

Liberty Ridge Fatalities, estimated 5/28/14 or 5/29/14

While we will likely never know exactly what happened, it is probable that 6 climbers (4 clients, 2 Alpine Ascent guides) were fatally swept down several thousand feet from Liberty Ridge to the bottom of the Willis Wall by an avalanche sometime between late Wednesday 5/28/14 and Thursday 5/29/14.

SAR was initiated late 5/30, with the first avalanche transceiver signal and visual clues confirmed by NPS SAR helicopter at the bottom of Willis Wall on 5/31. After a period of summer melt, some equipment and three bodies were recovered in August '14 by the NPS. The last known elevation of the climbers on Liberty Ridge was between 12400-12800 ft on the evening of 5/31.

NWAC interviews with NPS rangers after the initial SAR effort point to the collection of newer ice, snow and rock debris at the bottom of the Willis Wall, suggesting that either a storm slab, or ice (serac) and/or rockfall avalanche may have swept the group from their camp.

Locally heavy snow showers may have built new storm/wind slab Wednesday, 5/28, although nearby weather stations were not representative (NWAC Paradise station data on page 2) of new snow conditions observed by mountain guides on the upper mountain around the time of the accident. Isolated thunderstorms in the vicinity of the accident site on Mt. Rainier late 5/30 may have contributed to newer debris observed on 5/31.

Extreme winds from strong downbursts generated by intense showers or thunderstorms were considered by NWAC and other PNW meteorologists, but model forecast soundings for 5/30 did not lend support to this possibility.



Willis Wall/Liberty Ridge Photo courtesy of NPS

During the spring, NWAC issues special avalanche advisories when unusually dangerous spring-time avalanche conditions are expected. A special advisory was not in effect during the time of the accident and reports from around the Cascades and within close proximity to Mt. Rainier including Mt. St. Helens and Chinook Pass did not note any new snow avalanche problems around the time of the accident.

Out of the roughly 10,000 annual attempts to summit Mt. Rainier, a little over 1% of climbers attempt the steep and challenging Liberty Ridge route. ([Data courtesy MRNP annual climbing reports](#))

NWAC Paradise weather station, elevation 5400'

24 hr precipitation ending 4 am PST	Inches
5/25/2014	0.00
5/26/2014	0.50
5/27/2014	0.16
5/28/2014	0.07
*5/29/2014	0.26
5/30/2014	0.00
5/31/2014	0.00

*Likely period of accident