



Scrambling Fall on Mt. Haig – Forced Bivouac, Inadequate Equipment

Canada, Alberta, Border Ranges, Mt. Haig

On November 13 a party of six scrambled to the summit of Mt. Haig, in the far southern Canadian Rockies, via the east ridge. At about 4 p.m., as the party was descending, one member of the group stumbled forward and at the same time lost her grip on her ice axe. This resulted in a tumbling fall of approximately 40 meters down snow-covered ledges. Details of her injuries are not available, but she was conscious and stable after the fall. With deteriorating weather and nightfall approaching, the party was able to send an SOS message from a SPOT device and text messages from a cell phone.

A team of three rescuers reached the party at 11 p.m. One rescuer stayed on scene with the injured climber through the night, using two small tents as bivy bags, while the uninjured members of the party descended with the other rescuers. The weather continued to deteriorate overnight, with wind speeds of 80–110 km/h (50–68 mph), and 10–15 cm (4–6 inches) of snowfall. The following morning, the weather improved slightly, and the injured climber and rescuer were extricated using helicopter sling rescue.

ANALYSIS

The snow patches that the route crossed were very firm due to rime ice on the surface. Each member of the group carried Microspikes, and the use of proper crampons might have prevented the fall.

Two observations can be made on this party's use of the SPOT, relevant to users of all such devices. 1) The device continued to send a location message for several hours after the initial SOS message. The group member who carried the SPOT changed locations repeatedly, which led to some confusion on the part of the rescuers. Thankfully, this climber did not move far from the injured party. 2) Once the SOS on the SPOT had been triggered, the emergency contact of the SPOT owner was notified. It would have been beneficial if this emergency contact had details of the group's trip plans.

The extra layers of clothing and emergency tarps the group carried would be sufficient for healthy people to stay warm for several hours in the weather conditions the group experienced during the day. However, with the deteriorating weather that evening, the group likely would have become hypothermic had they needed to spend the night out (especially the injured party) without assistance. They carried disposable, foil-type tarps ("space blankets"), and several of these had already been destroyed by the strong wind before the rescue party arrived.

Images

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