



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Impacted by Tumbling Rock

Alaska, Hayes Range, Mt. Skarland

On May 12, I (female, age 35) was scrambling up Mt. Skarland (10,315 feet) in the eastern Hayes Range when a boulder, approximately two feet in diameter, was dislodged by a climber above and struck my left hand. I suffered a hemorrhaging crush injury and near complete avulsion of the hand, which necessitated applying a tourniquet in the field. I was climbing with four alpinists—Katie Bono, Ben Chapman, Alexander Lee, and Alan Shanoski—all of whom participated in extracting me from the steep shale and snow slope.

As my bleeding became controlled with the tourniquet, the team activated the SOS on a Garmin inReach and then communication was established with Alaska State Troopers via a satellite phone. We assigned clear roles to each climber and initiated a plan for descent, taking into account the safety of each person and the resources available to us.

A medevac helicopter arrived on scene three to four hours after the initial rockfall. The helicopter was only able to land safely at the base of the mountain, 1,500 feet below, so we had to descend a mixed scree and steep snow slope to the base. The skills and teamwork of the group made it possible to descend through a series of eight or nine rope lowers. An incredibly skilled pilot flew us out with no daylight to spare, and the work of my team and the emergency responders, coupled with extensive trauma training in my personal career, ultimately saved my life. I was flown to a hospital in Fairbanks, where I was stabilized, and then by air ambulance to the nearest level one trauma center in Seattle, where I began a series of complicated surgical repairs to my hand. (Source: Ilana Jesse.)

ANALYSIS

Traveling steep terrain in a group increases the hazard anytime a rock is knocked loose. Moving one at a time through suspect areas, while the remaining climbers wait out of the fall zone, can minimize the hazard.

This team's ample preparation and multiple systems for communicating with rescuers prevented a bad accident from having a more serious outcome. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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