



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice, Climbing Alone and Unroped

New Hampshire, Crawford Notch, Frankenstein Cliffs

Mark, Pete, and I (Jesse Morenz) headed up to the Whites early Saturday morning, March 16, to train for our upcoming Liberty Ridge climb. We arrived at the Frankenstein parking lot at 12:30 p.m. and planned on getting in two climbs before our larger alpine climb the next day. We decided to climb the first two pitches of Standard and then finish with the Penguin. At the base of the route we encountered an older climber (mid-60s). He was by himself and seemed a bit off. Not thinking much of it, we headed up the first pitch of Standard. Pete led up to the cave on the right side and set up a belay, bringing Mark and I up. At the cave we arranged ourselves and then Mark headed up the second pitch. After Mark began, we heard a sound that is hard to describe, but all of us knew what it was: the sound of a falling climber. I looked down to see the older climber cartwheeling down the lower portion of the route, all the way to the railroad tracks below. At first I thought he had slipped at the base of the route and tumbled down. I quickly realized that he was moving too fast—he had fallen off the first pitch of Standard Center while soloing.

Other than curl into a fetal position, he did not move after impact; this was a very serious injury or a fatality. At the tracks, four or so climbers reached him nearly instantly. They dispatched two runners to call 911 and get the litter from the emergency cache at the parking area. As this was happening, I called down to see if they needed help. They told me that they would need us to help carry him out. Being mindful of our own safety, Mark carefully downclimbed back to the cave and all three of us rapped down, leaving the rope in place.

The first climbers on the scene had bandaged the victim's head wound and taken his pulse, led by an IMCS guide. He was not unconscious, but was barely speaking. He was complaining about his hip and saying he could not breathe. He was gurgling when he took a breath. One of the runners returned with the litter and the group lifted him onto it, securing him with climbing rope and webbing. Then the group lifted the litter and carried the victim out. Climbers, many still in full gear, took turns keeping his airway clear. He complained from time to time that he could not breathe, but as time passed these complaints decreased.

More and more climbers joined the rescue party as we walked down the tracks; over 15 climbers were assisting with the rescue by the time we got to the trestle. I expected to see snow machines on the other side of the trestle, but there were none. We carried him out the entire way. Very close to the parking area, a few EMTs met us. At the parking area we transferred the man onto a gurney and the EMTs put him in the ambulance. We were informed that they planned to take him to an area where a medical helicopter could land and transport him to Dartmouth's hospital.

Analysis

My thoughts on the matter are, first and foremost, solo ice climbing is dangerous. This was the second major incident in a few weeks in the Whites involving a solo ice climber. The second is that one should not expect a major rescue if injured. This accident happened under the best possible conditions for a rescue. It was on a frequently climbed route, and there were many people around. Even so, it took 80 minutes to get the victim to the ambulance. If an injury occurred in a more remote area of the White Mountains, like Mt. Willey, it could be many hours before anyone responded. One must remember these rescue personnel are volunteers from a small town—in this case Bartlett. They did everything right, but they do not have the staff or resources to get paramedics to an injured

climber in 15 minutes (or even an hour). What one can rely on is help from the tribe—every climber who saw the incident helped. But they can only help if they are around. (Source: Jesse Morenz.)

Images

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