



AAC Publications

Ski Mountaineering Fall – Off-Route, Unable to Self-Arrest

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, South Teton

On February 16, at 11:10 a.m., park dispatch received a call that a skier had fallen down the Amora Vida Couloir on the south side of South Teton. Ranger Scott Guenther assumed incident command (IC) and spoke with the reporting party. She indicated that their party was “just at the entrance” [on top of] the Amora Vida Couloir, that one of her ski partners had fallen, and that he was not responding to calls via the hand-held radios they were carrying. She stated that they were a party of three females and one male, and that the male had fallen. She also said they would try to descend to him, if possible. Guenther asked them to be very careful and to descend only if it could be done safely.

Guenther called for a Teton County SAR helicopter. At 12:18 p.m., he spoke again to the reporting party, who indicated they had climbed back uphill and had determined they were not actually in the Amora Vida Couloir but instead had entered a different couloir on the southeast face of the South Teton. They also said that they would hold in place rather than ascend further, as the snow was warming and becoming potentially unstable.

The helicopter was en route to the scene at 12:36 p.m. Rescuers located the party and then searched downhill from their location, soon spotting the victim. He appeared to be motionless and had fallen a distance later estimated to be approximately 1,200 vertical feet. At 1 p.m., the helicopter landed in Avalanche Canyon and dropped off three rescuers, who skied and climbed to the victim, arriving at 1:40 p.m. The skier was determined to be deceased.

Later that afternoon, the victim was extracted by helicopter long line. Staying in contact with the IC throughout the afternoon and evening, the three remaining members of the party reascended South Teton, arriving on the summit at approximately 7 p.m., and then descended Garnet Canyon, reaching the Taggart Lake Trailhead at about 10:30 p.m.

ANALYSIS

The partners and friend of the victim [John “Jack” Fields, 26] described him as an expert skier. Since arriving in the area about two months prior, he had skied a number of technical descents in the Teton Range. His partners and he would all be considered to have the requisite skill and experience to ski the Amora Vida Couloir.

The victim’s partners described the skiing conditions prior to the accident as pretty good. They practiced safe technique, skiing one at a time between safe areas. At one point, the question of whether they were on the right route came up; however, the subject, who had the most route information, made the decision to start down the couloir where the accident occurred. He also decided to keep his skis on his feet while navigating a short narrow section that required his tips and tails to be touching the rock. Unfortunately, the heel piece of his Dynafit bindings released. (The skis were not recovered, so the binding description came from his partners). Since his toe piece did not release, it is presumed that he had it in the upright, or locked, position. It is not uncommon for ski mountaineers to descend steep, committing terrain with the toe piece locked to prevent inadvertent release.

Witness statements indicate that the subject did not appear tense or scared even after the heel piece

released, and he worked to position himself to click back into his binding. When he started to slide, he attempted to self-arrest using his Whippet (ski-pole self-arrest grip). However, the snow was too soft for the Whippet to gain any purchase. Unfortunately, in this type of high-consequence terrain, there is very little margin for error or equipment failure. (Source: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report.)

Images



South Teton from the air. Red line: Approximate ski route. (1) Entrance to Amora Vida Couloir, partially hidden on left. (2) Approximate fall site.

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