

FALL ON SNOW, POOR ROUTE SELECTION

British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains, Mount Abbott

On July 29, 1987, a party of three was traversing from Sapphire Col to Mount Abbott, a route that requires several ascents and descents primarily over broken rock and stepped ridges. The climbers had ascended the first summit from the Sapphire Col hut, and were descending the northeast slopes of the Dome (2700 meters) when they encountered a 50-meter snow slope. Two of the climbers avoided the snow by descending the adjacent rock.

The other climber (31) chose the snow route and quickly lost his footing. His attempt at self-arrest was ineffective, and he descended rapidly into rock. The slope had a surface covering of loose snow over hard snow and ice. One of the climbers descended the Asulkan Valley to report the accident to the Park Warden Service, who carried out a helicopter rescue. The fallen climber suffered a fractured femur with deformation at the hip. (Source: E. Dafoe, Public Safety Warden, Glacier National Park)

Analysis

Late summer snow on north and east aspects should always be approached cautiously because of the presence of hard crusts and melt/freeze ice. The rock route was the better choice. The heavy load carried by the climber probably increased the rate of descent once the climber had fallen. (Source: E. Dafoe, Public Safety Warden, Glacier National Park)

HOLD PULLED OUT, FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING UNROPED

British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains, Mount Sir Donald

On July 30, 1987, following a successful climb, a guide (30+) and his client moved camp for the ascent of the Northwest Arête the following day. After establishing camp, the guide set off to scramble and climb some steep, cliffy rock below the proposed ascent route. After he had ascended about ten meters, a large block pulled loose.

He fell among rocks and onto a steep snow slope. Once on the snow, he gained speed rapidly, cartwheeling downslope into rocks. The fall resulted in compound fractures of the tibia and fibula, and a closed fracture of the left wrist.

While his client descended for help, the injured climber covered his compound fracture and moved himself onto a ten-degree snow slope where a helicopter could land. The client reported the accident to a radio-equipped trail crew, and a helicopter rescue was carried out. (Source: E. Dafoe, Public Safety Warden, Glacier National Park)

Analysis

This accident illustrates the hazards of solo climbing, even by a person with a high degree of skill and experience climbing on relatively unexposed terrain. Climbing roped with a partner and placement of adequate protection would likely have resulted in a minor fall with no injury when the block came out. In addition, the climber was not wearing a helmet at the time, and could have suffered a serious head injury falling among rocks. (Source: E. Dafoe, Public Safety Warden, Glacier National Park)