



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall During Descent

Alaska, Juneau Icefield, Mendenhall Towers

On March 5, in early afternoon, Ryan Johnson and Marc-André Leclerc reached the summit of the Main Tower (6,910') in the Mendenhall Towers massif, after completing the first ascent of the north face. The pair started down the east ridge and then began rappelling the Fourth Gully, a steep cleft leading down to the glacier to the north. During this descent, an unknown event caused the men to fall down the gully and into a crevasse. Searchers later spotted ropes in the crevasse, and a hovering helicopter with Recco search technology determined the victims must be located inside the crevasse. A recovery was not possible.

ANALYSIS

It's unknown what caused the two men to fall, but searchers and friends believe they likely were hit by something from above, such as rockfall or an avalanche. Descending in the afternoon, the warmest part of the day, might have increased this possibility.

Although weather prevented searchers from finding the climbers' location with any hope of rescuing them alive, the Recco reflector installed on at least one item of their clothing or equipment permitted searchers to pinpoint their location. Alpinists are reminded of the value of carrying avalanche transceivers or similar location technology in glaciated or avalanche-prone terrain. In addition to possibly saving one's own life, it can make searchers' job much safer and more effective, possibly offering some comfort to survivors. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



After climbing the north face of Main Tower in the Mendenhall Towers (shown), two climbers descended the left skyline ridge and then started down the very steep couloir dropping from the saddle. An unknown event caused their fatal fall to the bottom.

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