



## AAC Publications

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### Fall on Snow - Poor Position

Canada, British Columbia, Rogers Pass, Mt. Sifton

**On July 28, two experienced climbers planned to ascend the southeast ridge (4th class) of Mt. Sifton from their Hermit Meadows camp.** The weather conditions were perfect and the climb proceeded as planned. The pair topped out on Sifton's east ridge about 70 vertical meters below and 250 meters horizontally from the summit. Unfortunately, the otherwise easy-looking ridge was blocked by a steep snow dome. With only a single mountaineering axe each, they decided not to attempt the snow dome and abandoned the summit bid.

From this point they decided to scramble down the northeast ridge to the SiftonRogers col to reach easier terrain. However, they first were faced with descending about 350 meters of moderately steep snow near the crest of Sifton's glaciated north face. At times the snow was capable of supporting weight, but more often it was poorly bonded and friable. They pitched out the downclimb, using ice screw anchors. After five and a half pitches of insecure snow, the duo made it to rock scrambling terrain and elected to unrope and repack their crampons. As they continued, the ridge presented a number of obstacles. At one point, faced with several options, the team chose the less technical east flank, following the footprints of a previous solo climber. Crampons and ice axes were readied once again, and the first member of the team led down a short snow slope of about 30°–35°. No anchoring options were immediately available, so the downclimb was unroped.

The lead climber was facing outward with his single ice axe in his right hand. His boot penetrated the snow up to about mid-calf. He took three or four steps and then the snow gave way. The climber instinctively rolled over and began aggressive self-arrest action. However, the unconsolidated snow offered little purchase and his speed did not abate. The snow ended and he fell over a three- or four-meter cliff. He tumbled several times and then impacted the slope heavily on his chest. He came to an abrupt stop about 15 meters from a sharp drop-off, about 100 vertical meters above the glacier.

The battered climber was conscious and used his axe to dig out a stable stance. He removed his crampons and called up to his partner, who was about 100 meters above. His partner descended carefully to his position and they assessed their self-rescue options. They decided to move laterally to skier's left about 30 meters to a relatively stable spot where they could build an emergency anchor. Spontaneous rockfall was occurring about every 10 minutes on the face. At this point, the fallen climber felt his body begin to "seize up" and experienced intense pain in his lower legs, limited use of his left arm, impaired balance, and overall pain. They decided to call for rescue.

They made contact with Jasper Dispatch via satellite phone. A Parks Canada crew was mobilized out of Revelstoke, and a team from Glacier National Park Visitor Safety was slung to the site with a helicopter. They were on the scene at 5:40 p.m. With limited remaining daylight, they quickly packaged the patient and slung him from the scene to the rescue base, followed by his partner. The patient was transferred to an ambulance at 8:30 p.m. The final diagnosis, after many X-rays, determined there were no broken bones, probably a torn rotator cuff, and multiple soft tissue injuries. He was extremely bruised.

### ANALYSIS

The injured climber was in his early 70s and his partner was in his 50s. Both were fit and had ample experience on moderate mountaineering routes. Considerable planning preceded the climb, and

Careful decisions were made at each stage of the ascent and descent. The injured climber offered the following analysis of his accident:

(1) The slope in question had an easterly aspect, and it was in shade half the day. The slip may have been due to a weak layer collapsing and poor cohesion within the underlying snow, perhaps over basal facets. The team observed a weakness in a thin snowpack with a northerly aspect, but had found good snowpack cohesion and support on snow slopes with a southern exposure.

(2) Downclimbing while facing in would have been more secure. At the time, neither the steepness of the slope nor the state of the snowpack seemed to require it.

(3) A belay from a solid anchor would have prevented a serious fall. However, at the time, the fallen climber determined there was no suitable anchor in the area.

According to Danyelle Magnan of Glacier National Park, the group chose to follow another party's tracks but did not consider that the snow conditions might have changed. Due to the late time of day, the snow was wet and loose. Crossing the snow slope exposed them to large cliffs below.

It should be noted that the pair endeavored to assess their situation objectively and considered self-rescue. When this was clearly not feasible, they made the correct decision in calling for help and were able to do so immediately with their sat phone.

**Images**

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