

safety plan. Once behind schedule, we just tried to catch up. In fact, we had no explicit plan for bailing once the climb began. Without criteria for retreat—dark clouds on the horizon, etc.—we kept moving up until fleeing in either direction was equally risky.

In the final analysis, we got into trouble because we raced for the summit instead of retreating. All other considerations—forecasts, rain jackets—were secondary. Preparation is important, but no substitute for intelligent analysis of the developing conditions.

Brad's and Richard's first aid training may have saved my life. Brad was not sure if I had actually stopped breathing, so he played it safe. If there is any uncertainty, do not waste time—properly done, assisted breathing will not hurt your patient.

I would like to sincerely thank Bojan and Wolfgang for remaining at the summit to help in spite of the obvious danger of staying. Without their aid things would have been a whole lot uglier. My eternal thanks!

Months later, I still remember very little about the strike. Oddly, I think that makes me the lucky one. The true victims are the people who do remember: Brad and Richard, worrying if I would survive the day; my family, receiving the late-night call; my girlfriend, upon whom I placed tremendous demands during my recovery. As we take risks with our own lives, we risk a part of the lives of all those who love and care for us. I still climb, but I do so with a new and profound respect for everyone emotionally tied to the rope with me. (Source: Andrew and Brad Betts, and John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

*(Editor's Note: Mother Nature chose her targets with a sense of humor: Four are electrical engineers and one is a computer science pro.)*

## **FALLING ROCK— DISLODGED, NO HARD HAT, POOR POSITION**

### **California, Yosemite Valley, Sentinel Rock**

On June 27, Jim Corpus (44) and Mike Penner (45) climbed the Steck-Salathe route (15 pitches, 5.9) on Sentinel Rock. They summited at sunset, took a break, and started looking for the 3rd class descent gully after dark. Despite having headlamps, they had trouble finding their way and wound up descending slabs on the south side of the gully, where they encountered lots of loose rocks.

About midnight, halfway down the slabs, with Jim 100-150 feet ahead of and below Mike, Mike's foot dislodged a 5-10 pound rock. He yelled, "Rock!" and listened as it bounced down the face, and then called for Jim, but got no response. He scrambled down the slab and found only a headlamp where Jim should have been. Beyond the lamp, patches of blood led another 150 feet downhill to where Jim lay, unconscious and bleeding from his scalp. He was just two feet short of a 40-foot cliff that probably would have finished him off.

Mike: "After several minutes Jim started mumbling, and his level of consciousness improved slowly but considerably through the night. Immediately after the accident he couldn't process what had happened, asking the same questions over and over: 'Where are we? What happened? Is this real? Got any water?'

“I didn’t apply pressure to Jim’s wound because touching it was intensely painful to him. After awhile I decided that he probably wasn’t bleeding severely, despite the initial amount of blood. I was sure he’d suffered a severe concussion, possibly a skull fracture, and he was in shock. I got him into his jacket, put my jacket over his legs and a rope underneath him and made him as comfortable as possible without moving him much.

“I couldn’t find anchors and I wanted to keep him from rolling off the ledge we were on, so I just sat next to him all night holding him in place. I wasn’t sure of the way out, anyway, and the light from my headlamp didn’t allow me to see a safe way down.

“As it began to get light, I was able to improvise some anchors and tie him in. By this time he was more lucid and really wanted to get to a more comfortable position, but I didn’t want him to. When dawn arrived I could see where we were and where we were supposed to be and took off for help.”

Mike reached his vehicle—and his cell phone—at about 0830 and called the NPS. While a ground team scrambled up the descent route, a helicopter from Naval Air Station Lemoore searched from the air; the crew spotted Jim and rappelled two Rangers and a Navy crewman to him. He was alert by this time, though still complaining of dizziness. They immobilized him as a precaution against spinal injury, and the helicopter hoisted him out shortly after 1100.

X-rays at the Yosemite clinic showed no fractures. Because of his head injury, he was helicoptered to Doctors Medical Center in Modesto for further tests, but was later released, with only a severe scalp laceration and minor cuts and bruises.

### **Analysis**

Jim and Mike are both very experienced climbers. They were not far off route, but even the correct way down that gully is a potential bowling alley. When you cannot see the rocks coming at you and your ability to dodge them is restricted, it is usually best to stick close together.

Mike: “I know descending can be more dangerous than ascending, and I’ve always been extremely careful with rappels. I never expected such an accident on a walk-down, but loose rock is a danger wherever you find it.

“We didn’t have helmets. The rock that hit Jim might have knocked him out or off his feet even if he’d been wearing one, but a helmet surely would have lessened the damage and the risks.

“In retrospect, we should have just bivouacked on the summit. We’d been climbing all day without much water and ran dry before the top. It was a pleasant night and there are some nice sandy spots there, but we were thirsty and were lured downward by the crashing of Sentinel Creek. Ironically, the medics did not allow Jim even one sip of water until he was cleared of internal injuries in Modesto the next afternoon!

“My advice for Sentinel climbers: If you top out at sundown, have a seat. Don’t lose the route on the walk-down, and keep your helmet on till you hit the Four-Mile Trail.

“Months after the accident, three thoughts stand out: First, it’s remarkable

how lucky we were. Aside from the fact that the rock or the tumble down the slab didn't kill him, it's a miracle that Jim stopped short of that big drop. Second, we were lucky to be in Yosemite, because the job the NPS and the Navy did was truly impressive. Finally, the time that passed between dislodging the rock and finding Jim alive was only a minute or two, but it was the most horrifying moment of my life." (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)  
*(Editor's Note: For more about rockfall, see CA incidents on 4/24 and 8/12 in this issue of ANAM.)*

## **OFF ROUTE—FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT AND PROTECTION California, Yosemite Valley, Royal Arches**

Welsh climbers Dan McDonald (20) and Peris Roberts (20) started climbing Royal Arches (17 pitches, 5.9) at 1130 on August 1. The route was well within their abilities, and they finished it with no problems, reaching the patch of woods at the end of the last regular pitch at about 1830.

While looking for the 3rd class exit to the rim—a scramble up and left, then a few easy moves through summit overhangs, their attention was drawn to an obvious path descending to the left. They followed it until it dead-ended on the cliff face at the base of a slab that appeared to lead to the top. They decided to try the slab, so Peris put Dan on belay. Dan was expecting 3rd class and this looked easy, so he did not bother taking protection along or changing back into his climbing shoes.

He climbed 10-15 feet of loose 5.6-5.7—harder than he had expected, then he fell when either a hold broke off or his feet slipped. He grabbed a two-inch-diameter bush that he had used climbing up, but it came out by the roots. He took a sliding fall of about 20 feet, stopping in some tree branches ten feet below Peris. He realized right away that he had dislocated his shoulder, but nothing else seemed to be injured. He was secure where he had landed, so Peris took him off belay, scrambled down to him, and tried, unsuccessfully, to get his shoulder back into place. It was now about 1930, and an hour of daylight remained.

Dan was able to belay, so Peris took over the lead. He climbed another ramp up and left, toward the falls from Royal Arches Creek, but this was also harder than 3rd class. He did not think Dan would be able to follow, so he turned back. They considered having Peris solo up the ramp he had just explored and go for help, but they were almost out of daylight. They chose, instead, to stick together, stay where they were, and signal for help.

They tried shouting and whistle blasts in groups of three, with no luck. Finally, after several hours, they managed to alert someone on the Valley floor by using their lone flashlight and the flash on their camera. At midnight, Rangers contacted them with a loudspeaker from the base of the cliff.

Two NPS rescue team members started up the Royal Arches route at 0045 on August 2 and reached Dan and Peris an hour and a half later. They helped Dan up the correct Class 3 route to the rim and made camp. In the morning he was flown out by the park helicopter, and his shoulder dislocation was reduced at the Yosemite clinic.