



AAC Publications

Slip on Snow or Ice - Faulty use of Crampons (Came Off)

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mt. Lefroy

On July 31 two climbers were descending the standard route on Mt. Lefroy around 6 p.m. When they were approximately halfway down the route, one of the climber's crampons fell off. His climbing partner was 15 meters below and started to ascend back to his partner to help. As the lower climber was climbing back up, the climber with the loose crampon, who was in a bent-over position, fell over and started to slide. He knocked his partner off his feet, and they both started falling down the face. They generated a small avalanche during this ordeal, and one of the climbers describes their experience as follows: "almost stopping, then a wave of snow would wash over us and push us forward." This phenomenon occurred three or four times, and the climbers became separated during the fall. The climber higher on the slope had a minor knee injury when he came to a stop, and he began looking for his partner, whom he located further down the slope. His partner was unconscious and had sustained a severe head injury. It also appeared that his helmet had come off during the fall.

The incident was witnessed by people staying in the Abbot Pass Hut. A small team of climbers went to assist the fallen climbing party. They brought with them a stretcher (stationed at the hut) and some first-aid supplies. They were able to place the patient in the stretcher and carry him down-slope approximately 150 meters to a flat area, where they waited for rescue. The incident was called in by somebody who remained at the hut. This person had to climb up behind the outhouse to obtain a cell phone signal, as there is very poor reception at the hut itself.

After calling Banff Dispatch, the caller was transferred to the rescue leader (RL) on shift. The rescue leader collected information and mustered a crew of Visitor Safety Specialists from Banff and Lake Louise.

A team of four specialists was airborne approximately 45 minutes after the accident occurred. One specialist maintained staging logistics and security at the Chateau Lake Louise parking area while two other specialists responded to Abbot Pass with the rescue leader. The injured climber was located quickly. However, a thunderstorm was brewing just behind the pass. After an initial assessment, a plan was made to act quickly, safely, and professionally in order to minimize the chance of the patient being caught out overnight in a storm. One specialist was dropped at the patient's location with gear to prepare for loading directly into the helicopter. The second specialist was flown down to the hut to locate the second injured climber, whose location and condition were unknown at that time.

While this was occurring, the RL flew down to the Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House to configure the helicopter to receive a horizontal patient with the pilot. In the time it took the rescue pilot and RL to configure the helicopter, the specialist on scene with the patient was ready for pickup. The RL came back with the pilot to the scene, and the patient was loaded efficiently. The RL and the specialist traded places. The RL remained on scene with the other climbers, and the specialist flew down to the staging area with the patient (where the patient was transferred to Banff EMS). The RL took the group down to the hut to meet up with the other injured climber and specialist. The rest of the Parks Canada staff and the injured climber remained at the hut until the storm passed, at which point they were all flown down to Lake Louise.

Analysis

It is unknown what caused the climber to fall specifically. However, crampons falling off mid-route is something to be avoided. Always ensure that safety equipment such as crampons is secured tightly. Checking twice and having the situational awareness to anticipate this type of incident likely would have prevented such an accident.

This accident was initially responded to by a group of climbers nearby. Parks Canada cautions climbers about taking it upon themselves to rescue and assist other parties who find themselves in trouble. We do recognize that in some cases, actions of nearby climbers can make a big difference in the outcome for people who have had accidents. Nevertheless, if those actions are not thought through critically, vigilant rescuers can become victims, making the problem twice as big as it originally was. Therefore, Parks Canada urges climbers to think critically about situations and come up with a strong rationale for responding to accidents in their immediate vicinity. Rest assured that if the decision is made not to respond based on reasons of personal safety, climbers will not be held responsible for not responding. Parks Canada has professional rescue staff that will ultimately deal with all mountain-related accidents. Using common sense and critical thinking, climbers need to make their own decision whether to respond to climbing accidents in their immediate vicinity.

To be clear, in the case of this rescue, the actions taken by the climbers at the hut were reasonable and safe, and likely contributed to a better outcome for the climber who had fallen. Good job!

(Editor's note: Recent articles, online discussions, rescue data, and current trends indicate there is a need for climbers to be self-reliant and well versed in improvised partner and self-rescue. Barring injuries and overwhelming circumstances, a number of problematic situations can be handled independently by experienced and practiced climbing teams.)

Images

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