



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock and Snow – Inexperience, Off Route

California, Sawtooth Range, Cleaver Peak

On March 21 the Mineral County Sheriff (Nevada) received a 911 call from Brandon Reiff (33) of Reno, who reported that he had broken his leg in a fall near Matterhorn Peak (12,280'). His 911 call was transferred to the Mono County Sheriff, but the call was dropped due to poor cell phone reception. Attempts to re-establish contact were unsuccessful, so his exact whereabouts were unknown.

Mono County SAR responded, along with a helicopter from the California Highway Patrol. Due to high winds, the helicopter had limited capability for searching near the 12,000-foot peak, so a larger helicopter was requested. Just prior to dark the subject was spotted at approximately 10,000' on a steep slope just below the crest of ridgeline forming Cleaver Peak (11,760'), two miles north of Matterhorn Peak. The helicopter tried numerous times to lower a medic but was unsuccessful due to high winds, the steep slope, and darkness.

That evening Mono County SAR personnel began hiking to the subject's location. A larger helicopter and assistance from the Inyo County SAR team were requested for the morning of March 22. While SAR personnel climbed to the victim's location, a Chinook helicopter was able to lower a crewman. The victim was hoisted up to the helicopter, then flown to Bryant Field in Bridgeport and transferred to Mono County Paramedics. Medics transferred him to a CareFlight helicopter for transport to Renown Medical Center in Reno. (Source: Mono County SAR.)

Analysis

In late winter or early spring, any route on Matterhorn Peak or Cleaver Peak is a mountaineering objective, involving a considerable amount of steep snow climbing and exposed, steep, and possibly snow-covered rock. This climber did not have technical mountaineering skills or experience; however, his equipment included mountaineering boots, crampons, a climbing helmet, and an appropriate clothing system for winter mountaineering—he was not carrying an ice axe.

According to the climber, he made the decision to attempt Matterhorn Peak late the night before and did not leave the trailhead until after 8:30 a.m. He was unable to locate the trail toward the peak; instead, he chose to scramble and bushwhack up a streambed toward the mountain. After realizing he had underestimated the approach to Matterhorn Peak, he decided to attempt Cleaver Peak instead, by its steep north side, without foreknowledge of any route. He climbed the snow slope up to the ridgeline forming Cleaver Peak with crampons but no ice axe. Once reaching Cleaver Peak's vertical rock walls, he continued upward but soon realized the terrain necessitated rock climbing equipment, and so he began downclimbing.

While negotiating a steep section, the climber decided to let go and drop a short distance to a ledge below. Upon impact with the ledge, the climber broke his leg and went into a free fall down rock cliffs and snow slopes, eventually coming to a stop on a snow bank. He placed a call to 911 and attempted to splint his leg. The climber noted he'd also dislocated his left shoulder and broken multiple ribs; he also had pain and swelling on the back of his head and neck. Due to his injuries and the difficulty of rescue, the climber spent a full night out in single-digit temperatures and was lucky to survive without

additional cold injuries.

What can novice mountaineers take away from this?

- Know the terrain and your abilities: **Hiking and peakbagging can easily turn into technical climbing.**
- Plan ahead: **Research the day's objective in advance, not the night before. Knowledge of the route and general area is important to success and survival.**
- Leave early: **Most individuals attempting high peaks in winter, or under winter conditions, should depart in the predawn hours.**
- Have the right equipment: **In this terrain the climber should have been using an ice axe in conjunction with his crampons. By bringing a rope and rock climbing protection—and knowing how to use it—the climber could have built anchors and facilitated a safer descent.** (Source: The Editors, with information from a blog post by Brandon Reiff.)

Images



The accident occurred below Cleaver Peak (11,760').



A close-up of the accident location. A chinook helicopter is inbound to extract the climber.



The climber being extracted from the accident site.

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