



AAC Publications

Fall into Crevasse - Snow Bridge Collapsed, Climbing Unroped

Oregon, Mt. Jefferson, Whitewater Glacier

Our team—Craig Hanneman (64), Mark Morford (56), Bob Alexander (56), and Jim Walkley (40)—was traversing the Whitewater Glacier at about 1 p.m. on July 20, after successfully summiting via the Jefferson Park Glacier route. We were traveling unroped, and our helmets and crampons were stowed. Conditions on the glacier were such that we believed existing crevasses were for the most part open and obvious and could be easily avoided.

At around the 8,900-foot level, midway across the glacier, we encountered an area of tic-tac-toe crevasses. Hanneman, who had climbed the same route two weeks prior, and Morford were in the lead, and Walkley and Alexander were a short distance behind. Hanneman recognized that we probably had drifted too far down-glacier and needed to climb a little to get around this crevassed section. Alexander suggested roping up, and we were beginning to back out of the area to accomplish this when the snow under Hanneman gave way. He had been unknowingly standing on a partial bridge. A 10- by 25-foot section collapsed, and he fell approximately 30 feet into a tapering part of the crevasse. The bridge on which he was standing was probably five feet thick and stayed mostly intact. It wedged in the taper about 30 feet from the surface. Hanneman rode this bridge down. A large portion of the lip followed the main slab and fell on top of Hanneman, mostly burying him. Another large portion of the bridge, about 10 by 10 feet, remained hanging and threatened to fall on him.

The team was relieved to hear Hanneman's muffled calls for help. He was able to partially free one arm after about five minutes and clear a space in front of his face to breathe, but was otherwise unable to move. The rescue effort was dealt an immediate blow when we realized that our one 9mm rope was with Hanneman, in his pack, buried. A quick inventory of every runner, piece of cord and webollette on our harnesses allowed us to cobble together about 40 feet of line. Morford volunteered to go in, but before that could happen we needed to get to the far side of the crevasse. The near wall still had significant amounts of snow clinging to it. We couldn't risk knocking it loose and dropping it on Hanneman.

We did an end run of the crevasse field and then carefully navigated back to the opposite edge of the crack that held Hanneman. Morford tied into our makeshift rope and was lowered with a hip belay into the crevasse. The sides of the crevasse were vertical or overhanging and coated with rotten snow. It was not possible to get any purchase with crampons or tools in the crevasse walls. Thirty minutes had passed since the accident. Hanneman was clad in a T-shirt and was soaking wet, buried in snow, and getting very cold. Most of his body was buried below a block of ice. His head was contorted at an angle that suggested a neck injury. He was conscious but incoherent. It took another 30 minutes to dig him free, access his pack, add some layers, and send the climbing rope up.

Alexander and Walkley set up a haul system in a cramped field surrounded by crevasses. At that point we were fortunate to flag down two other climbers. These two provided extra horsepower and much more assistance. The raise went quickly, but the lip presented us with a difficult problem. Even with an ice axe as edge protection, the rope dug deeply into the rotten snow of the freshly formed lip. Hanneman is not a small guy (6-foot-3-inches and 210 pounds), he had basically lost the ability to control his limbs, and was mostly delirious and in considerable pain. He could do little to assist us in getting him over the last few feet. A second drop loop and a lot of yanking on his arms and harness finally got him over the edge. Close to two hours had passed since the initial fall, and we had a severely hypothermic, injured friend.

Some of us worked to get Hanneman out of wet clothes while the others extracted Morford. He too was a little cold after having spent an hour and a half in a wet crevasse. Now in dry layers, Hanneman was placed in two sleeping bags and zipped into a bivy sack. He continued to shiver uncontrollably, flail around, and didn't always seem to recognize us.

Despite having a clear view of most of central Oregon, we had been unable to get a cell signal to call or text for assistance. At this point, Kasey Crockett and Tony Chenier (the two other climbers) basically emptied their packs of anything we could use, noted the coordinates of our location, and headed for the Whitewater Trailhead to report the accident to authorities and a fifth member of our party who had elected not to climb. They completed this task by 5:20 p.m. Meanwhile, Morford and Walkley made a round trip to our camp on the North Ridge to collect additional gear for a bivy on the glacier.

Over the course of the evening, as he warmed up, Hanneman's mental state improved, but he was still in considerable discomfort and we worried about possible internal injuries. Our plan was to monitor him through the night and reassess our situation in the morning. We didn't anticipate any assistance until daylight. As darkness fell we all retreated into our bags and tried to stay warm. Hanneman was cocooned in three sleeping bags atop a down air mattress, and all of this was packaged in a bivy sack.

At 11 p.m. we were surprised to hear rotors and see the spotlight from an Oregon Army National Guard Blackhawk. We scrambled to put on our boots and secure our gear. Soon the flight medic was descending, followed by a litter. The helicopter withdrew while we packaged Hanneman, then returned to take him on a wild ride into the sky. The medic grabbed Hanneman's pack and clipped onto the cable a few minutes later. Once he was onboard, the Blackhawk turned away and it was suddenly quiet, except for the sound of one large collective exhale.

Analysis

We should have been roped up when we stepped onto the glacier. There was no reason not to be. The rope had been used appropriately up to this point. However, we were nearing the end of what had been a straightforward climb and thinking that all of the difficulties were behind us. We just let our guard down. A rope may not have prevented the accident, but it likely would have minimized the injuries and would certainly have expedited the extraction.

We are all grateful for the selfless assistance provided by Kasey Crockett and Tony Chenier, and to the Oregon Army National Guard for their swift response and willingness to conduct a night operation. Our thanks also go out to SAR officials from Linn, Marion, Jefferson, and Deschutes counties for making the right things happen. Finally, our appreciation to the mountain rescue organizations and ground teams that began to mobilize on our behalf. (Source: members of the climbing party.)

Images

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