicate that the party was travelling light, suggesting an equipment cache below the start of the gully. The absence of a summit photo also suggests summit arrival after dark. From footprints found on the summit area, it appears that the party could not find the start of the southside descent route (rimed rock formations known as the "pearly gates") due to poor visibility (snow spindrift or ground /fog) or the loss of daylight They ended up descending the upper Wy'east route. After several hundred yards, the group decided to descend the Cooper Spur route instead. This decision was likely prompted by the milder winds experienced on the easterly (leeward) exposure. After leaving the windy crest, they dug a large snow cave, seeking shelter and awaiting a break in the storm. Faint tracks suggest that at least one climber explored the area below the cave (top of black Spider couloir system) probably looking for a safe descent route. Winds did not drop significantly until about 5 PM, so it is likely they remained in the cave until Sunday morming. They probably left the cave about 7 AM Sunday to continue their traverse/descent via the Cooper Spur route. At the anchor site, two pieces of cut rope, ice tools, one glove, and steep terrain all suggest a catastrophic falling accident. A small avalanche could also produce the same effect.

The initial scenario carried by the media involves the intentional separation of the party at the snow cave. James, presumably in a weaker state was left behind while Hall and Cooke descended to get assistance. This corresponds with the message James gave his wife. However, it is difficult to explain why a 911

call was not placed since there were at least two phones in the party. Leaving a fellow climber behind is a desperate act, and an obvious admission that a self-rescue was not possible. The snow cave was later shown to be cell phone friendly, at least for James' phone. Another inconsistency is the foam pad found at the belay/rappel anchor site. It seems unlikely that both Hall and Cooke would intentionaly leave James lying on a snow cave floor without the very important insulating pad. The absence of any physical injury of James also does not support the "injured climber left behind" assumption, although he could have suffering more than the others from exhaustion, hypothermia, or altitude sickness.

A different scenario which may better fit the facts supposes that the entire party left the snowcave seeking the Cooper Spur descent. At this point, the climbers may have optimistically expected self-rescue, so no 911 call was placed. A belaying or rappelling accident, avalanche, or perhaps an unroped fall by Cooke and Hall could have left James stranded at the belay/rappel anchor. High winds, hard ice surface conditions, or unstable snow may have caused such an accident. As the sole survivor, James would be emotionally distraught, perhaps irrational, and may have forgotten his insulating pad as he returned to the snow cave.

The weather experienced by the party was predicted. During the approach, the party enjoyed fair weather. While on the North face on Friday the climbers experienced cold temperatures (as low as 15 degree F) and no solar heating for the entire ascent. Winds were estimated at 10-20 mph. Very early Saturday morning brought colder temperatures, several inches of snow, and higher winds. Later in the day summit wind estimates picked up to 35 mph sustained. On Sunday morning the temperatures increased to about 20 degree F and the winds abated to about 20 mph. However, the arrival of a second storm front in the afternoon raised summit winds to about 45 mph sustained. Since the arrival of the first storm on Friday night, it is likely that the summit was engulfed in ground fog with very limited visibility. On late Sunday a severe storm system hit the mountain preventing searchers from approaching the summit for a full week.

The route conditions during this climb are believed to be good. Aerial photographs taken one week later (after the major storm) suggest that there was adequate consolidated snowcover and sustained sub-freezing temperatures needed to cement the volcanic rock and provide purchase for crampon points and ice tools.

By succumbing to the comfort of the low hut, the party burdened themselves with an additional two hours of approach on their technical climbing day. This put them late on route and should have caused them to re-evaluate their situation, possibly deciding to abort the summit. Retreating from high on this route would be difficult and would involve many roped pitches of downclimbing or rappelling, which is slow even for a party of two. Once committed, proceeding to the summit was likely viewed as the fastest way off the route. The fault in this logic is that getting off the mountain can be much harder than completing the ascent route.

While experienced climbers are capable of surviving weeks in snow caves if they have appropriate equipment (extra food, stoves, bivouac gear), such equipment may slow the speed of approach ascent and retreat. This may cause an increase in overall risk to the climbers when timing or a time limitations are necessary to safely complete a climb. Winter climbing conditions can be particularly difficult due to the short days, low temperatures, frequent and long duration storms. For this particular accident, it appears that all of the bivy gear was cached below the technical route and did not contribute to the survivabilty of the party. "Travel light" practicioners assume the risk associated with delaying action of injuries or storms. It appears that James was only able to survive in the snow cave for 3-4 days with his minimal equipment.

Climbers carrying cell phones are not always capable of reporting distress situations, especially in wilderness environments lacking urban cell coverage. In this case, the cell phone message appeared to be too late and non-specific to be useful. Also, radio-location of cell phone signals was not precise enough to be helpful. For those climbers who feel the need to rely on high technology, a Personal Locating Beacon (PLB) will provide fast and accurate location information to relevant authorites. Alternatively, a GPS-assisted cell phone (called Enhanced E911) could also help in situations where only a single cell tower is accessible.

10. Additional Comments:

As a direct consequence of this high profile search, the Oregon state legislature is proposing bills whcich mandate electronic signalling devices (Personal Locator Beacons, Mountain Locator Beacon, GPS receiver with cell phone/ two-way radio) for all climbs above 10,000 on Mt Hood. Most local rescue personal and climbers encourage the use of such equipment, but do not believe its use should be required. For this particular accident, the stormy weather delayed reaching even know locations in the summit area, so electronic signalling would have not likely affected the outcome.

Note: Local weather data was provided by the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center

Late Note: Several organized searches were conducted the following summer. A very large equipment cache containing sleeping bags, bivy sacks, stoves, extra clothes, a shovel, a backpack, and other equipment was found in the hut where the party stayed. Effectively all of their survival equipment was left behind early on the approach. The upper sections of the Newton-Clark and Eliot glaciers were searched by air and ground teams but no additional clues to the fate of the two missing climbers were found.

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