

FALL ON ROCK—RAPPEL ANCHOR FAILURE

California, High Sierra, Palisades Region

On May 29, Dan Kipper (54) and Warren Buettner (65) started from Glacier Camp and ascended the Palisade Glacier to the V-Notch. Their objective was to climb the V-notch, ascend Polemonium Peak, traverse over to Sill, and then descend back to camp. Snow and ice conditions, however, were not ideal. Fresh snow impeded the approach, and conditions on the V-Notch were crusty junk over blue ice. Dan did all the leading, as Warren was not at all comfortable on technical ice. Their progress was slow. They didn't top out until almost five o'clock.

Due to the late hour, they decided to forego Polemonium and Sill and head back down after taking a much-needed lunch break. They searched for the descent gully between Sill and the V-Notch, but couldn't locate it. They settled upon a gully that they knew was not the correct one, but one which looked like it would get them down to third-class rock after two or three rappels. (This gully is one gully north of the normal descent). They set up a sling anchor around two big horns; Dan went first and Warren followed. This got them to a ledge, where it looked like one or maybe two more rappels would get them onto third-class and then the glacier. However, when Dan tried to retrieve the rappel line, the rope jammed. They pulled on it for some time and finally gave up. Tying into the rope on a self-belay, Dan hauled himself back up a steep blocky face about forty feet high. There was a ledge here and he was able to free the ropes from this spot.

At this point, Dan said that he was setting up another anchor so that he could rappel back down to Warren. From there, he said, he was certain they could reach the third-class section with one more rappel. Warren waited several minutes in silence. Then Dan hollered, "Rope!" and threw down the ends. A minute or so later, Dan told him he was coming down. According to Warren, there was no sign of stress or concern in his voice. Then suddenly he heard him shout, "Oh no!" and Dan came plunging down, rope and all. It was a long fall—approximately 1,000 feet, to the bergshroud. Dan was killed instantly.

Night was setting in and with no rope or gear, Warren bivvied on the ledge. He yelled for help for some time but finally gave up. He could see Dan's body way down the glacier. He said it never moved. In the morning, he finally gathered enough courage to pick his way down the blocky face, convinced he was going to fall to his death at any moment, and eventually reached the glacier. He went down to Dan's body and stayed there with him for quite a while. Then he got up and hiked out to call the sheriff.

During the body recovery, it was noted that Dan's rappel device was properly attached to the rope and harness. A single sewn runner was looped through the top of the rope, suggesting that the sling had been cinched around a block or flake and had somehow popped free. Also, Dan's rappel device was a foot or so

from the anchor point, suggesting that as soon as he leaned back and weighted the line, something immediately gave way. One possibility is that the block or flake that Dan had slinged peeled off when he leaned back. Warren indicated that no rocks come crashing down on him when Dan fell.

On Monday May 31, 2004, volunteers of the Inyo County Sheriff's Search and Rescue team, assisted by C.H.P. helicopter H-82 from Apple Valley, recovered Kipper's body. He was flown off the glacier and released to the Inyo County Coroner's Office.

Analysis

Both climbers were tired at the end of a long day and ready to get down. Dan was known as a meticulous and safe climber. We'll never know exactly what happened, but it appears that when he slung the block, the sling slipped off when he weighted this anchor. Given his experience, it is hard to say how he might have made such a simple but fatal mistake. We can say that it is always a good policy to set a backup anchor while testing the primary rappel anchor prior to rappelling. (Source: Dave German, Inyo County SAR)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Tuolumne Meadows, Lembert Dome, Northwest Books

On July 15, Amit Singh (27) fell while climbing the third pitch (rated 5.9) of Northwest Books on Lembert Dome. He had placed a cam just above the belay and had started to climb the difficult section. Ten feet up, he placed a #5 nut and continued to climb another five to ten feet. He told me (park ranger) he had difficulty at the top of the crack, that he was struggling to hold on and place gear.

His partner, Anthony Baraff, said Singh struck his head and went unconscious for about 15 to 20 seconds. Singh could not remember what had happened. Baraff yelled for help and in about 15-20 minutes nearby climbers responded and went for help. Park rangers from the SAR team rescued Singh.

Analysis

These climbers had about two years of experience, mostly in the Gunks and mostly sport climbing. They were just starting trad climbing and said they were comfortable leading 5.7 to 5.8 routes.

The most important lesson here is that they were wearing helmets. (Source: George Paiva, Yosemite Valley SAR Ranger)

FALL ON ROCK—INADEQUATE PROTECTION (CLIMBER AND BELAYER), NO HARD HAT

California, Yosemite Valley, Church Bowl, Bishops Terrace

After work on July 28, Ric Sedlak (20) and I, Amy Painter (21), headed for the Church Bowl to climb Bishops Terrace (one pitch, 5.8). It was Ric's lead. He could follow 5.11, but he had just started leading traditional routes