

Weissner route with a friend and a professional guide when the accident occurred. She was preparing to climb the third pitch of the route and was attached to a set of anchor bolts when a 10- to 12-inch diameter rock was dislodged by a party climbing approximately 300 feet above her. The rock struck her in the helmet, left arm and left ankle, causing multiple injuries, including several broken bones. Sander's guide provided initial care and was lowered with Sanders 200 feet to the base of the route by another climbing party. Rangers and other climbers then packaged and lowered her in a litter through another 100 feet of vertical terrain. Sanders was then flown by the Rapid City Regional Lifeflight helicopter to Rapid City, South Dakota. (Source: Scott Brown, Chief Ranger)

### **Analysis**

Climbing on the Devil's Tower brings with it an inherent risk these days. It would have been easy to add "poor position" as one of the contributory causes here, but that's the point. It's hard NOT to be in the fall-line here. Nevertheless, climbers must take even greater care to avoid causing rocks to fall. This is as important a skill to learn as all other climbing techniques. (Source: Jed Williamson)

## **FALL ON ROCK**

### **Wyoming, Grand Tetons, Cloudveil Dome**

On July 1, about 0630, Heather Paul (34) and Susie Schenk (38) departed from Lupine Meadows with plans to complete a traverse of Cloudveil Dome from the South Fork of Garnet Canyon. When they arrived at the Meadows of Garnet Canyon, because of ambient conditions they re-considered their plans to traverse Cloudveil Dome and instead decided that they would climb the South Teton. Since the ascent of the South Teton was essentially non-technical, they decided to stash their gear (rope and technical climbing equipment) at Garnet Meadows. They put on their mountaineering boots and then proceeded into the South Fork of Garnet Canyon.

When they arrived at a location below Cloudveil Dome in the South Fork of Garnet Canyon, they decided to complete the traverse of Cloudveil Dome after all, and ascended the Zorro Couloir route (which is actually on Spalding Peak to the west of Cloudveil Dome) to gain access to a col to the west of Cloudveil Dome. The ascent was essentially a snow climb and the condition of the snow was "soft, but not too soft—great for kicking steps." They arrived at the summit of Cloudveil Dome around 1230.

They then proceeded to scope out and down-climb the East Ridge Route of Cloudveil Dome in order to complete the traverse and return to the South Fork of Garnet Canyon. On a previous occasion, Heather had descended the East Ridge Route, which involved low 5th-class climbing,

unroped. Susie was concerned because they had left their climbing gear and rope below in the Garnet Canyon Meadows. They decided to continue down the East Ridge Route with the alternative of ascending back to the summit of Cloudveil Dome and re-tracing their steps back down the Zorro Couloir in the event that they became uncomfortable with the East Ridge down-climb.

They were very comfortable down-climbing the East Ridge until they came to the second set of rappel anchors. (The first and second set of rappel anchors are sometimes used to descend the route using ropes when route conditions are poor, and/or by less experienced climbers.) The route-finding and down-climbing “got a little bit tricky.” They were scoping out the route: Susie was checking down and to the right and Heather down and to the left. Heather told Susie that “this way looked good—doable—good handholds.” Heather had good handholds, a good right-foot placement, and appeared to be fishing with her left foot for a foot-hold when she suddenly popped off and slid down a V-shaped corner. She hit a ledge feet-first a short distance down and plummeted off backwards (perhaps due to the weight of her backpack) down to a snowfield and out of sight. She was wearing a climbing helmet.

A significant SAR operation ensued, involving about 25 National Park rangers and Forest Service heli-tack crewmembers. One team of rangers climbed to Susie, who was in distress, and assisted her to a heli-spot where she was flown to the Lupine Meadows SAR Cache. Another group of rangers climbed to Heather’s location and, after determining that she was deceased, flew her to the Lupine Meadows SAR Cache, where she was transported to Jackson.

### **Analysis**

Heather Paul was an avid climber, mountaineer, skier, and world-class athlete. Why this tragic event ever happened and whether a similar event could be prevented in the future merits discussion.

When the two women left from the Lupine Meadows parking area early that morning, they planned on a west-to-east traverse of Cloudveil Dome. When they arrived at the Meadows of Garnet Canyon, they had a change of mind because of conditions, stashed their rope and technical climbing gear, and headed for the non-technical South Teton. Shortly thereafter, as they approached Cloudveil Dome, they had another change of mind and decided to attempt their original itinerary (but without the rope and technical climbing gear).

Did this indecisiveness contribute to the final outcome? Given the fact that mountaineering is not a static event, their change of plans based on existing environmental conditions demonstrated experience and knowledge

of the mountain environment. Mountaineers should set a goal and define a specific itinerary to accomplish that goal, but they should also be willing to dynamically adjust to the environmental conditions that present themselves. Their decision to climb the South Teton and then to climb Cloudveil Dome via the Zorro Couloir as they originally had planned reflected changing environmental conditions and sound judgment.

Did stashing their technical gear and rope, and then proceeding with their original climb, contribute to the final outcome? When Heather and Susie arrived at the base of Cloudveil Dome, specifically the start of the Zorro Couloir, they encountered ideal snow conditions: the snow “was soft, but not too soft, great for kicking steps.” Under these conditions, the placement of technical gear and use of ropes most likely was not necessary. Most climbers with their level of expertise probably would not have taken the equipment and rope from their pack. To the contrary, use of the gear and rope on the Zorro Couloir would probably have slowed them down considerably and subjected them to dangers such as falling rock and avalanche that often occur as the day progresses and ambient temperatures increase.

Did not having a rope on the descent of the East Ridge contribute to the final outcome? Heather and Susie were both highly competent mountaineers and well within their comfort level while descending the ridge. They also had a “fall-back plan” to re-trace their route and down-climb the Zorro Couloir should they become uncomfortable with their descent. Up to the moment when the accident occurred, they were comfortable with their descent. Although the route-finding had become “a bit tricky,” consider Heather’s last words: “This looks good—doable—good handholds.” Under these circumstances, I doubt that the rope would have ever left their pack. Most climbers of their ability level, and even of lesser ability, down-climb the East Ridge route without a rope. Why? When mountaineers begin an ascent of a mountain, they do so with the understanding that there are many inherent risks involved that necessitate a balance between moving quickly through the mountains and doing it safely with the use of technical gear. (The use of ropes and gear may prevent a fall, but they slow your progress and expose you to falling rock and avalanche for greater periods of time.) If Heather and Susie had had a rope and had used it, certainly the tragic event would not have occurred; however, as noted above, I doubt that the rope would have ever left their pack and the outcome would have been the same.

Because of this, I see no flaw in Heather’s and Susie’s decisions throughout the day. They made these decisions based on a profound understanding of the mountain environment, balanced with their ability level. They were comfortable with their descent up to the moment of the accident. (Source: George Montopoli, Incident Commander)