

MILD HYPOTHERMIA, DEHYDRATION, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT AND WATER

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On May 31, 1993, at 1620, SAR site member Eric Rasmussen, who was near the base of El Capitan, heard cries for help from unidentified climbers on the Nose. Heavy rain had been falling most of the day in Yosemite, with the snow level around 8,600 feet. Rasmussen reported his finding to Rick Foulks at the SAR cache, who called NPS dispatch. Park Rangers Mike Hansen and Mary Littel had been involved with an earlier overdue report from the same route and were also taking an initial report of an overdue climber descending from Sentinel Rock. Rangers Hansen and Littel drove with SAR technician Mark Ingram to El Capitan Meadow with size-up gear. I finished taking the Sentinel overdue report and went to the SAR cache, where I was assigned to be IC for both SARs.

The team at El Capitan Meadow was able to determine that two male climbers were uninjured, but wet, cold and unable to stay the night at their Camp 5 bivy ledge, approximately 800 feet below the top of the cliff. They requested ranger assistance.

NPS planned for a major SAR. Incident command positions were assigned. At 1703, Rescue 2 helicopter was placed on alert at Naval Air Station Lemoore and dispatched at 1720. Park contract helicopter 51 was called in to El Capitan Meadow to ferry rescuers and gear and SAR site was paged out. Three teams were flown to the top of El Capitan to place fixed lines.

Helicopter 51 was then free to fly the Sentinel Rock descent gully. At 1927 the earlier reported overdue climber was spotted having difficulty with an injured leg. He was rescued using Lemoore's Rescue 2 helicopter.

From the top of El Capitan SAR site member Tom Rorges was lowered to the climber's location with dry clothes. The two climbers were in good enough condition to be able to jumar the fixed lines to the top and arrived about 2300. They were given dry clothes, sleeping bags and a tent for the night. At 0711 on June 1, Helicopter 51 flew the climbers to El Capitan Meadow. They were then driven to the SAR cache.

Analysis

These two experienced climbers (ages 28 and 33) were short on adequate gear. The introduction to Meyers' and Reid's Yosemite Climbs is entitled "Staying Alive," and says, among other things:

(1) Never rely on cotton or down (even if covered with one of the waterproof/breathable fabrics. A warning: several climbers have blamed the waterproof/breathable fabrics for their rescues or close calls. They claim that no version of it can take the punishment of a storm on the walls. Whether true or not, you must be the judge; test this type of gear ahead of time under miserable conditions, but where you exit is an easy one.

(2) For sleeping ledges, take a big tent fly or a piece of heavy duty, reinforced plastic and the means to pitch it. (Source: Greg Maguder and John Dill, SAR Rangers, Yosemite National Park)

FALL ON LOOSE ROCK, WEATHER, PARTY SEPARATED

California, Yosemite Valley, Sentinel Rock

On May 31, 1993, at 1630, John McMillan reported his climbing partner, Ian Johnston (27) overdue from descending Sentinel Rock. After climbing the Chouinard/Herbert

route on Sentinel, they spent the night at the summit. They had split up on the descent when the gully became very cloudy. With virtually no visibility and in a rain storm, Johnston preferred to wait until the storm passed and visibility became better. McMillan descended alone to Yosemite Valley. At 1630, he became concerned and notified NPS.

As Both Helicopter 51 and the NAS Lemoore helicopter were available after completing a mission on another SAR, Helicopter 51 with two spotters flew the descent route looking for Johnston. He was discovered partway down the descent route, and indicated he had an injured ankle. Once his condition and position were determined, the Lemoore helicopter was used to evacuate him, as they had both rappel and hoist capabilities currently lacking with Helicopter 51. Lemoore was able to hover close enough to Johnston that he was able to board the aircraft without resort to rappel or hoist evolutions.

I interviewed Johnston later. He indicated he was unable to negotiate the steep, loose terrain with his bad ankle. Johnston slipped and injured his ankle about 100 yards prior to reaching Sentinel Creek, and attempted to continue on. He was only able to take three to four steps at a time. In addition, he was thoroughly wet and cold after spending most of the day in a rainstorm. Given his physical condition and the difficult, hazardous terrain required to evacuate him, it is felt that both Johnston and rescuers would have been put into unwarranted dangers by attempting a ground evacuation in the dark. (Source: Michael D. Lalone, SAR Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

(Editor's Note: One cannot help but question whether an injury as minor as a sprained ankle warrants the risk and cost involved in the use of a helicopter under these conditions.)

FALL ON ROCK, PLACED INADEQUATE PROTECTION, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, TRYING TO LOOK GOOD California, Donner Summit, Nova Express

On June 16, 1993, I was attempting to lead a route which I had tried twice before but had never led. I've been climbing two full seasons, but have just started leading on pro. My climbing is relatively strong, but choice and placement of gear is still shaky. Because I knew the route, my gear was run out too close to the ground. I placed my first piece at 20 feet. It was bomber. Second piece was about 35 feet. I was comfortable at that point, but because the crack was shallow and facing, I could only get two cams of a #1 camalot to hold. At this point, knowing my second piece was bad, I made the decision to keep climbing to about 50 feet, where I knew there was a bomber placement. I placed the gear, but in trying to clip became extremely pumped. Finally, after two attempted clips and dropping the rope both times, I let go. The camalot at 35 feet broke as soon as it was weighted, and I was on the ground before my first piece had a chance to do any good.

Analysis

First of all, don't be afraid to "sew up" a crack. I was more worried about looking good to other climbers in the area. Though this was my fifth day of climbing that week, and I had been climbing very well, I had a bad feeling about the climb before I even started, so listen to your sixth sense; it very well could save your life.

Though I suffered a broken back, a shattered pelvis and other assorted injuries, I