



AAC Publications

FALL ON SNOW – Climbing Unroped

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Flattop Mountain

On July 10, Will Toor (60) and Mariella Colvin (59) fell down the East Couloir (II A12 or 65° snow) on the north face of Flattop Mountain (12,324'). At the top, a cornice collapsed, causing Toor to fall.

The dislodged debris struck Colvin. Unroped, they both tumbled 900 feet. Colvin left her immobilized husband to try to get help, bushwhacking nearly two miles despite having suffered broken ribs, a broken sternum, a broken wrist, and three fractured vertebrae. While she was gone, two climbers on an adjacent peak came over to assist Toor and summon a National Park Service rescue. Toor was helicoptered out with a broken femur. Colvin was evacuated the next day.

Toor recalls: “Mariella and I arrived at the couloirs around 11:30 a.m. and spent some time examining conditions. We planned to climb the 1,200-foot-long East Couloir. The cornices at the top had not fully melted out, but there was a portion in the middle with a reasonable looking exit— maybe 80 feet of very steep snow, before turning almost vertical for ten feet.

“It was a warm day, and because of the timed entry permit, we did not get an early start. But the couloir had been in shade down low, and the snow was good for kicking steps. I was maybe ten feet ahead of Mariella most of the time. We wore helmets and crampons. We had packs with some warm clothing. We did not bring a rope or pickets (to keep our packs lighter). We did not have satellite devices, only cell phones.

“Just below the top, we stopped on a ledge and got out our second tools. We talked about traversing left to a lower-angle exit, but I felt more comfortable facing straight in, with a tool in each hand (for three points of contact), versus traversing. We started up again, and I was still able to kick very secure steps and get secure axe placements. Right around 1:30 p.m., I made the final move to the flat snow on top.”

At this point, the snow collapsed. Toor’s memory of the moment is hazy: “I remember starting to fall and being totally confused how that was happening. I was done with the climb! Our theory is, the old cornice fracture line a few feet back from the edge collapsed.”

Colvin recalls, “I was knocked over backward. I lost both ice axes. I slid until I found myself rolling, which eventually turned into somersaulting, sliding, and tumbling. I was aware enough to see some rocks in the snow as I hit the lower-angled section and did my best to miss them. I dragged my crampons to come to a stop near the bottom and amazingly didn’t break my ankles.”

Meanwhile, Toor recalls “hearing Mariella scream and trying to self-arrest. I remember tumbling out of control and having a fleeting sense that this was the end. Mariella also remembers feeling we were probably going to die.”

Colvin recounts. “When we finally stopped, I could skootch sideways to him. Will thought his femur was broken. I knew my upper body had significant trauma, but my legs were fine. Will kept asking, ‘Where are we, what happened?’, which made me worry about a concussion. I tested my mental state by asking myself easy arithmetic questions and did okay. I yelled for help but got no response. I realized I would have to get help, so I gave Will my warm clothes and food and set off with nothing but a windbreaker.”

Toor recounts, "At 3:30 p.m., two climbers (Markian Feduschak and Riley Gaines) arrived. They had been climbing on Notchtop and had heard our calls. Seeing them walk toward me was one of the best sights of my life. They immediately took off their own puffy jackets and put them on me. They were able to text with the Park Service on a Garmin inReach. They oozed calm and competence.

"Unfortunately, I was still cold because from lying on the snow. Then, a party of three climbers appeared. They used my crampons to dig a trench, then lined it with packs and dragged me into a sitting position. We got contact back from the Park Service confirming Mariella was with folks tending to her, which helped me relax. At that point, I hadn't realized that she had serious injuries beyond a broken wrist."

Colvin, unaware that aid had arrived for Toor, had "headed straight down over snow and rock slabs, avoiding cliffs and talus fields. Finally, I reached Odessa Lake. I figured this was a good place to yell for help, as my voice would carry across the water. I heard helicopters circling, and I felt sure they were going to Will and was really relieved. That gave me permission to just lie down and rest, but within a few minutes I saw a man and his son. He sent his son in search of help and helped me on the rough trail around the lake to a campsite.

"A couple camping there had two tents. She set me up in a sleeping bag and air mattress. Someone else had a Garmin device and contacted the Park Service."

Toor recounts, "Around 6:30 p.m. we saw three yellow raincoats—the Park Service hasty team. They had warm blankets and painkillers. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the pain was setting in, so this was very welcome. Eventually, a big National Guard helicopter appeared. Just before 8 p.m. they dropped a litter and an attendant."

Because of bad weather and impending darkness, Colvin had to wait overnight. "Two medics hiked in and spent the night with me, monitoring vital signs and administering painkillers," she said. "They initially thought I would be able to walk out, but it became clear I would need an evacuation. So, the next morning, two teams of rescuers transported me to a clearing for a skilled pilot to land a helicopter."

ANALYSIS

Toor and Colvin are very experienced, having climbed since the 1980s in the Tetons, Colorado, and the Canadian Rockies. One can argue for using ropes and intermediate protection on snow climbs, but given the pair's competence, such a precaution might have only slowed them down, exposing them to even softer snow conditions.

Their late start was a factor. Toor wrote that as they started up the couloir, "We were a bit concerned about the temperature." While this national park's timed entry can be challenging, it also reinforces best practices by encouraging one to be at the trailhead by 5 a.m. An earlier start might well have prevented this accident.

Alpine climbing is fraught with unforeseen hazards. In line with Toor and Colvin's cornice fracture theory, Park officials also suspect that the cornice hadn't melted out completely, contributing to its collapse.

Toor says, "So many people put themselves out to save us, in little ways and in big ways, with skill, enormous effort, discomfort (the climbers with me had to jog to stay warm because I had their warm clothes, and that couple gave up their tent and sleeping bag for Mariella), and real risk (the helicopter team). I just can't thank everyone enough. I am buying a Garmin inReach for us and one for my son Nicky." (Sources: Will Toor, Mariella Colvin, Rocky Mountain National Park.)

Editor's Note: See more photos from this incident in the March 2023 edition of ANAC's Prescription

newsletter.

Images



A National Guard helicopter swoops in to evacuate Will Toor from Flattop Mountain. The East Couloir, down which Toor and Mariella Colvin fell, is visible above and left of the rescuers.

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