

happy there wasn't anything worse! (Source: From a letter sent in by Mark Puleio, mountain guide.)

(Editor's Note: Cannon Cliff is the rock formation where the New Hampshire State symbol USED to be. The famous stone profile known as the Old Man of the Mountains exfoliated last summer. Spontaneous rockfall is a common phenomenon and one of the inherent risks for climbers.)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION FAILED

New York, Shawangunks, Boston

On November 6, a climber (53) fell about 30 feet from the crux of Boston (5.4+ or 5.5, PG). A cam placed two or three feet below the point from which he fell failed (broke). The next pro was at about 15 feet and was too low to keep him off the ground.

He had placed two pieces of protection at ten to 15 feet (at "the triangle"). He and the group spoke about that being the last good place to put in gear before the off-width and that a ground fall was a serious concern past that point. He then climbed the off-width and into the good stance below the crux. He placed the cam below the crux, started to climb into the crux, reversed to the comfortable stance, and extended the cam with a runner. He was struggling with the crux, and a partner provided some beta based on his having climbed the route recently, so he switched to a lieback, still struggled, then fell. He hit the ground on a loose rope.

His climbing partners and two EMTs who were on a nearby climb gave assistance immediately. He was put on a stretcher and evacuated quickly and taken by ambulance to St. Francis Trauma Center. He was unconscious though breathing when he arrived at the hospital, but died without regaining consciousness three days later.

Analysis

I think there are two main points to be learned about cams from this accident. First, the degradation of performance of all cams in a placement such as this—in an uneven, nubby crack in hard rock—is probably much greater than most climbers believe. Second, this is especially true of cams made of die cast aluminum because the material is weaker to begin with and much more brittle. I don't think any manufacturers in the U.S. or western Europe currently manufacture cams of die cast aluminum, but there are still lots of them around on climbers' racks. Climbers should probably get rid of them, or at least be aware that they are much less forgiving of non-standard placements than are modern cams made of 7075 or other similarly strong and ductile aluminum.

Someone would do the climbing community a favor by documenting the breaking strength of four-cam units when only two cams on the same side are holding. This would be a "standard, non-standard" test. (Source: Mark Nord)