



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Exceeding Abilities, Weather

Oregon, Middle Sister

On November 12, Ryan Burton (25) and Benjamin Newkirk (39) left the trailhead at Pole Creek and hiked six miles to Camp Lake, where they set camp and rested before departing around 6:30 p.m. Weather reports at the time and for the three days following the incident included warnings for high wind and large amounts of snow. The party was aware of the forecasts and expected the weather to arrive at around 10 p.m. that night. The party wanted to summit before the storm hit and believed they had the ability and equipment to survive the storm if they were caught.

The two men climbed the southeast ridge (Grade II, 4th class) and reached the 10,056-foot summit at around 9:42 p.m. They began their descent at around 10 p.m., after resting, eating, and drinking water on top. Weather conditions around this time included temperatures of about -5°C (23°F), wind of 20 mph, and visibility of about 30 feet. The party was unroped. At around 9,600 feet, Newkirk experienced a fatal fall; at the time, he was out of sight of Burton and about 30 feet upslope. Burton recalled that Newkirk slid past him with his feet downhill, on his back, and with a functioning headlamp, making no visible attempt to arrest his fall. He was wearing a helmet, a backpack, and crampons. Burton's visual and verbal searches returned no indication of Newkirk. Burton called his father and then 911, and then descended to Camp Lake. He was evacuated the following day. Newkirk was located on November 16 and was extracted via helicopter.

ANALYSIS

The weather on a high peak in winter is not to be underestimated. The knowledge of an impending storm most likely hastened the party's descent and partially contributed to the fall. Even if the subject's injuries were survivable, rescue would have been impossible due to the storm. On this particular route, climbing unroped is generally considered to be reasonable and expected. (Source: Matt Crawford, Deschutes County Search and Rescue.)

[Editor's note: According to an article in The Bulletin, an Oregon newspaper, Burton told officials after the accident that Newkirk had indicated he was "bonking" high on the mountain, and Burton believed Newkirk was already unconscious when he fell, explaining why he apparently made no attempt to self-arrest.]

Images

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