

Rescue from the Goldberg Glacier

by Elkie Kammer



High up on the glacier - Christian Raab

After a lapse of 6 years (when I was too busy establishing mycroft in the Highlands), I returned to Austria this summer for my 13th hutting tour. Unfortunately, the clouds were hanging low, while I was trekking from Badgastein to the Niedersachsen hut and the following day I tackled the steep exposed ridge to the Zittelhaus on the Sonnblick. The third day looked no better and with very poor visibility it was not surprising that, heading for the Duisburger hut, we lost our way on the glacier and instead of reaching to the Nedere Scharte, we found ourselves stuck somewhere near the top of the Windischer Kopf. After a scary descent and traverse over loose scree and shifting boulders, we finally stood at the edge of the glacier again with a steep snow slope vanishing into the mist. I was first to step onto the snow with Chris, my Austrian companion, still dithering behind me. As soon as my second foot touched the slope, I lost my balance and began to slide.

It's amazing how decades of mountaineering training kicked in automatically. Not carrying an ice axe (according to the guide book it wasn't required), I made sure to stay upright on my bottom, feet outstretched and careful not to brake too hard with my crampons, which would have toppled me upside down. When my right foot suddenly struck a rock, I knew at once that it was broken. After about 150 metres I finally came to a halt. Taking a deep breath, I turned to Chris, shouting: "My foot is broken!" to let him know that I was alive and conscious. Then I kept going by using my good foot and my arms to push myself forward until the terrain flattened out. I knew it was important to get off the snow to avoid hypothermia.

Chris miraculously got down unscathed. When hopping with his help didn't work, I crawled on my knees to reach the moraine. I finally found a flat boulder where I could rest, while Chris went for help. We agreed to blow our whistles if he had difficulty locating me again. I knew not to open my boot and only took my crampons off to prevent them from snagging on anything. Then I put a couple of layers underneath me, wrapped myself in my foil blanket and leaned against my rucksack. Due to the shock, I hardly felt any pain.



Elkie on the stretcher - Christian Raab

Sooner than expected, Chris was back with a member of the Mountain Rescue whom he had met in the nearest hut. He, too, knew the protocol, asking questions to make sure that my brain was working properly, whilst wrapping me into a thermal blanket and giving me a drink and a power-bar, before stabilising my injured leg with a makeshift splint. At the same time he was on the radio organising the evacuation. Since the clouds were too thick and the terrain too steep for the helicopter to approach, he called for a stretcher team. They arrived quickly and lost no time putting me into a Gamov-bag with an insulation mat on top and strapping it on to the stretcher. With military precision the 8-man team carried the stretcher across the

moraine and manoeuvred it down the steep snow, changing hands for greatest efficiency and staying in close contact with the helicopter.

When we arrived at the spot where the helicopter could land, they all covered me with their bodies against the down-draught of the blades, until it was time to push the stretcher in. I would have liked to thank each one of my rescuers personally for their extraordinary effort, but they were left to gather their equipment and make their way down on foot. The helicopter briefly landed in the valley to pick up a medic, who accompanied me to the Tauern Klinik in Zell am See. When the staff there took my boot and sock off, they all stared for a minute. I could only throw a glimpse at what was supposed to be my foot and kept asking: "Can you fix it? Is it going to heal?" Eventually one of the doctors nodded. "I'm sure you'll walk again."

By Helicopter to the Tauern Klinik - Christian Raab



The x-rays showed several broken and splintered bones and a severed tendon and somehow the lower part of the foot had moved at an unnatural angle to the upper part. I reckon the impact with the rock at full speed must have been shattering and it didn't help that the foot was subjected to further jolts before it was possible to stabilise it. The operation took place immediately and was followed by 5 days of excellent care and treatment at the Tauern Klinik. The ÖAV AWS insurance couldn't have been better in organising repatriation to Inverness with paramedic escort.



After the operation - Christian Raab

They also directly took care of the invoice from the helicopter company, saving me additional worries during my weeks of recuperation. I'm very grateful for all the help and kindness I received and hope that one day I will be able to finish the tour in less inclement weather.