



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow - Ski Mountaineering

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Emmons/Winthrop

On July 7 a nine-person ski-mountaineering party from Canada summited Rainier via the Emmons/Winthrop Glaciers route. On the descent, one member of the team (47) fell while skiing and sustained multiple traumatic injuries. He landed in what's known as the Alpine Meadow, a flat area near 13,500 feet on the Winthrop Glacier. Some team members stayed with the patient while others descended to Camp Schurman for help. Park dispatch was notified via SPOT beacon, 911 calls, and the emergency radio at Camp Schurman. Ranger Payne was notified by dispatch at 3:07 p.m.

Ranger Payne assumed incident command and put together a response team. A field team of two climbing rangers was picked up from Camp Muir via Chinook helicopter and inserted 30 minutes from the accident scene at Liberty Saddle. Upon accessing the patient, Ranger Self determined the patient needed immediate extraction. The patient was flown to Madigan Hospital.

Analysis

However well prepared a party is for navigating the upper mountain, success depends on skill, experience, and judgment. Ski mountaineering allows less room for mistakes than conventional climbing. Climbing Mt. Rainier can be made safer in places by using skis, but if used unwisely skis can make climbing more risky. The trick is to know when one needs to remove skis and rope up, when to rope up with skis, and when to remove skis, rope up, and use standard glacier climbing techniques.

Using skis to ascend glaciers during the winter—and even into May and June, when the snow is deep, warm, and soft—can help decrease the chances of a crevasse fall. The skier's weight is spread over a larger area, and skis decrease the time spent on a snow bridge. During descent, skiers traveling at 10–15 mph are often not over a crevasse long enough to fall in.

Traveling in a rope team on skis requires additional skill. Parties should practice this technique and test their ability to stop a fall in safe areas with variable snow conditions and slope steepness. Self-arresting on skis is not the same skill as stopping falls while climbing on foot.

There is a misconception among those who are not ski mountaineers that skiing is significantly more dangerous than climbing. While skiing can be dangerous, when techniques are used wisely it can also be a safer way to climb Mt. Rainier. This party simply chose the wrong technique for the particular conditions. (Source: L. Veress, Ranger.)

Images

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