



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Snow, Fall into Crevasse - Fatigue, Unable to Self Arrest**

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Emmons Glacier

A group of three climbers was ascending Mt. Rainier along with our group on August 31. At midnight we left Camp Schurman to ascend the Emmons Glacier. A third of the way up, our rope teams split. We assumed the second party had turned around, as they showed signs of fatigue. We tried to contact them, but the handheld GPRS units we brought were unable to connect. Two-thirds of the way up, we were surprised to notice our friend's party still following us, only 20 to 30 minutes behind. We continued to the summit, lingered for a short time, and began descending. Shortly after leaving we passed our friends and said hello to them. It was a little late in the day, but they seemed in good spirits and we figured everything was fine.

During our descent we tried to set an obvious path so they wouldn't have difficulty routefinding. At one point during the descent we had an exposed 10-meter traverse above a large crevasse. The snow quality was not good there, with thin crust plus 6 cm of powder on top of ice. I remember thinking that it would be a really bad place to slip, but it wasn't very steep, so I didn't think too much of it. The precarious snow bridges elsewhere on the mountain had seemed much more terrifying.

It wasn't until we got near camp, at about 5 p.m., that we spotted our friends again. They were much farther up the mountain than they should have been— about two-thirds of the way. We started eating dinner and boiling water while keeping an eye on them. They made slow but steady progress down. We would lose sight of them every now and then as they moved behind a serac or a similar feature. Around 7:30 p.m. we lost sight of them again, just above the traverse. After about an hour without further visual contact, we started to get worried. The ranger who was supposed to be at the camp wasn't there, and no one was listening on the emergency radio. We called 911 and they connected us to park staff, who said there was a ranger on the other side of the mountain who would come over as soon as possible.

As we learned later, Climber 2 had slipped and was unable to self-arrest, which caught the other two climbers by surprise. They were unable to stop the slide, and all three fell into the large crevasse. They bounced off one side, falling onto a small ledge. Climber 1 broke a collarbone, dislocated a shoulder (losing sensation in the affected extremity), and was confused. Climber 3 had split his helmet in two and was having a hard time understanding where he was. (Subsequently, Climber 3 had no recollection of the weekend.) Climber 2 was more or less uninjured, and he was able to keep the other two safe.

Around 10 p.m. we had all suited up again and packed some emergency gear, and we left camp. A couple of other guys who had climbed Rainier that day stayed back to keep an eye on us. (They were more tired than we were, and we didn't want to endanger too many people.) We got to about 100 meters short of where the other team had disappeared when one of our teammates completely ran out of energy and was unable to move. The situation was very frustrating, but we had to turn around. We ended up having to short-rope him back to camp. On our way down, about 1 a.m., we ran into another party climbing the mountain. We told them about the accident and where the stricken group was. They continued up, finding the climbers around 4 a.m. They were unable to reach the group because they were on the other side of the crevasse, but they sent out a 911 call.

Around the same time a ranger arrived at our camp. At 6 a.m. another party started going up to the accident site while the ranger built a helipad. The rescue party got to the crevasse around 9 a.m., and

one of them was lowered into the crevasse to bring the victims some extra jackets and water. They were eventually long-lined from the mountain by helicopter later that afternoon.

## **Analysis**

Arresting a fall on snow, especially in icy conditions, is not a sure thing. Most self-arrest practice is done in fairly ideal snow conditions, and does not take into account factors such as exhaustion and surprise. Tunnel vision was also in play here, as none of the climbers had noticed the crevasse before they fell in. The team was probably excessively tired as well, though this is a difficult thing to assess, as it was not particularly noticeable when we saw them near the summit.

Climbers 1 and 3 were both fairly experienced, and Climber 2 had received all the appropriate training, but had little experience. Overall, the team was well prepared. They had plenty of warm clothing and a bivy sack. It took 15 hours before they received any real assistance, so the extra clothing they had was crucial to their survival.

An additional note: Try to make sure the right people are contacted when one calls 911. It wasn't until the second call, about eight hours later, that search and rescue was actually notified. The first 911 call had reached the park office, but it was closed. (Source: Alan Trick, friend of Climber 1.)

(Editor's note: We received two separate reports on the same incident, and below we offer the second report, from the Rainier ranger staff, for its additional perspective.)

**Images**

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