



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow — Team Fall While Roped

Meico, Puebla, Pico de Orizaba (Citlaltépetl)

On August 20, a fall killed four people climbing Pico de Orizaba (5,636 meters), Mexico's highest peak. The climbers were roped together above 5,000 meters on the Jamapa Glacier when one of them fell, dragging the other three down the mountain.

The secretary of the interior for the state of Puebla confirmed that all four climbers were Mexican nationals and belonged to the same group. Three of the deceased were from Veracruz, and one was from Puebla. The tour company Volcanes de México identified the fallen as Carlos Altamirano Lima (53), José Inés Zepahua (63), Hugo Cruz Vázquez (19), and Humberto Kenji Muray (58). Altamirano was guiding the group and was an experienced mountaineer.

ANALYSIS

The standard Jamapa Glacier route (the scene of the accident) is not technically difficult. However, above 5,000 meters, crevasses present a hazard and the snow steepens to 35°. On hard snow angled at 30°, a falling climber accelerates almost as quickly as they would in free fall.

Although being roped together in a team of varying experience levels is standard for safeguarding glacier travel, it presents various hazards. The general principal is that if one climber falls, their fall can be arrested by one or more of the others. Unfortunately, on steep terrain, this can prove difficult, especially if the top member of the rope team falls. In an ideal world, pitching out technical terrain or having intermediate anchors mitigates the hazard. In reality, such steps often are impractical, especially in situations where speed is safety.

While the uninitiated view "low-angle" snow climbing as inconsequential, experienced climbers understand the danger. Protection is often poor or nonexistent. The chances of falling are magnified by slick terrain, unstable footing, and falling objects. "Balling" of built-up snow on crampons and tripping when crampon points catch pant cuffs have killed many climbers. Self-arresting on steep, hard snow is very difficult. All that said, one must exercise heightened caution and avoid being lulled into a false sense of security when climbing steep snow. (Sources: Government of Puebla, ExplorersWeb.com, and the Editors.)

Images

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