

in a stretcher, splinted her injuries, and carried her out to the road so she could eventually be taken by helicopter to the hospital.

“The weather was so bad you couldn’t even look up to see if they were rappelling with her because of the ice coming down and the rocks and debris coming down,” said Capt. Tim Bingham of the Riverside County Fire Department. (Source: Edited from an article by Christian Berthelsen in the *Los Angeles Times*)

LOST IN THE DARK

California, Yosemite, Half Dome

In late September, Aloysius “Apple” Leap (25) and I (Chris Tomasetti, 23) made our first trip to Yosemite for a week and a half of climbing. We’d been climbing pretty intensively for 3-4 years at a good standard, though no big walls. We had the idea we were going to do the Nose and the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome on this trip. First we tried El Cap, sharing bivies and some gear with two other friends climbing as a separate party. When they decided to retreat, we forgot to have them leave the community poop tube behind. The next morning we rummaged through our haul bag looking for a substitute, but when we couldn’t find anything, we reluctantly bailed, too, and set our sights on Half Dome.

We planned to hike up Thursday afternoon, October 2, sleep at the base, and allow two full days on the wall with a bivy on Big Sandy Ledge along the way. That would give us time to work the hard pitches and free the whole thing, but at noon on Thursday we discovered that the weather forecast had changed. It now called for a storm to hit at midnight Friday, which would catch us on Big Sandy. We had a quick conversation: We were leaving the park Sunday, so this was it: We either do Half Dome in a day and risk getting caught near the top by the storm, or we go home with nothing big to show for the trip, just some cragging. We decided to climb it in a day and not try to free it. We would do a little aiding through the bolt ladders and French free other moves as necessary. Starting at 0500 Friday would have us off by 1700-1800, we thought, or roughly 12 hours.

We took the slab route from Mirror Lake, got to the base of the wall around sunset, and were on the route by 0500 as planned. We left our sleeping bags and bivy sacks at the base. Underneath our climbing pants and shirts we wore synthetic tops and bottoms, and we stuffed fleece jackets, warm hats, rain jackets, and rain pants into our pack. We didn’t bring mittens or gloves, but we did have helmets, headlamps, walkie-talkies (for windy pitches), Apples’s cell phone with a good battery, and enough food and water for a day. We brought only one rope, a 70-m, but we had a big rack, figuring if the weather got bad we could rappel off, leaving gear behind.

We'd done our homework regarding the route, and the climbing went well—super smooth. We freed a lot of the pitches except for some of the cruxes. The rock was dry, but the clouds rolled in before sunset and I climbed the Zigzags in heavy fog, unable to see 30 feet. We finished at 2100, a total of 16 hours, a little behind schedule. Unfortunately the storm arrived earlier than we expected, and a mix of rain and snow began ten minutes after we topped out. We hadn't researched the descent; we only knew we had to go down the cables and then some steps—about 900 vertical feet of rock, in all—and that was it. We didn't know whether to go left, right, or straight ahead, or in what compass direction, and we didn't have a compass anyway. I think our mindset had been, 'It's just a hikers' trail, it can't be that bad.' It was dark and foggy, and despite our headlamps, we couldn't find anything.

We kept trying to follow little piles of rocks, thinking they were cairns marking the trail, but they weren't, and they took us in circles. It was really confusing. So we walked around for a couple of hours, trying to figure out what to do, and then it dawned on us that we had a cell phone. We weren't actually sure who we were going to call. We had buddies in Camp 4, but we didn't have their numbers, and we never thought to call 911. Finally we found in Apple's pocket an empty matchbook with the Yosemite Lodge number on the back.

We had a conversation with each other: "Should we call?" "Well, you can call, but I don't want to call." "Do we have any other choice, man?" "Well, you call, man, it's your phone." Calling for directions was not the thing we wanted to do, but it was either that or walk in circles all night, and we figured a hint or two would be all we needed.

The number on the matchbook was disconnected but it told us to dial a different number. I had Apple remember the last four digits and I remembered the first three. We dialed and told them what was going on and they connected me to Katie, the NPS dispatcher. I told her where we were and she asked if we had a compass or a GPS device. Of course we had neither, but at one point the fog lifted briefly and I could see the lights of the Valley, so I said, "If I'm looking at those lights, where should I go?" She replied, "Over your right shoulder, the cables are in that direction." We were totally turned around, absolutely lost. We couldn't even find where we had topped out. The time was about 2330.

We got off the phone, wandered around for another 15 minutes in the fog and rain, and sure enough, found the cables. They were slightly covered with ice by now and really cold on our bare hands. Upright stanchions held them off the ground as handrails, so we clipped our daisy chains to the cables with locking carabiners. That way a stanchion would stop us if we fell.

It took us a while but we eventually got down and found that the cables

ended in a little saddle. We knew the cables led to steps but didn't know a saddle separated them, or how far apart they were—another surprise.

Once again we wandered around, couldn't find the steps, and had no idea where to go. So we called Katie back. "Where are these steps, we can't find them". She said, "If you're standing in the saddle with the cables to your back, you have to go up over the little hump and down and slightly to the left."

(Ranger Dill notes: Chris and Apple were talking with the right person. Katie had spent three seasons patrolling the Half Dome trail and had seen just about everything.)

Visibility was now down to 15-20 feet. It was still precipitating, a little heavier than a drizzle, but our rain gear was keeping us dry except for our hands. The wind was sporadic, at first none, then a strong gust forcing us to stop moving and turn our backs to it. We'd stay relatively warm if we kept moving, but it was pretty cold if we stopped. My backup plan was to walk in circles all night if we'd got stuck up there. It would have been a long night but we'd be OK.

We followed Katie's directions. We walked quite a ways and almost found the steps on our first try. We were looking at a tree that later turned out to be right next to the steps, but in the fog and rain and with only our headlamps we thought, "This can't be the steps. If we walk down there, we'll be at the very edge and we'll fall off. Let's err on the side of caution and back off here." We couldn't tell if it just got gradually steeper or the world ended in a shear drop 20 feet ahead. We probably could have explored on belay but we didn't think of that. Maybe we were stuck in hiker mode.

So we talked to Katie again and she eventually transferred us to Kevin, the ranger who now had Katie's old job patrolling Half Dome. We got him out of bed in his camp a few miles down the trail and he was actually thinking of coming to get us, but we had just found three or four steps all by themselves in the middle of nowhere, and now Kevin had an idea of where we were. Over the phone he walked me down the slab another couple of hundred feet until we hit the final steps. By now it was about 0100.

We knew we could find the trail in the woods to get back to the bivy. We were kind of ashamed that we had to call and it would have been worse if Kevin had had to come for us. "You don't have to come out," I said. He asked us to call him when we got back to the bivy, but our cell phone had died by then. The clothing under our rain gear was still dry and so was our bivy gear. The feeling was, "Thank God! I want to crawl into my bivy and never come out." In the morning it was still slightly drizzling and we didn't want to go down the slabs, so we went back up to the shoulder and followed the hikers' trail to the Valley. We were pretty embarrassed for the first month or two.

Analysis

Chris's comment, "It's just a hikers' trail..." hit the bull's-eye. Even the climbing guidebooks devote no more than a brief phrase to this descent, but everything changes in the dark and the fog. Information is readily available: The standard 1:24000 USGS maps, Google Maps, SuperTopo, and lots of trip reports on the web show the trail to the summit in enough detail to get you headed in the general direction when you top out. Chris is right again stating that a compass is valuable, but it needs to be paired with a map, whether on paper or accurately stored in your brain.

Never trust what appear to be cairns in Yosemite or other national parks. (*Editor's Note: They are invaluable in some locations, such as the White Mountains in NH.*) The NPS does not construct them, and they often lead nowhere. When it gets down to searching by Braille in the fog without falling off the end of the earth, then it's time to rope up. This is not just for safety, but also for navigation. Leave the belayer in one spot as your reference point and explore in an arc. Even when not roped up, it helps to explore from a point you can always go back to; this is standard advice for hikers anywhere.

Chris confessed, in hindsight, "Looking back, it was a foolish decision to try the climb under the circumstances, but at the time our trip was coming to an end, and we didn't want to leave the Valley without achieving one of our objectives." The decision to climb in view of the forecast wasn't necessarily foolish, but going with marginal ability to escape or to survive an injury stranded on the wall in the predicted conditions was cutting it close. They were pretty well prepared for the dark and the weather they actually encountered, but they would have been better off with a few more items, such as warm/waterproof gloves, one more warm body-layer, and a second, light-weight rope for full pitch rappels.

Everyone goes light these days, but October is storm season, and the summit of Half Dome, at 9000 feet, is not the Valley floor. If this storm had hit them a couple of hours earlier on the wall and/or if it had been just a bit colder, they would have been in a far worse predicament. That's a lot of "ifs", but consider this: On October 3, 1994, at 2200, it began to rain in the Valley. By the time the storm cleared, we had rescued 13 climbers from El Cap, and Half Dome looked like Greenland. It all started on the same day of the year and one hour after Chris and Apple reached the top. (You'll find that case in ANAM 1995.)

This isn't the first time climbers have called for directions from the Half Dome summit and not the only place descent confusion occurs. See, for example, Royal Arches, April 10, 2007, in ANAM 2008. (Source: Chris Tomasetti and John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

(Editor's Note: This is what we call a "near miss." If the climbers had become stranded or had needed to be rescued, we would have included the data in the Tables.)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT and INADEQUATE PROTECTION, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Tahquitz Rock

On October 19, Sean was leading the first pitch of "The Blank" route on Tahquitz when he fell. The route began at a large ledge and access to the ledge was via easy 3rd-class on the right side of the ledge. The back of the ledge dropped off 20 feet or more to a relatively flat area on the talus field below the rock. The ledge was large enough that the climbers felt comfortable relaxing, walking around and having a snack while waiting for the party ahead of them on the route to get underway on the second pitch before starting to climb.

The climbers did not anchor before Sean began to lead. Sean started up the pitch a couple of feet and placed a nut in the crack (finger sized and thin) and clipped to it using a quick draw. The nut was well slotted in the crack. Sean was having difficulty with the pitch and fell twice with no failure of the nut. Then Sean managed to get high enough that his waist was approximately level with the nut. He had his right foot smeared to the right and his left foot suddenly lost friction. He noticed the nut come out of the crack as he fell toward his left. Sean hit the ledge and either bounced or rolled off of the back side, falling to the flat area about 20 feet below. Rick, the belayer, reported that Sean seemed to have been "catapulted" off of the rock rather than falling more or less straight down, as he would have expected. Rick was pulled off of the ledge and landed about five feet from Sean.

Sean had severe pain in his right ribcage and difficulty breathing. Rick had a large laceration above his right eye. Both climbers had multiple cuts and scrapes.

The climbers above heard the commotion and rappelled down to help. One of those climbers, Evan, stated that he was an emergency medical technician and began to help. Soon other climbers were on the scene and plans were being made to get Sean and Rick off of the mountain. Sean was able to walk around, with much pain, and the plan was to secure Rick to one of the Stokes litters that had fortunately been stashed in the area and carry him down. Someone made a 911 call on his or her cell phone. Idyllwild Fire Dept arrived on the scene some time later and examined both injured climbers. Their team recommended both climbers be extracted by helicopter due to the unknown extent of Rick's injuries and because Sean was showing symptoms of a collapsed lung.