



AAC Publications

Slip on Snow - Climbing Unroped, Inadequate or No Protection, Failure to Test Holds, No Helmet, Poor Position, Unable to Self-Arrest

British Columbia, Vancouver Island, Strathcona Park, Rambler Peak, El Piveto Mountain, and Wolf-Cervus Divide

The accident occurred on August 2 during a descent from the shoulder of Rambler Peak, heading toward El Piveto Mountain. This was day two of a planned six-day mountaineering traverse of the Wolf-Cervus Divide, and all members had full packs. DC and CE had just completed an ascent of Rambler Peak via the Spiral Staircase route, and they met with JY at the Rambler shoulder. It was approximately 2:30 p.m., and the descent involved weaving down snow slopes of 30 to 40 degrees between bluff-like rock sections. All members were using ice axes, but not wearing helmets or crampons. JY was familiar with the route, having previously done part of the traverse, and was out in lead. At one point CE had a loss of footing, and was able to self-arrest. However, it was apparent that the snow was quite soft, and arresting was difficult. About five minutes after this slip, JY was transitioning into a steeper stretch of snow (35 to 40 degrees) when he slipped. He slid for 30 to 40 feet on snow, during which time he made several unsuccessful attempts to self-arrest. He then hit a steep rock bluff and fell for another 30 to 40 feet of near free fall.

JY was unresponsive to calls and was not visible, as he had plunged over the cliff. DC directed CE to move to safer terrain where she could wait, and then DC proceeded down the slope to where JY had fallen. It took maybe five minutes to descend to JY, and he was found at the base of the slope, face-down in a moat, conscious. JY had suffered numerous abrasions and lacerations, including large gashes on his head and knee, and he was significantly disoriented. (He did not know where he was or what he was doing.) DC was able to remove JY's pack and move him into a stable location in the moat. DC performed an assessment of JY's condition, and was able to determine that JY had broken several ribs and, while conscious, was unable to move. At that point DC deployed a distress call using a SPOT device.

While waiting for a response to the distress call, DC attended to JY's surface wounds, monitored his condition, and kept him warm with dry clothes and a sleeping bag. Approximately 45 minutes after the distress signal had been sent, an RCMP helicopter arrived and assessed the situation. There were no suitable landing spots near the accident, but DC was able to communicate the nature of the issue (broken ribs) to the RCMP. They advised that they were seeking additional support for a rescue. To facilitate a rescue, DC returned to CE and set up a rappel station to enable the team to regroup with JY.

Approximately one hour later, a Cormorant helicopter with CFB Comox arrived and deployed two SAR techs via winch and long-line. They provided additional first aid to JY, and coordinated the air evacuation of all three team members. From CFB Comox, JY was transported to the hospital in Comox, where he was diagnosed with a punctured lung, six broken ribs, and several surface wounds.

Analysis

The online accident report cites the following contributory factors: climbing unroped, inadequate or no protection, failure to test holds, no helmet, poor position, and soft snow making self-arrest not feasible. Concern over snow conditions should have been communicated, and increased diligence around footing and self-belays may have checked the initial slip. Route options were limited, but perhaps an alternate route might have had less exposure to poor run-outs.

(Editor's note: Attempting to self-arrest while wearing crampons can cause injury. On the other hand, could crampons have initially prevented the fall?)

Images

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