



AAC Publications

Lost – Inexperience, Exhaustion, Climbing Alone

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch

On February 16, at 7 a.m., lead ranger Nick Meyers received a call from the Siskiyou County SAR coordinator about a lost climber on Shasta. A solo, male climber, 37 years of age, with little to no experience, had attempted to climb the Avalanche Gulch route in one day. A family member or friend of the climber had contacted 911, activating SAR. The SAR coordinator requested that Meyers call the climber and determine his location and present situation.

Meyers contacted the climber at 7:15 a.m. The climber had begun at 2 a.m., in the dark, had got off-route somewhere along the way, and was lost on the upper mountain. This was his first time on Shasta. He left his pack at Misery Hill and thus had no food, water, or any other gear when he became lost. (Often, rangers see people leaving their pack at the top of Misery Hill because it's at this point on the Avalanche Gulch route where you can first see the summit. While it only looks to be a short distance to the top, it can be much longer, especially for those who are exhausted and hypoxic.) The climber reported to Meyers over the phone that he reached the summit but could not find his pack or his way off the mountain. He said he was on "the east side" and wanted rescue. Meyers suggested that it would be in his best interest to attempt to self-rescue, as it could take hours to get to his location by foot, especially since rescuers would be unsure of his location. The climber was uninjured; he agreed and said he thought he could self-rescue, especially since it was now daylight. (Communication was very difficult due to the climber's heavy accent, accompanied by spotty cell service.) It was still early in the day, and the weather was clear and sunny.

Around 11 a.m. the climber called Meyers back and said he needed rescue. He now said he could see Shastina and was on the west side of the mountain. Rangers believed that the only way the climber could make it from the east to west side of the mountain in such a short amount of time, and as a novice climber, was if he were on the upper ramparts of the west face/summit plateau area. At middle and lower elevations, it could take a day or longer to traverse around the mountain.

It was estimated that it would take rangers a minimum of four to six hours to reach the upper mountain by foot, and the climber's location was still uncertain. It would be near dark, and they would still need to conduct a search. That would almost guarantee an open bivy and/or night operations for the climber and rangers on the upper mountain. Meyers didn't think this was a good option, and so he contacted California Highway Patrol helicopter (CHP H-16) to do an air reconnaissance. Siskiyou County had pinged the climber's cell phone; however, the location of the ping was not accurate.

CHP H-16 came into Mt. Shasta airspace around 1 p.m. in perfect flying conditions. Based on the climber's latest description of his position, rescuers assumed he was on the west side of the mountain, as that is the only side where one can see Shastina. H-16 flew back and forth at multiple elevations along the west side of the mountain and could not locate the climber, despite his bright red/orange clothes. Finally, they spotted him in the saddle between Shasta and Shastina. The climber's location was a surprise to rescuers, as it was much lower than expected and an obvious terrain feature—information that could have identified his position.

The CHP helicopter refueled and off-loaded equipment at Mercy Medical Mt. Shasta, flew back to the Shasta/Shastina saddle, and loaded the climber. He was dropped off at Bunny Flat and was in decent shape, albeit dehydrated and very hungry. He said that he had slipped and fallen, losing his helmet and glove in the process.

ANALYSIS

Because Mt. Shasta is a wilderness area, rangers make an attempt to preserve wilderness characteristics by using the minimum means necessary for all rescues. However, rangers believe the decision to use a helicopter for this rescue was reasonable and prudent. Choosing to not use mechanized equipment would have dramatically increased exposure not only to rescue personnel but also the climber.

The climber was very inexperienced. He said this was his first time on snow with ice axe and crampons, and his first time on Shasta. He tried to climb in one day, by himself, unfamiliar with the route, in the dark, with no map/compass or GPS. He left his pack at Misery Hill. He could not find his way back down on a perfect, sunny day. He chose to climb in February. A winter climb of Mt. Shasta can be quite considerably. Weather conditions could have been much worse, as well as the outcome of his situation. He learned some lessons, to say the least, and was very thankful. "I thought I was going to die several times," he told rangers.

We leave it to avalanche educator Jill Fredston to sum up this type of incident: "Every accident, of any kind, is preceded by a chain of events or errors, but each is set into motion at one irreversible moment. Until that moment, the accident might have been prevented." (Source: Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report 2015.)

Images

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