



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Inexperience, Inadequate Equipment

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Whitney

On the morning of June 10, Inyo County Search and Rescue was notified of an accident involving three climbers above Trail Camp on Mt. Whitney. At approximately 7 a.m., climber 1 (female, age unknown) slipped while ascending “The Chute,” a snowfield often used as a shortcut in early season when the main route is under snow. The Chute gains about 1,200 feet, rejoining the main trail around 13,600 feet. At the time of the accident, the snow surface was likely hard or icy.

Climber 1 was ascending the snowfield, reportedly without crampons or an ice axe, when she lost her balance and began sliding. She was unable to self-arrest and tumbled down the slope, colliding with climber 2 (female, age unknown) and then climber 3 (male, age unknown), who reportedly reached out to try to stop the falling climbers and sustained a spinal injury in the ensuing collision. Climbers 1 and 2 came to a stop approximately 150 feet apart and on 30° terrain after falling almost 500 feet in elevation.

Climbers 1 and 2 suffered a number of injuries, including major head and facial trauma and pelvic and spine injuries. Other climbers, whose aid was essential to the operation, stabilized the patients' positions, preventing them from sliding farther down the slope. A California Highway Patrol helicopter ferried members of the Inyo SAR team to the accident site, where they treated Climbers 1 and 2 and packaged them for transport and hoist evacuation. Despite his injury, Climber 3 was able to hike out on his own. (Source: Inyo County SAR.)

ANALYSIS

Given the relatively moderate pitch of the snowfield, it seems probable the accident could have been prevented with proper equipment and experience. Climbers attempting Mt. Whitney in early season conditions should be prepared with crampons, ice axe, and helmet, should be trained and confident in self-arrest and other mountaineering techniques, and should not ascend directly below other climbers.

As an additional note, climbers should not attempt to stop an uncontrolled high-speed fall of another climber on icy terrain, but rather move out of the fall path if possible and then downclimb to assist any injured climbers. (Sources: Inyo County SAR and the Editors)

Images

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