

Squaw Valley woman barely survives falling through snow into water

By Marek Warszawski, McClatchy-Tribune

There was no time to react. One instant, Marcia Rasmussen was walking on snow. The next, she was engulfed by icy water and being swept downstream.

“There was no way,” says Rasmussen, the tone of disbelief in her voice still fresh. “I didn’t hear the ice crack or groan. No way. It all happened amazingly fast.”

It was a sunny and warm June afternoon at Mineral King, the glacial valley in southern Sequoia National Park in California. For the 51-year-old ultramarathon runner from Squaw Valley, it was one of her usual training jaunts.

Running and hiking alone, Rasmussen was on her way back to the car when she came to the spot where the Farewell Gap Trail crosses Franklin Creek on a snow bridge.

Snow bridges are a common sight during early summer in the Sierra backcountry, formed when snowdrift fills in the opening around a creek. This one appeared sturdy. In fact, Rasmussen had thoroughly checked it out before crossing without incident on her way up. She even carried an 8-foot-long branch with her for safety.

“It felt very firm and was about 4 feet thick,” she says. “I poked at it with a stick, to see if it had softened any.”

Rasmussen was about two-thirds of the way across when the section she was walking on gave way. She remembers her head going underwater, gasping for breath and feeling helpless as the current carried her over a small waterfall and farther

down the snow tunnel.

After about 40 feet, Rasmussen managed to grab onto a bush. It took all her strength to pull against the current and drag herself out of the water.

“There was an alcove just big enough for me to stuff my body into,” she says.

Cold and shivering, Rasmussen took a minute to gather herself. Her decades of experience as a mountaineer one who used to teach search and rescue courses in Virginia taught her not to panic. Despite being trapped beneath several feet of snowpack, she knew she was lucky to be alive.

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