

Fall of Spanish Climber on Gasherbrum II, 2006

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On 2006-07-25 I witnessed a Spanish climber fall at 7700m on Gasherbrum II. Here are my observations and photographs.

Most of the text was originally published on Everestnews.com. The original text is currently found at <http://www.mfarris.net/stories/gasherbrum-ii-diary-2006/>. The main text was written immediately after return to Base Camp.

I have talked to Krzysztof Wielicki twice in my life, both in 2006. He came to our base Camp to thank me for helping with the rescue of his friend Artur Hajzer on Broad Peak in 2005. The second time we spoke was on the day of the accident.

I was an independent climber sharing a permit with other climbers. On 2006-07-25 I left Camp 3 at 0130 and the sky was perfectly clear and the air was warm. Near dawn I arrived at Camp 4 (7400m).

The next 300m of ascent was an easy snow climb with a long traverse. I reached a flat area where I cached my down gear and stove. It was warm, perfectly clear, and with no wind. Another 100m up snow took me to the base of the final long snow slope to the summit (~7700m).

The situation before the fall. Spanish climber (in red) at 7700m on Gasherbrum II. Krystof Wielicki, his partner, and the Spanish climber who fell are above.



The track goes up the slope above in a series of switchbacks: first right, then left, then right again. Two people were sitting at the first switchback (Polish), one was below me (Spanish), and one was at the top left. I'm climbing up to the right when I see a red flash above. The top climber (Spanish) had fallen and was cartwheeling down the slope. I stared directly into his eyes as he spun by only feet away from me; he was protecting his head and I realizing that I was absolutely unable to help. Somehow he landed on the only level patch of snow in the whole area. I yelled to his partner below to come up, and all of us converged on the fallen climber, afraid of what we would find.

The general line of the Spaniard's fall and his landing place. Foreshortening makes it difficult to see the starting point. Taken from the summit ridge (~8020m) of Gasherbrum II. Climber: Nick Rice. Other climbers are visible to the left of the words 'Camp 4.'



The climber was conscious, could move his limbs, but very quickly it was clear that he had a sore neck and was having trouble staying awake. The two other climbers were Poles, including the leader Krzysztof Wielicki. He yelled, "Here you go again, Mike, another rescue at 7700m."

We had no rope, tents, or stretcher. If the fallen climber had serious injuries there was little we could do to help. I was afraid of skull/neck fractures, brain trauma, or internal bleeding (I am not a medical doctor). Krystof used his radio to talk to his team at Camp 4 and asked for a tent, sleeping bags, and doctor to be sent up from Camp 4. The uninjured Spaniard was on the radio with his doctor. It was about 1300 when the Poles descended.

Krystof Wielicki, his partner, and the uninjured Spanish climber after the Spanish climber fell. Krystof had completed his radio call at this point.



Should I stay with the Spaniards, go down, or go up? I told the victim's companion that there was nothing we could do medically. So I would go on to the summit and stop on the way back and aid as needed. Even a skilled physician would only be able to describe what happened to the victim if he had internal injuries.

The remainder of the climb up the snow was in a well-packed track, the snow almost perfect in its hardness. There were no ropes (the Koreans had removed their ropes, but not all of their trash). Then there were ropes so I clipped in. There was one curious rope. I finally saw that the sheath was gone and I was hanging on the inner core only.

I finally reached the summit at the late hour of 1545, and was joined soon after by Nick Rice (USA). It was still warm and sunny.

On descent I stopped at the 'rescue tent' and the victim looked much better. I could offer no aid, and my down clothing was cached below, so I descended to Camp 3.

I was told later that the Spaniard descended with the help of his teammates and was flown off to Skardu.

The Polish team deserves all credit for getting resources to 7700m as fast as possible.

Notes added in 2018

I have participated in rescues on Kanchenjunga (North Face, 2002), Broad Peak (2004, 2005), and K2 (2008). I would not change any decisions made on that day in 2006. When I visited the victim after my summit (at approximately 1700) he was responsive and much improved. The temperature was warm, skies were clear, and there was no wind. He was in no danger from rockfall or icefall. I cannot recall if his Spanish climbing companion was with him in the tent. I assumed the tent (and other supplies) were from the Polish team since no new Spanish climbers were present (as I recall).

Given the situation:

- Unknown injuries (including possible head, neck, and spine injuries)
- Excellent weather
- No icefall or rockfall danger
- Not extreme elevation (~7700m)

Then conservative approach (applied here) of having the victim remain in place was correct until either:

- 1) a medical doctor confirmed that the victim could walk down safely, or
- 2) sufficient equipment and climbers were available to accomplish a difficult evacuation down a long snow traverse and the descent of the rock slopes below Camp 4.

On my descent I saw no evidence of the Spanish team though they must have been on the mountain. If additional help was needed, nobody in my Base Camp was informed.

I was not contacted at Base Camp or as a result of my post on Everestnews.com. If there were any issues, the Spanish team could have contacted those of us involved very easily.

I have added the photos below since they were taken during this episode. I have no photos of the tent or other items brought up to aid the victim.

Spanish climber after his fall. The equipment he dropped is just visible in the upper center (see next photo).



Looking up the final ridge of Gasherbrum 2 from 7700m. Gear dropped by Spaniard on right.



Spaniard after his fall. The ski pole belonged to a different climber; the very short technical axe was being used on descent by the victim.

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Part of the long traverse from the accident location to Camp 4.

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