



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Snow – Climbing Unroped**

Alaska, Chugach State Park, Mt. Yukla

**On Sunday, January 18, 24-year-old Dasan Marshall fell to his death on the north face of 7,535-foot Mt. Yukla in Chugach State Park.** He was attempting a variation of the route No Call, No Show with his climbing partner, 23-year-old Nikolai Windahl. [Editor's note: No Call, No Show is a serious 20-pitch ice, snow, and mixed climb (5.6 WI5 M6 Steep Snow), established in 2011.] The team had attempted another route on the face on January 17, but retreated due to the amount of spindrift coming down the route. They bivied that night at approximately 3,500 feet in a boulder cave at the base of the valley. On the day of the accident, they decided to attempt another couloir on the face. They began their climb at 6:30 a.m.

The team climbed unroped into the couloir, moving up moderate névé slopes (reaching 60 degrees) and through a short overhanging section. After about three hours, they reached a 30-foot section of almost vertical snow and ice, which seemed to give way to more moderate terrain. Dasan was scouting a route through the steeper section, and he called down to Nikolai that it was difficult but doable. Immediately after this Dasan slipped and fell 1,000 feet down the face. Nikolai estimates the time of the fall at 10 a.m. Dasan died of a head injury caused by contact with rock while falling down the couloir. He was wearing a modern, lightweight, foam mountaineering helmet.

Nikolai was forced to downclimb the route, as the party's rope was in Dasan's pack. While retreating, he had to improvise a rappel down a 20-foot overhanging section using a shovel blade as an anchor and 30 feet of 7mm cord. It took him about two hours to descend to Dasan, whom he reached at approximately noon. Nikolai assessed Dasan as deceased and attempted to call 911 with his cellular phone; poor cell reception caused his call to be dropped. Nikolai had to follow their tracks down the technical Icicle Creek drainage alone to find better cell reception. After descending for an hour, he was able to communicate the emergency to a friend in town via text message. He then continued his descent to the established trail and reached the trailhead at 4:30 p.m. A Pararescue team from the 212th Alaska Air National Guard, alerted by Nikolai's friend, recovered Dasan's body with an HH-60 Pavehawk around 4:30 the same afternoon.

### **ANALYSIS**

Accidental slips and falls are the main cause of climbing fatalities on alpine snow and ice routes. Nikolai did not see the exact events leading to Dasan's slip, but it is reasonable to speculate that he lost his footing or ice tool placements in the snow and was unable to stop his fall.

Nikolai was able to keep his focus and retreat from the climb, improvising with the minimal equipment he had. When a team decides to simul-solo in high-consequence terrain, splitting up the technical gear and ropes would give each climber more options for descending alone. Using half ropes instead of a single rope gives better options for retreating from an alpine climb.

In many remote climbing destinations, reliable communication is problematic and sometimes impossible. Although it would not have changed the outcome of this particular accident, arranging for the use of a reliable satellite-based communication device would have allowed Nikolai to communicate his emergency earlier, and may have allowed him to avoid descending Icicle Creek alone. Text-to-911 service, available in 18 states but not in Alaska, would also be an asset to any backcountry traveler in areas of spotty cell coverage.

(Sources: Accident report by Eeva Latosuo, Alaska Pacific University, and Bill Billmeier, Alaska Mountaineering School, fact-checked with Nikolai Windahl.)

## Images



The impressive north face of Mt. Yukla. The line attempted before this accident is near the center of the face.

## Article Details

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