



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Inadequate Protection

Washington, Mt. Stuart, Ice Cliff Glacier

About midnight on February 16, Eric Strickler, 29, and Edward McFarlin, 28, left their base camp at 6,500 feet and navigated the steep snow and ice walls of the Ice Cliff Glacier, past the bergschrund and into the final gully leading to the northeast shoulder. At 7:45 a.m., Strickler was belaying McFarlin up the last pitch of the gully, which was slightly corniced at the top. As he was climbing the cornice onto the ridge, a snow step collapsed beneath McFarlin and he fell, ripping out his only piece of protection, a picket placed just below the cornice. McFarlin rapidly slid toward his belayer, but Strickler was unable to arrest his fall. When their two-picket anchor failed, they fell another 800 to 1,000 feet onto the upper Ice Cliff Glacier.

Strickler was knocked unconscious in the fall, lost his helmet and pack, and was later diagnosed with three fractured vertebrae (C1, C4, and C5). McFarlin fractured his femur in two places. He managed to keep his backpack on, but the contents were strewn across the snow. After Strickler regained consciousness, the climbers found his personal locator beacon below them on the glacier and activated it. Their repeated attempts to call 911 were unsuccessful because of their remote location. While McFarlin assessed their situation, Strickler went to get his pack, which had an extra sleeping bag, food, and water. The climbers then insulated their sitting area and kept calling 911.

An hour later, a call connected to the Chelan County Sheriff's Office and dispatchers told them a ground team was being assembled. Eventually rescuers sent a helicopter and told the climbers to make themselves visible, which they did with space blankets and an orange sleeping bag. A rescuer lowered on a cable winch and strapped Strickler into a rescue harness before lifting him into the helicopter. The challenging terrain kept rescuers from being able to put McFarlin on a backboard to protect his fractured femur, but he was also lifted into the chopper. Both men were taken to Wenatchee Valley Hospital for treatment.

ANALYSIS

The climbers each had about half a dozen years of mountaineering and rock climbing experience but were new to technical alpine ice routes. After the incident, they acknowledged they would have been better off choosing a less demanding route or taking along somebody with more experience. With the semi-consolidated snow they encountered during the climb, they should have used horizontally buried pickets for anchors rather than vertically driving them in and clipping the top hole of the picket. Also, McFarlin was impatient to finish the last pitch and get out of the cold gully, so he climbed straight through challenging conditions on the cornice rather than stopping to establish a better anchor to protect the crux.

The two had packed well for an emergency, with extra layers, space blankets, lightweight sleeping bag, and personal locator beacon. In retrospect, they wished they also had put a stove in their summit pack. (Source: Edward McFarlin.)

Editor's note: In December, also in the Stuart Range, an experienced 33-year-old climber disappeared while attempting a solo ascent of the North Buttress Couloir on Colchuck Peak. The climber's tent was found at Colchuck Lake, but two days of ground searching and an aerial search by helicopter turned up no sign of him. Officials planned to search for evidence of the climber in the summer.

Images



he north side of Mt. Stuart, with the Ice Cliff Glacier, narrowing to a couloir near its top, left of the prominent north ridge.

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