



AAC Publications

Ice Climbing Fall – Descending Unroped

Canada, Alberta, Ghost River Valley

At 3:40 p.m. on February 4, two ice climbers were descending the lower portion of the Aquarius ice climb (WI4). The first climber walked across a large ice ledge to the anchor at the top of the final rappel while his partner pulled the ropes from the previous rappel. As the first climber approached the edge, he slipped and fell approximately eight meters to the base of the route, breaking his pelvis and several vertebrae. His partner rappelled down, established the seriousness of the injuries, insulated the patient as best he could, and ran for help. A nearby group of three climbers stayed with the patient and provided additional warm clothing.

The partner hiked and drove for about an hour before finding a phone; he called for help just before dark. A joint ground response was initiated by Parks Canada, Banff EMS, and Kananaskis Country, with rescue crews reaching the injured climber at 8:45 p.m. The climber was packaged on a stretcher, lowered down the final ice steps, and transported 1.5 kilometers by wheeled stretcher to a staging area. A Shock Trauma Air Rescue Service (STARS) helicopter was able to land at the staging area, with the crew using night-vision goggles, and at 11:30 p.m. the patient was flown to a hospital in Calgary.

ANALYSIS

The initial slip occurred on relatively level ground, but the climber was not able to prevent himself from sliding over the edge. The only real preventive measure would be to stay attached to a rope or anchor while approaching an edge.

After the fall it became apparent that neither the injured party nor the nearby climbing party had any means of calling for help. This resulted in a delay of about six hours in the patient reaching the hospital. Fortunately, his injuries were not immediately life-threatening, but a satellite communication device would have resulted in a much faster helicopter rescue, during daylight hours.

Though the accident occurred on a relatively warm day, the patient was already mildly hypothermic by the time rescuers arrived; the insulation the other climbers placed between the patient and the ice allowed the patient to stay as warm as possible and certainly helped in the outcome.

Images



Rescuers assist at an accident scene in the Ghost River Valley, Alberta.

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