

## **FALL ON ICE, NO PROTECTION OR BELAY**

### **Washington, Mount Rainier, Cowlitz Cleaver**

While searching for missing climbers Chris Hartonas and Raymond Vakili on November 15, three rescuers sustained serious injuries after falling off the Gibraltar Ledges route. Park Ranger Asha Anderson and Rainier Mountaineering Guides Ashley Garmin and Art Rausch were searching along the Cowlitz Cleaver when the accident occurred. The rope team of three was part of a five person search team looking for clues along the route Hartonas and Vakili may have attempted to ascend. Anderson had just joined Garmin and Rausch on their climbing rope to cross an exposed icy gully at 10,400 feet. While traversing the chute, Anderson lost her footing and fell, pulling Garmin and Rausch despite everyone's aggressive efforts to self arrest. The team of three slid and tumbled uncontested down the 45-degree water ice slope for nearly 600 feet before coming to a rest on the upper Muir Snowfield near 9,900 feet. Search team leader Joe Puryear witnessed the accident and radioed for emergency assistance as the trio slid out of sight.

Another field search team was quickly dispatched to an emergency landing zone where a Chinook Helicopter, also doing aerial search, picked them up. That team, along with another aerial reconnaissance team in a smaller helicopter, was reinserted near the accident site. Together, they provided a very rapid rescue, airlifting the injured searchers off the mountain. During the fall, Anderson had sustained two broken ankles and ribs; Garmin had head lacerations and a broken back, while Rausch escaped with only a broken rib. All were seriously sore and bruised.

### **Analysis**

Conditions on the mountain were unique at the time. Hard, thick water ice covered everything between 8000 and 12,000 feet. It was as though a glass of water had been poured on the mountain and allowed to freeze.

Puryear's team searched the Camp Muir area first, then began a searching ascent of the Cowlitz Cleaver towards the "Beehive." At the time, Garmin and Rausch roped up because they would be searching along the edge of the glacier while Anderson, Puryear and S. Richards remained unroped, searching along the fourth-class cleaver. The team reconvened near 10,400 feet to cross a steep gully. Puryear and Richards successfully crossed the chute first. During that time, Rausch noticed that Anderson was concerned about the situation. He offered to have her join his rope team, which she did. Then they continued across the chute. Anderson could not recall what caused the slip, but once the slide started, it proved impossible to stop. Garmin and Rausch felt they could provide a team self arrest, but the ice proved too hard and their axes bounced off. As the team tumbled faster, everyone believed that, "this is it."

Rausch observantly noted Anderson's apprehension. Better communication amongst the entire team about each individual's skills and the terrain hazards may have lead to the decision to belay or place snow/ice protection along the route. (Source: Mike Gauthier, SAR Ranger, Mount Rainier National Park)

*(Editor's Note: Mike Gauthier points out that if Mount Rainier had a Bermuda Triangle, the route to Camp Muir would be it. This popular climb on a clear day is*