CANADA

FALLING ICE–FALL ON ICE, POOR POSITION

Alberta, Banff National Park, Johnson Canyon Upper Falls

On January 19, J. G. was standing at the base of an ice pillar when a climber above dislodged large pieces of ice. One of the pieces hit her and she fell about ten meters down a slope, suffering a compound lower left leg fracture. One person ran out for help. J.G. was evacuated by heli-sling by Warden Service rescue teams.

Analysis

Standing under ice climbers is hazardous, particularly when one is on sloping ground and not tied in to an anchor. Falls on ice with crampons frequently result in lower leg injuries due to the crampons catching while sliding. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

INADEQUATE BELAY–CLIMBER LOWERED TOO QUICKLY

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Malign Canyon

On February 10, at 1600, a Jasper Warden was contacted via cell phone by B.C., who reported his partner had stabbed his right knee with his left crampon while being lowered after top-roping a climb. The Warden Service evacuated B.C. with a wheeled stretcher to the trailhead.

Analysis

His partner lowered the victim too quickly, and as a result, he caught his crampon on the ice causing him to spin and then stab his right knee with his left crampon. Belayers should always pay close attention to their partners while lowering, and the speed should be slow enough so the descending climber can safely negotiate the terrain s/he is being lowered over. Occasionally, a fast lower can result in the belayer completely losing control over the lower, resulting in serious injury or even death. (Source: Jasper National Park Warden Service, L.P.)

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

Alberta, Banff National Park, Louise Falls

On February 14, T.T. was leading the final crux pitch of this popular Grade 4+ ice climb. He placed two or three ice screws above the belay on the steepest part of the pillar, the last one protecting the exit moves onto a low angled section. He began to climb the final steep step, when he fell approximately 30 meters to the bottom of the pillar, bouncing off the low angled section and onto the lower angled terrain below the belay. He sustained an ankle and back injury in the fall. Two mountain guides were guiding clients nearby and lowered the injured climber to the base of the route. The accident was reported by cell phone to Banff Warden Dispatch. Warden Service rescue crews arrived as the injured climber reached the base of the route. He was then evacuated by heli-sling to the valley below.

Analysis

It is sometimes tempting to not place protection after the crux is completed. It is not known why the climber fell, but the distance of his fall may have been significantly reduced had he placed a screw on the low angled terrain between the two steep sections. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, L.M., T.T.)

FALL IN CREVASSE—POOR POSITION, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Athabasca Glacier

On March 16, D.S. and I decided to attempt a ski ascent of North and South Twin, despite the fact that the third member of our party could not come along. The year 2001 was a low snow year, but we felt it was reasonable for the two of us to ascend the heavily crevassed Athabasca Glacier since we had been there several times before without incident. The weather was poor on that early Friday morning, but visibility was sufficient to find a route up the glacier beneath Mount Snowdome. Trail breaking was hard with 30 centimeters of new snow, and the howling wind didn't help as we lugged our 60-pound packs up the glacier.

We reached the serac zone beneath Mount Snowdome at about 1000 hours. On our left was a thick maze of crevasses. On our right were the house-sized blocks of ice from the seracs high above. I chose a line as close to the crevasses as seemed reasonable, and we picked up the pace a bit to get through this dangerous section faster.

I suddenly sensed darkness, a complete loss of orientation, and the horrible realization that I was falling. I saw the bottom coming up to meet me…fast!

After what seemed an eternity, the rope stopped my fall. I slammed against the crevasse wall about five meters above a ledge. My heavy pack was killing me as I pulled myself upright and spent the next minute trying to control my breathing. To say I was freaked would be an understatement.

I took my pack off—not the easiest thing to do given that I had forgotten to put on a chest sling. Taking off the skis turned out to be quite a chore as well. I figured I was about 12 meters from the sunlight above. I was in a slot about 20 meters deep, 12 meters long and two meters wide. Wild ice sculptures at either end and above made me cringe. I could see that the reason I fell so far was because we had been skiing parallel to this crevasse. D.S. told me later he thought for sure he was going to follow me in as the rope zippered into the snow before his eyes. It stopped three meters in front of him.

It didn't take very long for the walls of ice to start sucking heat out of me. While moving uphill, I only had a few layers on to avoid overheating. Dangling in my harness, I couldn't get anything out of my pack. Above, D.S. had by now built an anchor and removed himself from the system. He followed the rope, started digging and knocked loose some of the overhanging ice sculptures. Fist-sized ice cubes came raining down. Why don't we wear helmets when ski mountaineering?! One chunk hit my left thumb, another my left shoulder. It was now impossible for me to climb with the prusiks.

D.S. and I tried communicating, but I could barely hear him and he couldn't hear me at all. Finally he determined to get help. Having only two people on