



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall On Snow – Fatigue, Failure to Self-Arrest

Washington, Cascades, Mt. Stuart, Cascadian Couloir

About 11:50 a.m. on June 24, a climber called 911 to report that his partner (Varun Sadavarte, 32) had fallen several hundred feet on Mt. Stuart and couldn't be reached. Sadavarte and Owen Thomas (37) were friends who had taken a mountaineering course the year before and had climbed Mt. Baker and Mt. Adams. At 4 a.m. on June 24, they left their campsite and started up the Cascadian Couloir, which has significant snow in early summer. They exited the couloir around 6:30 a.m. After ascending to the saddle between Stuart and Sherpa Peak, Sadavarte and Thomas hit the false summit a few hundred feet below the top.

The route ahead was steeper than Thomas was expecting, so he decided to wait while Sadavarte went to the summit. Sadavarte returned about 11 a.m. and said he was hungry and a little tired. He took a five- to ten-minute minute break for some food and water, and they started to discuss which way to descend. Sadavarte took three steps along the snow slope below their rest spot, lost his balance, and began sliding on his stomach. He fumbled with his ice axe but was unable to slow down and quickly disappeared from sight. Thomas called 911 after not being able to see or verbally contact his partner.

A climber below who had witnessed the slide yelled up to Thomas that he could see Sadavarte and he appeared to be unresponsive. Another climber was able to climb down to where Sadavarte had stopped. He also called 911 to report the accident and relay his opinion that Sadavarte had not survived the fall.

By 2:40 p.m., a helicopter crew from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island was on scene and confirmed the climber was dead. They hoisted his body into the helicopter at 3:25 p.m. and delivered it to a staging area before returning to the mountain to retrieve Thomas, who did not believe he could safely descend after witnessing his partner's fall. Searchers recovered Sadavarte's backpack and helmet, which sustained significant damage to the left side and front consistent with tumbling into a rocky basin. (Source: Chelan County Sheriff's Department.)

ANALYSIS

A few things likely contributed to this accident. Effectively using an ice axe to self-arrest might have prevented the fall. Fatigue also played a role. This is a long climb, gaining 4,600 feet from the campsite, and the climbers may have needed more time to rest and take in calories before descending a steep snow slope they'd already identified as potentially dangerous. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Chelan County Sheriff's Department
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	72
Page	93
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Accident reports