



AAC Publications

Avalanche and Rockfall – Stranded

Washington, Mt. Rainier, Liberty Ridge

At 1:30 p.m. on June 6, Mt. Rainier climbing rangers were notified about a satellite SOS activation on Liberty Ridge. The incident commander was able to directly message two climbers, who were stranded at 9,700 feet. Rockfall had hit one climber in the head. A helicopter was dispatched with two rangers, and during the reconnaissance flight, the stranded pair was located. Plans were formulated for a short-haul rescue. A team was inserted on the ridge and extricated the distressed climbers. Both were taken to Camp Schurman and on to a hospital.

Interviews revealed that the two climbers from Colorado had set off at 12:30 a.m. to climb Liberty Ridge. At 5:30 a.m., they began the technical section of the route. June 6 was one of the first days of clear skies and warm temperatures following several weeks of snowfall. The forecasted freezing level was at 13,000 feet. The climbers reported “30 to 40 avalanches throughout the day, one every eight minutes before the accident.”

The climbers had discussed turning around but were unsure if they could find anchors to rappel, given the vast sections of rock. At 11 a.m., they turned around as they approached Thumb Rock (11,000 feet). The injured climber reported that a 35-pound rock had fallen 200 feet, striking him on the upper back and neck. Rangers found no obvious signs of trauma during patient assessment.

ANALYSIS

A Mt. Rainier National Park climbing ranger reported speaking with this party on June 5. The ranger highlighted the need for conservative decision-making following the recent series of storms and advised a different route or, at the minimum, observing their proposed route during daylight hours before an attempt. The ranger warned that Liberty Ridge is very avalanche-prone following snowfall. The climbers had also contacted a local guiding company on June 5 to acquire conditions information. During that call, a senior mountain guide suggested that the Coloradans should stay off Liberty Ridge, given the weather and route conditions.

The climbers had been advised to adopt a self-sufficient mindset and prepare for self-rescue. They reported that an avalanche had destroyed the snow bridge across the bergschrund that they crossed on the morning of their ill-fated attempt. They said that rappelling into and climbing out of the bergschrund was the only option for descent and claimed that this prevented retreat. They further claimed that self-rescue would have required them to “push for the summit.”

While the ambition to climb a major technical route is admirable, climbers must be mindful when conditions are bad. Patience is prudent on a climb like Liberty Ridge. Having the skills, experience, and equipment for retreat is mandatory. In this instance, the ability to rappel into a crevasse and climb out the other side would have negated the need for a rescue that endangered rescuers.

An emergency satellite communication device should not be a default option when choosing to do a dangerous ascent. In this case, rapid response was only made possible because of favorable flying conditions. Climbers should not assume that ground or air rescue will be possible, much less prompt. Route selection should be based on a climbing team’s ability and fitness level, plus an experienced assessment of conditions and the forecast. The life you risk may not just be your own. (Source: Mt.

Rainier Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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