



AAC Publications

Crevasse Fall – Poor Position

Washington, North Cascades National Park, East McMillan Spire

On July 29, my husband, Arthur Greef (52), and I (Colleen Hinton, 52) left camp at 6:30 a.m. with the goal of climbing the west ridge of East McMillan Spire (Class 3/4), followed by the southeast face of West McMillan Spire (Grade II 5.7). The weather was very warm, continuing a pattern of warmer-than-usual temperatures in the Pacific Northwest this summer. Due to heavy snowmelt, a large and unclimbable gap had formed between the top of the bergschrund and the bottom of the snow finger leading up to the notch between the two spires. After exploring alternatives, we decided to retreat and attempt another route. By this time it was about 9:30 a.m.

While we were trying to locate our alternative route, we saw climbers rappelling down the south face of the east spire and onto the glacier, and we asked them whether the base of the snow finger might be accessible from their rappel route. Receiving an answer in the affirmative, we reascended the glacier and climbed to the lip of the bergschrund to look for the best route to the rock wall. As I was preparing my axe and a picket for a belay, I heard a “whumph” and instinctively grabbed the rope with my bare hands and threw myself onto the snow. I saw that the top of the bergschrund had collapsed under Arthur’s weight and he had disappeared below.

Arthur estimates he hit rock within a couple of meters and then slid another eight meters on a wet, low-angled face until his backpack caught him. My hands had a couple of painful burns, but I was able to belay Arthur with a tight rope as he climbed out of the crevasse. He had been injured in the right eye (possibly by his ice axe) and was bleeding from the eye and a laceration on his cheek. We packed snow over the wound and descended to a point where we met the two Canadian climbers who had been rappelling. They examined Arthur and urged us to request a helicopter evacuation.

Although cell service on the mountain was inconsistent, I was able to contact the Marblemount Wilderness Information Center and secure a helicopter for Arthur’s rescue. A friend that I reached by text contacted the AAC and Global Rescue. Arthur was flown to Harborview Medical Center by evening, while I hiked out with the Canadians. He went into surgery that night to repair a laceration that extended to the back of the eye. The doctors saved the eye and much of his eyesight.

ANALYSIS

We are each experienced climbers (25-plus years) and should have known better than to get too close to the lip of a melted-out bergschrund in an unusually warm summer. We let our guard down when we saw the two other climbers rappel safely onto the bergschrund in a different spot, and our desire to “stop messing around” and complete a climb that day overtook our earlier caution. We are not convinced that the accident could have been avoided by being on belay, since Arthur hit the rock within a very short distance after he fell. We possibly could have used an ice axe or a trekking pole to test the thickness of the snow at the top of the bergschrund. We are grateful to the Canadian climbers, Chris and Dave, for their support and their insistence on requesting a helicopter rescue, which contributed greatly to a good medical outcome. (Source: Colleen Hinton.)

Images

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