



AAC Publications

Ski Mountaineering Fall – Failure to Assess Conditions

Oregon, Mt. Hood, South Side

At approximately 10 a.m. on May 26, an experienced skier (male, 35), attempted a ski descent of the Mazama Chute on the upper south slopes of Mt. Hood after reaching the summit. Following many days of warm conditions, the night of May 25 had been colder, with temperatures below freezing on the upper mountain. The snow surface was hard frozen corn—very firm and difficult to ski. According to witnesses, after two or three turns the subject fell and lost both skis. He tumbled about 400 feet, the full distance from Mazama Chute to Hot Rocks.

Hot Rocks was still partially covered with snow, and the upper transition from snow to rock consisted of multiple transverse crevasses. The subject flew across the first large crevasse, then fell vertically 20 feet off an ice edge, coming to rest in a trough on a snow shelf. He experienced extensive injuries from the fall and narrowly missed sliding off the shelf to the rocks below. His final location was precarious, with precipitous drop-offs just three feet from his landing point. His skis were lost in a crevasse.

Other climbers who witnessed the fall called 911. A team of four rescuers from Portland Mountain Rescue (PMR) was on the mountain that morning, and they reached the subject around 11 a.m. By that time, others climbers were assisting the injured climber, including an internal medicine resident from a local hospital.

The climber's location at the edge of an ice cliff above an active fumarole complicated evacuation and required more rigging and rescue personnel than the initial four rescuers could provide. While waiting for a larger team to arrive, the PMR team set anchors above and rigged a rope system that could be used to pendulum a litter and attendants across steep snow immediately above the ice cliff.

Attempts to recover the patient with a helicopter from an Oregon Army National Guard unit were thwarted by wind and turbulence. Instead, the patient was evacuated by penduluming the litter across a snow slope to the Hogsback. From there, rescuers lowered the litter some 1,500 feet to where it could be managed by unassisted litter attendants. The injured climber was transferred to a snow cat at the top of the Palmer lift at approximately 7 p.m. and then transported to Timberline Lodge, where he was loaded into a helicopter for transport to Portland.

ANALYSIS

Skiing off Mt Hood's summit is a common objective for expert skiers. However, conditions on the upper crater are often not appropriate, safe, or fun for a ski descent. On this day, the subject and his companion climbed to the summit and waited for the snow to soften. Unfortunately, they judged the snow condition in the couloir based on the exposed snow on top, which was not representative of the snow in the shaded chutes through the crater wall. Rather than confirming the snow had softened in the chute, the subject dropped in from above, only to find he could not hold an edge. He was unable to **arrest the resulting fall.** (Sources: Mark Morford, Portland Mountain Rescue; rescuer observations; and the injured skier.)

Images

Article Details

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