



AAC Publications

Fall While Descending – Tool Pulled Out of Ice

Oregon, Mt. Jefferson

In the midafternoon of July 20, Sam Lowry (age 60) and I (Jon Sprecher, age 64) climbed the Jefferson Park Glacier route and were descending the North Milk Creek snowfield to loop back to our camp via the Russell and Jefferson Park glaciers. This descent is usually done unroped for speed, because the climbing is not too hard and if you're not placing protection you'd only pull off the other climber if you fell. It was late in the season and the surface was soft ice with patches of slushy sno-cone ice, making face-out descent difficult due to the variable conditions. I was descending face-in, using two tools, a Black Diamond Raven ice axe and a Chouinard alpine hammer.

My accident occurred when, after I'd pulled out my axe to move down, the alpine hammer sheared in the soft ice and I started sliding and rotating to the right. My right crampon stuck in some ice, twisting my ankle and flipping me sideways. I flipped back over and self-arrested using the axe, stopping my slide after an additional 20 feet. I'd previously experienced a badly sprained ankle and quickly realized that I had a worse injury. I continued descending, kicking with one leg and "kneeing in" with the other before eventually crawling on my knees for several hundred more feet down to a point that was safe from rockfall. It was obvious that I wouldn't be able to complete the descent, so we called 911 on our one dying cell phone.

It was late in the day and we were forced to spend a night out, cold and sleepless. Still, with enough clothing, water, and food, it was "okay." The next afternoon, when we got tired of waiting for rescuers, my partner started down, and after an hour he ran into the search and rescue team ascending to find us; on his description of my injury, they called a helicopter for me. My injuries included a broken fibula and a couple of torn high-ankle ligaments.

ANALYSIS

If I'd had a second full ice axe, the pick likely would have gone in more deeply and not sheared out. I am very used to climbing with the Chouinard alpine hammer that I was using. Even so, next time I climb in the alpine I plan on using a medium length ice hammer with a longer pick. (Source: Jonathan Sprecher.)

Images



Rescue helicopter approaches a climber on Mt. Jefferson after his bivouac with a broken leg.

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