

because I was getting way too cocky with my climbing. I definitely got a BIG slap in the face.

Obviously once you are out there—on trail or off—you have to use your own judgment every step of the way. The advice from Graham's friends may have been correct, but it was insufficiently detailed to keep him on track in such rough country, and he had actually wandered off route.

A map will sometimes help, but it, too, will lack the necessary resolution. Also, if you are going to put a rope in your pack, take the gear to go down it safely. Add to this some prusiks and lightweight foot loops for ascending your line again if you find yourself at a dead end. Graham would hardly have noticed the weight of this gear in his daypack, and it would have been far cheaper than all those helicopters and hospital bills. Tenaya Canyon has been the scene of many strandings, injuries, and fatalities, all involving parties without the skills and/or gear for the terrain. (Source: Graham and John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

(Editor's Note: While not a climbing accident, this is a good example of a hiking situation that turned into a climbing problem.)

FALL ON ROCK, RAPPEL ANCHOR FAILED

California, Yosemite National Park, Cathedral Peak

On July 2, Aaron (28), Mark (48), Chad (28), and Brian (49) started up the West Pillar of Eichorn Pinnacle (five pitches, 5.9 or 5.10b). Brian was unable to manage the first pitch, so he chose to wait at the base while Aaron, Mark, and Chad finished the route. After climbing the first pitch and starting the others decided that rather than keeping Brian waiting, they would rappel off, join Brian, and go cragging elsewhere.

Aaron stopped halfway up the second pitch, established an anchor, and brought up Mark and Chad. The anchor was built from his own gear, so he was reluctant to leave it behind when they descended. He spotted a cluster of slings about 25 feet further up the pitch and climbed up to a small ledge just below them, for a look. He found three slings sticking out of a finger-crack, with a screw link and a carabiner attached to them. They had almost certainly been set up and used for rappels, and from what he could see, they were in good condition. He spread the slings apart and peered into the crack. The slings were wedged so deep that he had difficulty seeing the exact layout, but they appeared to be tied around a constriction where the two sides of the crack seemed to come together. He built a temporary anchor of his own a couple of feet below the slings and clipped himself to it. Backed up by that anchor, he rigged his ropes through the link and the carabiner on the slings and bounce-tested the slings as though he were on rappel. They seemed solid, so he decided to use them to anchor the party's first rappel. He pulled his temporary anchor and, with the slings as his rappel anchor, rappelled 25 feet to rejoin Mark and Chad at their belay.

From that point they would need to make two rappels to the ground. The first would be anchored through the slings above, so Aaron left the ropes in place. Mark was eager to rappel first and set up the next station. He got on

rappel and worked his way out a few feet to the right of the route, flipping the ropes to the right as he went, to keep them out of the main crack. As Mark descended around a corner and out of sight, Aaron turned his attention to other chores. A minute later he heard a “pop!”, like a gunshot, up at the rappel anchor, and a yell from Chad. Aaron turned around to see Mark fall to the ground, 250 feet below, followed by the ropes and the anchor slings.

Brian, a physician, was waiting at the base and scrambled over to Mark. He noticed immediately that Mark had suffered fatal trauma and was without a pulse. He tried CPR nevertheless, but realized the futility and finally gave up.

The ropes had hung up on the cliff 120 feet below Aaron and Chad, but Aaron was able to climb down to them by protecting himself with cams on long slings and back-cleaning as he went. He rigged an anchor and rappelled to the ground, where Brian confirmed that Mark was dead. Aaron then climbed up to Chad, with Brian belaying, and made sure that Chad got down safely. Then Aaron hiked out and notified the NPS. Rangers recovered Mark’s body that evening.

Analysis

When examined by the NPS on the afternoon of the accident, the rappel slings and hardware were intact—no broken or untied slings. An NPS team climbed to the site of the failed anchors the next day and examined the crack, but they were unable to determine exactly where and how the slings had been rigged. They did find one constriction in the crack that at first appeared to be a complete closure, however a more careful inspection showed it to be open enough that an anchor built there could fail. The team did not have the original rappel slings at that time, so they were unable to try to recreate the original anchor. Aaron had not been sure that the slings had actually been arranged as he remembered them, and other rigging possibilities existed at the site, based on dimensions of the slings and features of the rock. Aaron also remembers that there was a horn above this point just out of view that could have been used as well.

Aaron had noticed no movement as he tested the slings, but Mark weighed over 200 pounds and he may have added extra stress to the system as he flipped the already-loaded ropes to the right. Directionality may have been a factor, but any change in direction at the rappel slings due to Mark’s movements should have been fairly small, given his distance below them. Both Aaron and Mark had been climbing for years and certainly knew how to rig anchors and how to rappel.

Of course we can advise that all rappelling be done gently, but much more important is that the anchor be secure. Every anchor must be completely inspected visually. If you can’t see the whole anchor, that’s where the problem is apt to be—rock-abraded, rat-chewed, loose knot, false constriction, etc. Second, don’t hesitate to add a sling of your own. In the case at hand, a horn two or three feet above the anchor would have accepted a sling as a back up. Finally, don’t assume that an anchor is safe just because other

parties have used it without incident, even if recently. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

STRANDED—OFF ROUTE, WEATHER, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Tuolumne Meadows, Fairview Dome

On July 27, Randy Popkin (46) and his son, Cameron (16), climbed the Regular Route on Fairview Dome. They got to the base at 7:00 a.m. to allow plenty of time for the route, but a party of four was already there. Waiting for the larger party to clear the second pitch cost the Popkins 45 minutes, and then another hour on the third. The party of four ultimately pulled ahead, but the Popkins then lost more time allowing a faster party to pass. Randy and Cameron were having no problems with the technical difficulty of the climb, but they were getting a lesson in the realities of a long and popular route.

Finally, high on the face, where the route traverses to the right to the final fourth-class pitches, they missed the turn and continued straight up. By the time they realized their error and had rappelled back to their previous belay, another 45 minutes had gone by. By now it was nearing dusk, and Randy knew they would not get off. They reached the fourth-class section and ran up it as fast as they could, but they had no lights, and darkness stopped them 100 feet from the top.

The forecast had been good—no storms in sight—and the day had been excellent, but clouds began to build up in the late afternoon. At dusk it began to rain and hail, with lightning in the distance. Randy was somewhat protected with light nylon pants and a fleece-lined Goretex jacket, but Cameron had only shorts and a cotton long-sleeve sweatshirt. Luckily the precipitation never became heavy, and they found a decent ledge with an overhang that allowed partial shelter.

Their water and food had lasted all day, but now it was gone. They did, however, have a Family Band radio, and Randy's wife—who had already notified the NPS that they were overdue—was able to contact them from the road at about midnight. Randy initially figured they would sit it out, but he changed his mind when he realized that Cameron was getting cold.

The Park Service was also concerned that a second thunderstorm was forming, so they sent two members of the rescue team to the top of Fairview. They were able to rappel to the Popkins and belay them to the summit. Everyone walked out to the road a little before 6:00 a.m., just as the sun was coming up.

Analysis

Both had been climbing indoors and outdoors for the last two years and consistently followed 5.10. Cameron was not yet leading, but Randy had led a dozen or so single-pitch climbs at the 5.9 level. Neither had done a multi-pitch route without a guide, but a guide familiar with Randy's progress had suggested that he was ready to lead Fairview. The guide felt Randy was