



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Failure to Self-Arrest

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch

Michael Murphy, in his mid-50s, was climbing the Avalanche Gulch Route with partners early the morning of June 11. They reached the Red Banks and decided to turn around. They had begun descending when, at about 12,400 feet, Murphy caught his crampons on the cuff of his pants, tripped, and slid 2,000 feet down the route. The snow at the time was very smooth and firm.

A guided Sierra Wilderness Seminars team was on the route and witnessed the fall. They quickly descended to where Murphy came to rest. Two of the clients on the trip were ER doctors from San Francisco. Impressively, they were able to perform a tracheotomy using a CamelBak hose and bladder, and though the patient was unconscious, the off-duty doctors were able to establish an airway. When a helicopter arrived and hoisted him into the ship, the patient reportedly was breathing, but the rescuers were not able to sustain life. This was the first fatality on the mountain since 2011.

ANALYSIS

Descending on firm snow can be tedious and potentially dangerous on steep slopes, and it's possible for any climber to trip on the cuff of one's pants. (Slim-fitting pants and/or gaiters help minimize this risk.) The climber tripped and likely fell headfirst and rapidly gained speed—a difficult position in which to initiate self-arrest. Reports said he was knocked unconscious during his fall, which may have contributed to his lack of self-arrest. He was wearing a helmet, but it's not known if it was secured properly. He also was reported to have a pacemaker, though this is not suspected as a direct contributing factor to the accident. (Source: Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report 2015.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report 2015
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	40
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports