



AAC Publications

Avalanche – Poor Position, Weather

Canada, British Columbia, Mt. Robson Provincial Park, Whitehorn Mountain

IN THE EARLY hours of April 23, a party of two climbers from Europe left their high camp, located in the northeast bowl of Whitehorn Mountain (3,399 meters), to attempt the northeast face of the mountain. This is not believed to be an established route.

The party roped up for three pitches of waterfall ice interspersed with broad snow ledges. As the leader was approaching the top of the third ice pitch, they were struck by an avalanche. From the description and site inspection, it is suspected this was a solar-triggered soft slab avalanche of size 1.5 (on the Canadian scale that runs to size 5). The party reported that small avalanches had been coming down as soon as the sun started to shine on the face above them, and that they had nearly made it to the relative safety of the left side of the snow ledge when they were struck by the larger slide.

The party was swept down the climb and ended up in the middle of the run-out zone (2,400 meters). Both climbers ended up on the surface but were injured and unable to move. They used a satellite phone to contact a friend in Europe. From there the call went to their federal government, who contacted their embassy in Ottawa. The embassy then contacted Emergency Management British Columbia (EMBC), who notified the local SAR group (Robson Valley SAR). Robson Valley SAR requested the assistance of Parks Canada Visitor Safety staff, who conducted the rescue.

ANALYSIS

The northeast face of Whitehorn Mountain was still holding winter snowpack at the time of this incident. As a result the route was exposed to a significant objective hazard from the large snow slope and cornice running the length of the ridge above the route. Despite the party getting an early start, the snow slope and the corniced ridge were catching the early morning sun. This was also the start of the first significant warming trend of the season. The party reported that they had not been able to see the significant avalanche terrain above the roped pitches from the base of the route. These climbers were not equipped with avalanche rescue gear (transceiver, probes, and shovels) and were fortunate that they ended up on the surface of the snow.

While the climbers did have a means of calling for help (which likely saved their lives), they did not have the phone numbers of the local response agencies. This delayed the response time. Had this incident occurred a few hours later in the day, the communication delay may have forced the seriously injured climbers to spend a night on the mountain. (Source: Parks Canada.)

Images



Location of the fallen climbers after an avalanche on Whitehorn Mountain. The two were most of the way up the prominent rock band directly above the debris fan when the avalanche swept them off.



Location of two climbers in the debris fan below the northeast face of Whitehorn Mountain after an avalanche swept them from the route.

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	72
Page	0
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Accident reports