



AAC Publications

Avalanche, Fall on Snow/Ice - Inadequate Equipment, Inadequate Protection, Weather, Exceeding Abilities

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Liberty Ridge

On the morning of May 18, we (Cory Smith, 26, author of this report; Sydney Seyfart, 30; and Tim Smith, 23) were at about 13,000 feet on Liberty Ridge, just above the Black Pyramid. We were 1,100 feet below the summit of Liberty Cap and the end of the technical terrain. The night before we finished the last of our stove fuel. Two nights before we had discovered frost nip on my brother's toes. We had been on the move since May 14, often through harrowing terrain. The weather had for the most part consisted of pervasive cloud cover that made for poor visibility. This made navigating the Carbon Glacier difficult. We had had to spend an extra day at Thumb Rock due to inclement weather.

Tim led a serac pitch, and then we simul-climbed an ice and snow slope above. There was one last steep, traversing pitch of 55- or 60-degree ice before easy terrain and the top of Liberty Cap. I had chosen to bring only two ice screws on this climb, and when I reached the foot of the final steep ice section I had only one left. The second was on my brother's harness below me. I chose not to set a belay and tried climbing the pitch.

As I only had one ice screw I conserved it, climbing high above a snow picket at the base of the ice. Above the steep ice band I reached a section with ice on the left and snow on the right. I moved to the snow to rest. I should have set the screw before venturing onto the snow. Tim and I were on opposite ends of a 60-meter rope, and Sydney was tied in the center. Because of the traversing, we were zigzag on the slope, with me directly above Tim and Sydney off to the side. As I stomped out steps, I triggered a small avalanche that swept me over an ice band. I fell for 40 feet and fractured the talus bone in my left ankle. My fall continued in tomahawk fashion down the slope between Sydney and Tim. Tim hunkered down on his tools and was hit by the avalanche while Sydney was out of the avalanche path. She had little time to react, and when the rope came taut I ripped her from her stance, along with the snow picket beside her. After the snow passed Tim, he looked up and saw Sydney fall past him, so he hunkered back down again. When the rope came taut, he was pulled about 10 feet down before arresting the fall.

All told, I fell at least a couple of hundred feet and Sydney fell at least 100 feet. Sydney suffered a laceration and bruising above her left kidney, perhaps from the snow picket that popped beside her. I knew my ankle or leg had broken as I fell. When I came to a stop I saw that it was angulated 45 degrees medially. There was no pain or blood.

I was on my side, facing downhill with the rope wrapped around me, constricting my breathing. I righted myself and tried to untangle from the rope, but with my broken ankle this was too difficult. Sydney was yelling above me, trying to figure out if I was OK. "No," I answered, "my leg is broken." I planted my picks in the slope above me, with my lanyards taut on my harness, and then I untied, unwound the skein, and tied back in.

I knew that I had to try to climb out, for several reasons. First, Tim and Sydney weren't going to leave me. Second, we had no way of contacting help and there were no other teams on the north side of the mountain. Third, remaining in our current location would require spending a night out on a 50-degree slope. (Our previous bivy was farther away than Liberty Cap, and reaching it would have required rappelling the serac and giving up precious progress.) Fourth, remaining in technical terrain would

endanger the lives of any rescuers who tried to help us, whereas the terrain on top of Liberty Cap was relatively innocuous.

The climbing was slow at first, but I developed a system involving the knee of my bad leg. (My kneecap later suffered cold injury because of this.) Sydney and Tim climbed until they reached the base of the ice band, where Tim set a belay. I reached the belay with some groveling and sat down on a snow bench Sydney had made. I gave my ice screw to Tim, and we decided he would lead the ice band. He completed a phenomenal lead and didn't rest in any snow. Sydney set off after Tim, who had set a belay out of sight. When the rope came taut on my harness, I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew this traversing pitch would be decisive. Tim and Sydney couldn't assist me, and using my left crampon was out of the question. On hard ice, my left knee didn't work for anything but balance. However, it went better than expected, and once I finished the traverse they were able to assist my ascent. I set three points and yelled, "Pull!" They hauled on the rope and I moved.

Once I reached the belay, Tim began breaking trail through deep snow toward the summit of Liberty Cap. I crawled and scooted along to reach it, then descended the other side to a bivy site. It was about 7 p.m. now, and our bivy site was on a large level area on the ridge descending from Liberty Cap toward its saddle with the Columbia Crest.

They set up the tent with trekking poles because the tent poles had been thrown from my backpack in the fall. I lay down and did nothing, like a Samuel Beckett character. I still was not in pain. In the tent Sydney concluded that instead of going down the Emmons Glacier as we had planned, she and Tim needed to go to the summit early in the morning and make contact with guided parties that could get us help. At the time, Sunrise Road had not yet opened and Camp Schurman was not yet staffed, so the Emmons Glacier was deserted. From the summit they would go down the Disappointment Cleaver route on the southeast side of the mountain. I would remain in the tent and await rescue.

The next day the weather was serene, the best yet, and Sydney's plan worked. Tim and Sydney left me with all their food and water, thinking that I might be there for several days. They subsisted on the generosity of guides, rangers, and other climbers on the DC that day. Three hours after Tim and Sydney left the tent, three guides from IMG and RMI arrived and gave me medical attention, chocolate, tea, and food. They coordinated a rescue with the Rainier National Park rangers and U.S. Army Reserve 214th General Support Aviation Brigade. The area beside my tent served as a landing zone for a Chinook. I was flown off Liberty Cap at 3 p.m. I am indebted to all the individuals, guiding companies, and government organizations involved in my rescue. I am still more grateful to Tim and Sydney for saving all our lives.

Unfortunately, Tim's frost nip turned to frostbite. When he was assessed at Camp Muir, the rangers decided that he should not walk anymore, so they tobogganed him down the Muir Snowfield to Paradise and a waiting ambulance. Four months later, he had to have amputations of the first, second,

Analysis

There are a number of ways we could have approached this climb to be better prepared and to decrease risk, including asking ourselves several questions more seriously beforehand:

1. Was it reasonable to expect to navigate the Carbon Glacier and ascend Liberty Ridge in potentially poor conditions when none of us had climbed the route before?
2. If so, should we have brought more provisions, fuel, and equipment than we would have brought if conditions were ideal?
3. Should we have considered alternative, less committing routes in the area?

4. Given the route's isolation, would a sat phone or SPOT device have been useful?

If we had brought more fuel, we would not have run low on water. Our initial itinerary was for a four-day climb, and we brought food and fuel for five days. But we ended up spending six days on the mountain. If we had brought more ice screws, I might not have run it out on that final ice pitch, risking a catastrophic fall. Ascending the ice slope above the Black Pyramid would have been faster and safer with more screws. I could have evaluated the slope more conservatively and avoided the snow patch.

So how did Tim lose six toes to frostbite? Two additional, unanticipated days on the mountain increased the duration of his exposure to cold. Due to inexperience, Tim had brought cotton socks for his extra pair. Tim lent his first pair to Sydney on the third day and was unaware that his extra cotton pair would get wet and freeze. When we crawled into our tent during the last two nights, his socks had frozen to the toe boxes of his boots. During the climb, we were unaware of his cotton socks. Sydney and I should have been more involved in Tim's pre-climb preparation. We knew that Tim was the least experienced mountaineer, but we failed to properly compensate for his inexperience during our preparations. Tim met up with us shortly before the climb and we went straight to Rainier. We should have taken the time to inspect his gear.

For Sydney, Tim, and me, this climb was pivotal on a lifelong scale. This was an accident that should never have happened. (Source: Cory Smith.) and third toes of both feet. Sydney was the only one of us to descend the mountain under her own power.

Images

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