

halfway off the horn and stop. He was reaching for a nearby handhold when the sling came all the way off. He fell 20-30 feet down a chimney and landed on a small ledge.

He immediately knew he was injured. Both his ankles and his right hip hurt and he could not bear weight on his legs. The anchor sling lay nearby, still around the rope, so he retied it around a nearby chockstone and rappelled/slithered on his good side down to Schifferdecker. From there he was able to rappel the final pitch to the ground, where he waited while Schifferdecker went for help.

Schifferdecker reported to the NPS at about 1400, and the first rescuers reached Comstock about an hour later. He was packaged in a full-body vacuum splint and carried a mile down to the road. X-rays at the clinic showed fractures of the right side of his pelvis, the left ankle, and both heels.

### **Analysis**

Comstock had been climbing frequently for 16 years and led 5.9. For the last ten years he had averaged 40 expedition days/year. Schifferdecker had been climbing for 8 years and led 5.9-5.10.

Both climbers agree that the compression force of the loaded sling slid it off the point of the horn. They feel that a longer sling would have stayed in place since those forces would have been less. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger)

## **STRANDED, MISPERCEPTION—ROUTE RESEARCH, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, CREATING A HAZARDOUS CONDITION**

### **California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan Zodiac**

On Sunday, June 10, Dan McOmer (26) and Curt Chesney (25) fixed three pitches on the Zodiac (Grade VI) on El Capitan, and checked the forecast—clear and mild through Thursday. They started up for good on Monday, planning to summit late Wednesday and looking forward to good weather the whole way.

This was Dan's first trip to Yosemite, although he'd climbed long routes elsewhere. For the Zodiac he brought one layer of fleece tops and bottoms, Goretex bibs and jacket, a pile hat, uninsulated gloves and socks, a Goretex bivy sack, a -20° F down sleeping bag with nylon shell, and a Fish portaledge with a 4-season fly.

Curt had climbed the Zodiac two years before and several long routes elsewhere, including mountaineering routes in winter. He brought one layer of expedition-weight fleece, Goretex jacket and pants, fingerless hunting gloves, cotton socks, no hat but the hood on his jacket, a Goretex bivy sack, and a +20° F synthetic sleeping bag. His ledge was an A5.

Each brought a Grade VI haulbag and five days of food and water, but they left their foam pads behind.

The bags were heavy and the hauling on Monday took longer than expected. A party fixing behind them on Sunday caught them and passed—with permission—costing them more time. By Tuesday night Dan and Curt had finished nine pitches, leaving seven to go and putting them behind schedule.

Wednesday was cloudy and much colder, forcing them into long pants for the first time. Curt had caught a cold; he was shivering and feeling miserable. Although they no longer expected to finish that day, they still hoped to get within a couple of pitches of the top. Nevertheless the going was slow, and they had managed just two pitches when they got hit with wind and rain in the afternoon. After finishing the Zorro roofs they set up

their bivy in the rain and stopped climbing early. As one put it, "I was paranoid about being half-way through a lead and not being able to get back down in time to stay dry if it opened up." They had a fairly comfortable bivy.

Earlier that day they had watched parties bailing from other routes. With the weather so threatening, Dan and Curt were worried. They didn't think they could rappel the Zodiac, had no cheater stick or bolt kit, and figured they were committed.

The weather improved that night but looked bad again Thursday morning, and they knew they had to move fast if they were going to get off. It was raining by the time Dan started up the 13th pitch, to Peanut Ledge.

Dan: "I was in my Goretex. I was getting a bit wet but nothing major, and I was warm enough. Halfway up the pitch was a funnel with a waterfall. I thought if I climbed through it the belay would be sheltered. But the water ran down my sleeves and I got soaked and cold, to the point that no amount of will power could have gotten me up that pitch. I didn't even know if I would be able to get back down to the belay. I was so miserable I just wanted to stay right there.

"I got lowered and we set up our ledges in a hurry. It was hard, desperate, because the ledges were smacking into each other and getting tangled, and because I was so cold. I was kind of panicking at that point and wasn't as careful as I should have been. I'd been climbing with everything on and was wet through to the skin. I've never been so cold as I was then—I couldn't use my hands to work with knots. I got into my bag with all my wet clothes and my shoes on, just trying to warm up in a hurry. I knew it wasn't the best thing to do but there was no possible way I could undo my shoelaces and take my clothes off—I didn't have the dexterity. So my clothes got the inside of my bag terribly wet.

"That's when the wind really hit. On one side of the fly there's a drawstring; in the wind it was worthless. I had the cord pulled in and wrapped around my hand. The wind was lifting my ledge off the ground and slamming it back and I couldn't hold on to my fly. It would rip up and I kept getting colder and colder.

"Everything meant to be waterproof was taped or seamsealed, including the fly. It had only had four or five nights of use and had been in a stuff sack the last six months. This time, in the rain, I could see splotches on the fly, as if it had de-laminated. Big drops would hit these areas and come right through, but roll off other places like they were supposed to.

"Water was coming through to the point that I had a puddle in the bottom of my ledge. I tried to brush it out with my hands but I had to hold on to my fly. I thought about poking holes in the floor to let it drain but thought the ledge would rip apart. I also considered tipping the suspension to drain the water but didn't want to, the way the wind was knocking me around.

"A big gust would come up; I'd be holding on to keep my ledge steady and my sleeping bag would come down from around my shoulders into the pool of water. So water would get inside the bag continuously, even with the bivy sack. I was soaked to the bone, had nothing dry to put on, just getting colder and colder." Curt: "I had no leaks—my ledge was dry—but I just couldn't get warm. All I could do was lay in my bag with the hood tight and the bivy sack closed. I had bought a shorter sleeping bag to keep the weight down; I ended up ripping out the shoulders trying to move around. I had stuff sacks, knee pads, shoes, as much stuff under me as I could get. I couldn't lie on the ropes because they were soaked. I knew I was dehydrated and hadn't eaten all day, but to eat I had to get out of the fly and dig in the haul bag. It was too cold and I just wanted to lay there and shiver."

They talked about their options. Even if it was sunny on Friday, the pitch above would

remain impassable from runoff. If they ever did make it to the top they'd still have to negotiate the East Ledges, while even weaker than they were now.

They debated whether and when they should call for help. They were close to the top and still physically able to jumar out, but Curt felt he might be incapable of moving by the next day; the longer they waited the more complicated and uncertain a rescue would become. Neither wanted to say the R-word, but Curt finally said, "I don't know if I can make it. Let's just call."

About 1530 they yelled down to a climber walking along the base. Although the forecast was bad and the rescue team was looking at a long hike and a stormy rescue the next day, the weather broke at 1830. They were able to fly to the top of the route and lower a rescuer 400 feet to the bivy. Dan and Curt were on top by 2000.

### Analysis

Being held up by other parties, climbing more slowly than expected, and an "unpredicted storm" with rain, cold, wind, and waterfalls are all common occurrences.

Suggestions. Check all your equipment thoroughly before the climb and don't go up with anything substandard. Dan made sure the seams of his fly were sealed, but simply assumed the fabric was OK since it was fairly new. He feels the coating may have been defective. After the climb it was peeling off like a snake shedding its skin. He's not sure he would have noticed it in a preflight inspection, but certainly a forced bivy is not the place to find out. Defective materials occasionally get into even the most carefully made products, so be alert.

Carry a cheater stick and bolt kit, and find out what it takes to back off your particular route. The Zodiac has been reversed from at least the ninth pitch. Dan and Curt had read this only a month or two before but had forgotten it.

Carry enough insulation for sitting still, while wet, in sub-freezing temperatures. This means all-synthetic clothes and sleeping bags, rated for at least 0° F when dry. A single layer of fleece under Goretex is inadequate even if you are completely dry, as Curt discovered.

Foam pads are important in any cold bivy, but more so in a portaledge, because cold air is blowing directly up underneath you. They would have made a big difference for Dan and Curt, but "our Grade VI bags were completely full and we thought this was ridiculous—it looked like we were doing a two-week route. We didn't want to look like gomers, so out came the pads."

Unless you're wearing a swimmer's dry-suit, or you're sure you can get off, don't try climbing in cold rain or waterfalls. Dan may have been able to ride out the storm if he'd gone under cover while he was still dry, even with that fly and his limited insulation.

Take seriously what you read. The conditions described are real, and every mistake has been clearly articulated in print several times (see below), yet almost every hypothermic climber we've rescued in the last few years has ignored the advice. Dan and Curt had read everything, "But when we were packing in the meadow and it was 80° F, some famous big-wall ace could have come up and said, 'Take your damn coat, take your foam pad...,' and I'd have said, 'Get out of my way, I've got a wall to climb.'"

Do not depend on a rescue. Only a lucky break in the weather got Dan and Curt off that night. And don't let the brief description of the rescue downplay the expense, risk, and difficulty involved.

Dan: "I'd said before, 'I'm never going to get rescued. I'm not going to put anyone else's life in danger just to save my sorry ass.' It was easy to talk the talk, but when the chips were down, we were just scared to death."

Dan and Curt were found guilty of disorderly conduct (creating a hazardous condition for themselves and others) 36CFR 2.34 (a) (4), and ordered by the court to pay \$500 each to the park's rescue fund.

### **FALL ON ROCK, HASTE—TRYING TO STICK TO A SCHEDULE**

#### **California, Yosemite Valley, North Dome Gulley**

On July 6, Dave Bedell (34) and Matt Niswonger finished climbing the South Face of Washington Column and bivouacked on the summit. Early the next morning they headed for North Dome Gulley. Bedell had descended this way previously, staying close to the Column and making several rappels. They were late for a meeting this morning so, after a couple of rappels, they decided to walk further east along a ledge system in hopes it would be faster.

They soon came to a steep, smooth, granite water course several feet wide. Niswonger climbed up 100 feet or so to a less precarious crossing. Only thin streaks of water coated the rock, so Bedell figured he could cross right where he was, without a rope, by stepping in the dry spots.

Somehow he slipped, went down, and started sliding. After about 100 feet, he went over a 15-20 foot drop and landed on his butt in a shallow depression that stopped his fall. He had tried to lead with his feet the whole way, but he was nevertheless knocked out when he hit. He regained consciousness about ten minutes later, just as Niswonger reached him. Sharp pains ran down his back and legs. His legs tingled, and it hurt to breathe.

Niswonger found his way down to the phone at Mirror Lake and contacted the Park Service at 0900. Two rangers helirappelled to the scene at about 1000, and a ground team arrived shortly thereafter. They immobilized Bedell in a vacuum body splint, gave him oxygen, and shorthauled him under the park helicopter to the Yosemite Clinic. He was then flown by AirMed to Doctor's Medical Center in Modesto, where he was diagnosed with compression fractures of vertebrae L1 and T12, as well as fractures of the right 11th and 12th ribs and several deep bruises. He has made a full recovery.

#### **Analysis**

Although you can go a number of ways, the common route down North Dome Gulley follows a trail (make that a goat path) that traverses fairly high—but below the rim—and crosses the water course well above where Bedell fell. In dry conditions no rope work is necessary.

It is interesting to note that several years ago, another climber died at the same spot trying to cross the water course at night by matchlight. (Source: Cam Sholly, John Dill, NPS Rangers)

### **FALL ON ROCK, EXCEEDING ABILITIES**

#### **California, Yosemite Valley, Nutcracker**

On July 1, Paul Bennett (41) and Randy Kanta were climbing the Nutcracker, 5.8, on Manure Pile Buttress. Bennett led the last pitch; he climbed the low-angle slab off the belay, placed a nut in the steep corner, then climbed to the mantle, where he fell.

His protection held, but he struck the slab ten feet below feet first. The moment he hit he felt his ankle go. He tumbled over, stopped upside down, and when he looked up he saw that his ankle was bent 90° to the side.