



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Inexperience, Poor Snow Conditions

Washington, Mt. Rainier National Park, Little Tahoma, Fryingpan Glacier

On July 8, we started hiking along Fryingpan Creek and made it to camp above Meany Crest, at around 7,500 feet, by midafternoon. The next day, we woke up at 1 a.m. and started our ascent of Little Tahoma (11,138 feet). We reached the summit around 8:30 a.m. and returned to camp around 3:30 p.m., then took an hour to pack up for the hike out.

We planned to use crampons and ice axes for the descent of the snowfield below camp. I insisted on hauling the glacier rope down, pushing my pack weight to more than 50 pounds. The snow was slushy. We went at our own pace, with the more experienced members of our team in the front. I brought up the rear, and by the time we reached the slope's crest, the climbing party was committed to the slope. Three team members who had nearly reached the bottom saw a crevasse running along the full width of our slope and flagged everyone to traverse back east toward the rocks.

I was about to yell to our climb leader that I didn't feel safe when my footing gave way. My ice axe was plunged into the snow nearly to its head as a self-belay, but the snow was so slushy that it ripped out of the slope. I tried to self-arrest, and my speed slowed somewhat, but then the sliding snow pushed me down. During the slide, my axe was ripped out of my hands twice but the leash kept it attached. The slope flattened out and I hit a 10- to 12-foot gap, catapulted over it, landed on my back, and kept sliding. About 100 feet past the crevasse, I came to a complete stop.

I performed an assessment of potential injuries and found a serious laceration on my left forearm. I used my ice axe leash to improvise a tourniquet above the injury. My right leg below the knee felt painful, and I couldn't put any pressure on the leg. I never lost consciousness.

A member of our team activated a personal locator beacon (PLB), and another called 911. The team shoveled out a flat platform in the snow, stabilized my injuries, and kept me warm in my sleeping bag. About 90 minutes after the accident, I was airlifted off the mountain. My injuries included a severely sprained right ankle, compression fractures in my L4 and L5 lumbar vertebrae, and a deep laceration on my left forearm.

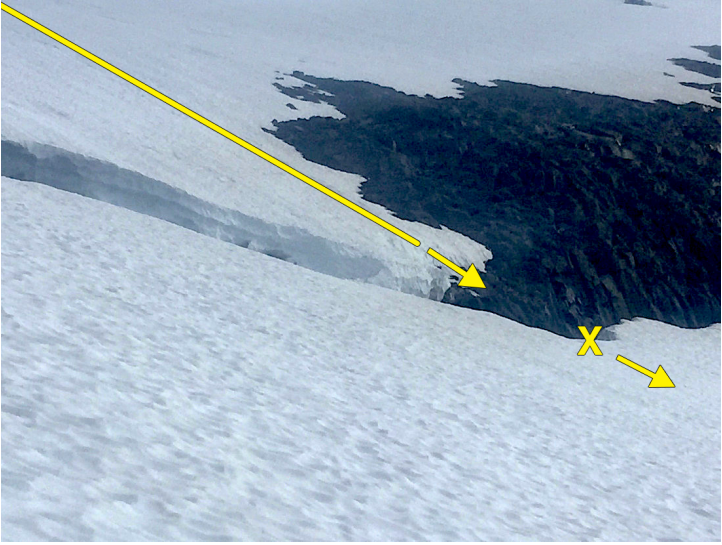
ANALYSIS

Several things contributed to the accident. I was inexperienced in descending steep, snow-covered slopes. We didn't scout the descent route in advance, and by the time we all saw the crevasse and how serious it was, we were already on the slope. It's possible that if we had known about the existence of the crevasse, we might have chosen a different descent route.

We descended late in the day when the snow was slushy. This made for very unstable footing and insecure axe placements. I also used incorrect self-arrest technique; only later did I learn that I had learned and practiced a faulty method. My heavy backpack had weighed me down and contributed to my fall, but it ultimately may have saved my life by absorbing some impact when I landed on my back.

(Source: Don Sarver.)

Images



Path of climber's slide toward crevasse, impact site (X) on far side, and continued slide.

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