



AAC Publications

Communication Device Problem

California, Mt. Shasta, Hotlum-Wintun Ridge

On August 29 I received a call from Siskiyou County SAR, Celeste Fowler, stating that a SPOT device had been set off on the northeast side of the mountain, near the 10,000-foot level on the Hotlum-Wintun route. The signal came from a commercially guided trip with two guides from Alpine Skills International (ASI).

SPOT devices are set up in this fashion: one button consists of the “SOS” alert; one would push this in the event of an emergency. Other buttons on the SPOT can be assigned personal text messages that the user sets via computer. One can assign any message to the extra buttons.

The ASI team had been assigned one group SPOT device for the trip. However, one of the guides also had a personal SPOT device. On that day, the guide pushed one of the alternative buttons with a pre-determined text message. The message came through as, “We need help, no helicopter necessary, we have enough equipment to stay overnight.” This message was relayed to the rangers at approximately 4 p.m. I spoke with both Celeste and Bela Vadasz (owner of ASI), and we all agreed that by the time rangers formulated and got over there and ascended to the party, it would be dark. Since it seemed that the party was “OK,” we decided that rangers would head in early the next morning to assist.

Later, just before dusk, Bela left me a message after changing his mind, stating, “Well, if they say they need help, then they need help. Can you go assist now?” Shortly after, another message was received at 9 p.m. from Bela, stating, “Sorry, everything is OK.” I did not hear from him again that evening.

I decided that two rangers would proceed with the original plan and head over to Brewer Creek trailhead in the morning, just to be safe. As rangers Coots and Wagenheim arrived at the trailhead at 7:30 a.m., they found no cars. I called Bela to verify that the group had made it out and to figure out what had happened.

Analysis

The guide with the personal SPOT had attempted to change the pre-determined text message assigned to the button just before this trip. He thought he had changed it to, “We are going to be one hour late.” Instead, the message was the original assigned text of, “We need help, no helicopter necessary, we have enough equipment to stay overnight.” Apparently, he did not successfully change the message, and thus the old message came through. Nothing was wrong with the group, and they had made it out that night.

This was our second SPOT incident of the year. Not much to explain on this one, other than to make sure you change the messages on your SPOT correctly! There is a big difference between, “We need help....” and, “We’re going to be one hour late.” (Source: Nick Meyers, Lead Climbing Ranger and Avalanche Specialist.)

(Editor’s note: This is not considered to be a climbing accident, but it illustrates what can go wrong with the use—or misuse—of such communication devices.)

Images

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