



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Inadequate Equipment, Poor Position

Wyoming, Middle Teton, Southwest Couloir

Climber 1 and Climber 2 had camped in Garnet Meadows on the night of August 28, with plans to climb the southwest couloir on the Middle Teton the following day. This route is 3rd class and is considered the easiest way to the summit. The two did not carry helmets, ice axes, crampons, ropes, or any other climbing gear. This equipment is not normally needed in late summer for a safe ascent of the peak, though helmets are often recommended because the route is popular and there is much loose rock in the couloir.

The two had a successful climb of the peak. On the descent, they found themselves at the top of a steep snow slope, north and east of the normal route, that often lingers all summer. They did not ascend this snow on their way up the peak earlier in the day. The snow on this slope is over 40° and has a bad run-out into the boulder field below it.

According to Climber 2, Climber 1 intentionally stepped out onto this steep snow, took one step, and immediately slid very fast down the length of the snowfield (about 100 feet) and then tumbled an additional 50 feet through the boulders. Climber 2 called for help around noon on August 29 and reported that Climber 1 (male, 22) was in and out of consciousness. Rangers responded by foot and helicopter, and the patient was short-hauled from the scene in a litter at 2:20 p.m.

ANALYSIS

When descending the same route that was climbed on the way up the mountain, it is usually a good idea to follow the same line, provided the terrain was reasonable to ascend and fit the route description. The snowfield where Climber 1 lost his footing appears to offer a tempting shortcut back down into Garnet Canyon's South Fork, and this is why numerous accidents have occurred here. The snow in late summer is very firm, and even a climber well versed in the use of an ice axe would be challenged to self-arrest a fall on this slope. These climbers had no axes. (Sources: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report and the Editors.)

Images

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