

Rolling with Rowland

Mark Rowland, Bear Valley SAR

I was a member of a four-person, volunteer, alpine, composite SAR team (two members from Santa Barbara County, one from West Valley SAR, and another from Bear Valley SAR) that was helicopter-inserted on Red Ridge (.86 mi, 235° true from The San Gorgonio summit) at approximately 16:43 UTC. We began working down the ridge toward the Vivian Creek Trail where our assignment was to

search the ridge between that drainage and the Mill Creek drainage to the south. Each member of the team had winter alpine packs/equipment/supplies, with helmet, ice axe, and crampons. The team had just stopped to regroup and talk, and was starting again. All of a sudden I slipped and slid approximately 400 ft. down the SW facing slope.



I suspect I'll never know what caused and how I accomplished my slip, mis-step, or whatever precipitated the fall. I just don't remember slipping, only that I was beginning to slide. My recollection is that one minute I was beginning to take my first step (from a stop) and the next I was sliding. I had not slipped, mis-stepped, slid, or had *any* trouble whatsoever with my footing prior to that.

"It's hard to imagine...the complete disorientation that occurred."

As I turned to arrest, my crampon(s) caught and I inverted, head downhill. I spun back around both to arrest position and so that my legs would hit fixed objects instead of my head. But I was bouncing off trees and stumps and going slightly airborne, so I was unable to arrest. My disorientation was surprisingly com-

plete. The following are possible causes for the fall.

- A weak or "soft" spot in the snow that collapsed under my weight. I'm skeptical of this theory.
- Being the first day this season on this type of slope, and starting up again from a stop, it's plausible that I "edged" my boot as you would without crampons (but *not* with them!). I'm receptive to this suggestion, but have no data to support or contradict it.
- Though I wasn't aware of it, it's possible that complacency contributed to the accident. We had had no trouble on the terrain, no equipment problems, and the slope was neither steep or icy enough to be intimidating, and should have been much easier to arrest on than some slopes I'd been above the previous week. I don't think there was any carelessness, but perhaps I wasn't "scared" enough, either. Just speculation.
- On inspection, there was no evidence to support equipment failure as a cause. On post-fall inspection, one tine on one crampon and two on the other were markedly bent, but these more likely occurred during the slide, not at its inception. (Coincidentally and ominously, that inspection also discovered two dents, a scrape, and crack in the helmet!) The crampons and ice axe pick had been sharpened the prior evening.

I believe that my training, certification, experience, amount of practice, equipment, and companions were more than adequate for the circumstances. It is plausible that currency of practice could have been less than optimal.

It's hard to imagine, without it happening to you, the complete disorientation that occurred, so I'm not at all sure of

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Rowland

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the order or chronology of the following, but I know that these, at least, occurred:

- I attempted to arrest and the pick hit a rock instead of snow, causing the axe to bounce back up against me,
- I caught a crampon and (of course) immediately (and violently) inverted,
- My ice axe was ripped from my hand,
- I hit several trees, some boulders, and was airborne at least twice,
- Once, I landed on my back, so, with my heavy alpine pack, I “turtled,” and it took another second or so to get back to a prone position,
- I saw imminent collision with at least one tree and leaned away to impact with my legs instead of head/torso,
- Team member, witness Mervin Tapsfield, reported, “I remember yelling for you to plant which you were trying to do. I am not sure why you couldn’t get a plant! James and John said that they saw you hit several trees on your way down.”

When I landed on the snow again after one of my airborne “episodes,” I realized that my hip had broken through the crust on top of the snow and I was “plowing” an inch or so through the snow. Surprised at reaching softer snow, I jammed my elbow through, as well. The combined increase in friction and possibly a slight decrease in slope gradient were enough to slow me down enough to risk planting my crampons. When I did, they held and I stopped.

I was hoisted aboard San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Air Rescue 7, flown to a nearby helispot, transferred to AMR ambulance, and transported to Loma Linda University Medical Center trauma center, from whence I was released shortly thereafter.

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Bobbin

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issue. As there is little uniformity of vertical training in the United States, people doing vertical are trained in a hit or miss fashion and the teacher’s own prejudices and misunderstanding is perpetuated. One project the Safety and Techniques Committee is working on is vertical training guidelines and recommendations, in the hopes of providing tools for people teaching vertical techniques. A good vertical technician will take the opportunity to try to understand their equipment, both in operation and theory. They will look to the leaders in the field for knowledge and guidance and will check with them before passing on potential misinformation. In this way we all can work to become better and safer while doing what we enjoy. I have no issue with using the bobbin style devices, but you can be sure that I will now be training people in the ways that it can fail, just as I train them in the ways any of their equipment can fail. Look for more information on failure modes in the near future. In the meantime, if you own one, experiment with it and see if you can reproduce these problems (in a safe environment, of course).

Editor’s Note

After discussing this article with a colleague, Paul Stovall, he sent me the following.

Little John (John Woods) and I were looking at the problem with the Petzl “classic” and “stop” descenders coming of the rope. It looks like the main no-no is do NOT use a quick link, use a carabiner. That’s all that needs to be done with the newer models but the older models with the metal gate need a little extra. After tossing around a few ideas I think John came up with the best suggestion, clip your short cow’s-tail into the remaining space just above the biner and that puts a stop to the thing coming off involuntary. 

Diagnosis was a shoulder sprain/impingement, neck strain, and multiple contusions, abrasions, and minor joint sprains. I was released to full duty immediately, but had minor medical follow-up and physical therapy for the shoulder injury.

Lessons Reinforced

- Practice, practice, practice. Self-arrest HAS to be instinctive and immediate. Momentary delay can be fatal. Who REALLY knows exactly what level of skills (or instinct) atrophy develops between the last trip of last season and the first one of this year?
- Similarly, the disorientation from inverting, tumbling, going airborne, and collisions with fixed objects prevents a calm, steady focus on self-arrest. You HAVE to stop before that starts.
- Make sure you practice arrest in realistic conditions (with appropriate safety precautions): full pack, extremely short stopping distance, really steep, really hard, etc. These long expanses of snow that give you plenty of time to think, plan, set up, and then arrest aren't realistic and don't cut it!
- Mental discipline is crucial (again!), persistence is important (as always), and resisting what seems to be inevitable can work.
- As Winston Churchill said: "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up! Continuing to look for ways and opportunity to arrest, even without the axe, eventually (though far from inevitably) paid off.
- Acknowledging that there is controversy and disagreement among the experts of the two schools of thought, I'm going to clip my axe to my harness on ALL slopes from now on. While this experience leaves me skeptical of your chance to regain your axe once it's ripped out of your grasp, At LEAST you can get it back again IF you get stopped without it while you still have function/cognition.
- Thinly covered slopes (also windblown) can have their own challenges, in this case hitting rock instead of ice/snow when trying to arrest.
- The difference between intellectually knowing these lessons and the complete incorporation of them into your subconscious and "instinct" can be the difference between life and death.
- There is absolutely NO substitute for dumb blind luck and the grace of God.

Classified Section

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