

trail to the top of Castle Dome, they descended a snow couloir, attached to each other by webbing tied to their belts. (They wore no harnesses and had no ice axes.) One fell, bringing down the other.

During the fall, Ian's belt released and he continued to tumble 300 feet to the creek drainage. He suffered a fracture to the lumbar vertebrae and a punctured lung. He spent the night out and was then rescued by the Highway Patrol helicopter and flown to Mercy Mt. Shasta. John Stafford stopped in a moat 80 feet below the fall and died of head and spinal injuries. His body was recovered by Climbing Rangers and a helicopter.

### **Analysis**

Although the couloir itself is not technically difficult, the lack of appropriate climbing equipment, as well as the vertical exposure, added to the danger.

It should be noted that the helicopter rescue and the recovery were very dangerous. (Source: Eric White and Matt Hill, USFS Climbing Rangers)

## **WEATHER, EXPOSURE, FAILURE TO TURN BACK**

### **California, Mount Shasta**

Early Monday morning April 10, Craig Hiemstra (38) and John "Zippo" Miksits (45), both experienced climbers, set out from the Bunny Flat Trailhead in beautiful weather to climb Mt. Shasta via Cascade Gulch. John and Craig had never climbed together before. They had made acquaintance at the trailhead with two other climbers, who then went with them. Their first camp was in Hidden Valley.

April 11 brought more beautiful weather, with a slight increase in winds, and both groups made their next camp at Lake Sisson, in a sheltered depression at the Shasta/Shastina saddle about 11,500 feet. That afternoon the winds increased, but nobody was alarmed. John mentioned the high, thin clouds he had been noticing, and Craig responded that the barometric pressure had remained constant and stable for the past four hours. Agreeing that there was no need to worry, the pair made plans for a 1:00 a.m. departure for the summit. The other two climbers decided that a summit attempt was out, due to their limited technical expertise, and that a ski descent from the saddle would be their plan for morning.

When they went to sleep, the temperature was around 25 degrees F, winds were around 35 mph, and the moon was visible through a thin layer of clouds. The winds continued throughout the night and the moon soon became disguised. Dawn brought whiteout conditions and winds up to 65 mph through the saddle.

On 12 April at 8:00 a.m., the two climbers who remained at the saddle received a radio call from John: "We are descending from summit, are at 11,900 feet, but can't find camp. Can you call the weather service and see if this is going to stick around."

The two at the saddle agreed and scheduled to make radio contact again in 20 minutes. Upon attempting to reach John and Craig after that interval, they received no response, nor did they ever again establish contact, despite re-

peated attempts. The pair remained at the saddle as long as they could, then descended because the high winds were starting to rip apart their two-season tent, while continuing attempts to contact by radio.

John and Craig were reported missing on April 13 when a check of the Bunny Flat Trailhead revealed that John's vehicle was still in the parking lot. A major search operation ensued, involving two California Guard Blackhawks, US Air Force Pavehawk, USFS CWN Bell Jet Ranger, and CHP A-Star. Over-the-snow vehicles and skiers were used on the days when weather conditions made flying impossible. On April 15, Craig's body was discovered without gloves or ice ax at an elevation of approximately 10,300 feet in Cascade Gulch. Injuries were consistent with a headfirst fall in soft snow (fractured cervical vertebra), and death had been instantaneous.

On April 19, during the search for John, a California Guard UH-60 Blackhawk crashed at 11,600 feet near Cascade Gulch, just below the Shasta/Shastina saddle. The helicopter rolled at least once and came to rest on its side, yet those on board—four Guardsmen, a reporter, and two Climbing Rangers—sustained only minor injuries. The party descended together through clouds to a helispot. The Guard crew and reporter were evacuated later that day by another Guard Blackhawk. The Climbing Rangers skied out to Bunny Flat through hazardous avalanche conditions, continuing to search.

John's body remained buried by snow and undiscovered until the Memorial Day weekend, when we found his remains at approximately 11,500 feet on the north side of the saddle. Subsequent autopsy revealed a dislocated wrist, pulmonary edema (associated with either the altitude or the terminal stages of hypothermia), a heart condition, and the probable cause of death was listed as hypothermia. Seventy-five feet above John's body, a meager bivouac site was found. Buried by almost two feet of snow, and almost directly beneath John's body was most of their gear, including water and food, packs, wands, and Craig's gloves and ax, laid out in an organized fashion. The sleeping bags and cooking gear were gone, however.

### **Analysis**

Although there has been much speculation, we will never know for certain exactly what happened up there after the last radio contact. We do know that John and Craig were hit by an extremely violent and prolonged winter storm with winds in excess of 60 mph, which dropped two feet of snow in 24 hours, and which, by the end of the search, had deposited over six feet of new snow on the mountain. The presence of Craig's body in Cascade Gulch suggests that he may have been on his way to get help for John, and suffered a fatal fall.

The fact that John and Craig had never climbed together previously should also be noted. While we will never know if this was a contributing factor in this accident, knowledge of your partner, and of yourself, in critical situations, can sometimes make a difference in the outcome.

The bottom line is this: In the high mountains, even ones we are familiar with, there is but one season: Winter. When a big storm moves in, circumstances can rapidly compound into a potentially fatal situation. High winds,

zero visibility, and heavy snowfall all can combine to disorient and incapacitate the most able climber. Add a physical problem like an injury sustained in a fall or AMS, HAPE or HACE, and the odds rapidly mount against us. Preparation and awareness are our closest allies against those odds. I miss my friend. Be careful out there! (Source: Bruce Binder, friend of victim and searcher. Report reviewed by other search volunteers: E. Holland, M. Golay, J. Burns, J. Huber, J. Keeney, and Dave Nicholson, Incident Commander)

## FALLING ROCK

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

On April 24, Cam Lawson (30) was leading the 6th pitch of Iron Hawk, a Grade VI route on El Capitan. This pitch starts on the big ledge from which the El Cap Tree grows. Jason Kraus (29) was belaying from the ledge, using a GriGri clipped to his harness. He was clipped directly to the bolted anchor with his daisy chains.

After scrambling up a 4th class section, Cam made several hook moves on loose rock, then he placed some pieces to reach a crack system below a 15-foot roof. He placed a cam behind a big expanding flake, and when the piece shifted under his weight, he yelled to Jason to be "heads up" because of the unstable rock. A minute before, Jason had removed his helmet to adjust his headband and wipe the sweat from his forehead. When Cam yelled, Jason reached for the helmet but fumbled it, and it fell onto the ledge, out of reach.

Cam placed another piece behind the same flake; when he weighted it, a slab about 1x6x13 feet broke away from the flake, releasing Cam and his uppermost pieces. The falling slab hit a small ledge 20 feet above Jason and burst into fragments.

Jason saw everything coming his way and reached for the brake-end of the rope, but he only had time to hunker down close to the anchor and cover his head with his free arm. He remembers being hit by at least three pieces, roughly the size of softballs, before he was knocked unconscious. When he awoke a moment later, he was hanging from his daisy chains, unable to move his arms or legs, but he recovered in less than 30 seconds.

One of their ropes was shredded by the rocks, another was cut in a few places, but the third was unscathed. The lead rope was severed five to ten feet behind the GriGri, but the device had done its job, engaging the rope automatically and stopping Cam after he had fallen 20-25 feet. He had only minor scrapes and contusions on his lower right leg where the loose flake had hit him while he and the flake were falling together.

Jason tied the good rope onto what was left of the belay rope and lowered Cam to the belay ledge using a Munter Hitch. By rappelling on single lines and passing knots, they were able to get themselves and their gear to the ground.

The rocks had missed Jason's head, but not his neck. X-rays at the Yosemite clinic and later at home showed that he had suffered a chipped spinous process on a cervical vertebra and a compression fracture of the T-7 vertebra. Nevertheless, he was back climbing within a couple of months.