



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Loss of Control of Glissade

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Whitney

On April 1, Sheila Hollins and I (Mike Zarski) attempted a winter-conditions ascent of Mt. Whitney from Whitney Portal. Because I had injured my ankle the day before, we only reached Trail Crest by afternoon, so we decided to turn back and camp at Trail Camp.

Our plan was to glissade the long chute below Trail Crest that runs parallel to the switchbacks (which were also snow-covered). Our alternative was to descend with crampons. Due to my bad ankle, the remaining hours of daylight, and our general condition, the glissade seemed to be the best option, even though this was the longest and steepest slope we had ever attempted to glissade.

The snow at the top of the east-facing slope was soft as we started down, but as the sun moved further west, the slope was cast in shadow and immediately glazed over. Sheila, who was above me, lost control. She attempted to self-arrest but had great difficulty getting her pick to penetrate the snow and continued to pick up speed, bouncing and spinning as she accelerated. She eventually was able to slow herself down sufficiently so that when she hit an area of rocks she suffered only bruises and a cut to her jaw. According to the GPS, she fell 750 vertical feet.

ANALYSIS

Our initial decision to attempt what was, for us, a challenging descent was influenced by our physical condition and desire to get down to camp before dark. Under other circumstances, we might have exercised more caution and descended at least partway on crampons or else worked our way down through the rocks at the edge of the chute, where a long, accelerating fall would not be possible. The consequences of an immobilizing injury would have been severe, as there would have been little time to mount a rescue prior to darkness and the overnight conditions were extreme.

We were properly equipped with helmets, ice axes attached with slings around our wrists, two-way radios, and a satellite communication device. We followed the guidelines for glissading published in *Accidents 2014*. We had practiced self-arrest on steep, icy slopes, and Sheila's ability to slow her fall probably made a life-or-death difference. (Source: Mike Zarski.)

Images

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