



AAC Publications

Stranded — Off Route, Inadequate Gear, Injured Rescuer

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Emerson, Southeast Face

In the late afternoon of September 15, hikers on the Piute Pass Trail reported that they heard calls for help and saw people waving their arms on the rugged southeast face of Mt. Emerson (13,204 feet). Two Inyo County Search and Rescue members were dispatched to the scene, where they encountered one member of a three-person climbing party at the base of the face. He informed them that he and his two companions had been attempting the southeast face (III 5.4), but became lost and determined they could not continue. This climber was able to downclimb to the base to seek help, while his two companions were stranded several hundred feet up. During the night, the SAR team ascended about 1,000 feet up the face but were unable to locate the two stranded climbers. They decided to bivouac at 2:30 a.m.

At daybreak on the morning of September 16, the two rescuers continued searching for the stranded climbers, but eventually decided to retreat due to high winds and falling temperatures. During their retreat, at about 9:30 a.m., rocks fell from above (likely dislodged by the high wind), striking one rescuer on his right forearm and fracturing his radius and ulna, and on his right hip, causing deep soft-tissue damage. The team alerted the SAR base about their situation, and an additional team of eight SAR members was dispatched to assist the injured rescuer. Helicopter support was unavailable due to extremely high winds.

While the injured rescuer and his partner waited for help, they encountered the two purportedly stranded climbers coming up the southeast face, having elected to continue after bivouacking off-route. The two climbers were advised to wait with the injured SAR member and his teammate. Once the additional SAR members arrived on scene, they stabilized their injured teammate and lowered him approximately 1,000 feet to the bottom of the face. The climbers were also assisted to the bottom, using a combination of belayed downclimbing, lowering, and tandem rappelling.

ANALYSIS

The stranded climbers drastically underestimated their objective. Although the southeast face of Mt. Emerson has a modest rating of 5.4, the route-finding is not obvious and the route is long. The climbers left a rope and anchoring material at the base of the route, thinking they would not need it after the crux first pitch. Had they brought this gear with them, it might have given them the means to retreat. They also were unprepared for spending a long time on the route and became extremely cold as a result. The initial call for rescue was due to the combination of these factors.

The rockfall that injured the SAR member was a random, spontaneous event. Although the SAR hasty team recognized that conditions were deteriorating and decided to retreat, they fell victim to the objective dangers inherent to the mountains. Overall, this incident illustrates the importance of having the requisite experience for a given objective—and the skills and gear needed for self-rescue—and it is a reminder that rescuers expose themselves to risk of injury in order to assist stranded or injured parties. (Source: Inyo County Search and Rescue.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Inyo County Search and Rescue
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	73
Page	42
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Accident reports