

FALL ON ROCK, ASCENDERS ATTACHED INCORRECTLY – ROPE SEVERED

Utah, Zion National Park, Touchstone Wall

Shortly after 2:00 p.m. on October 17th, James Welton (34), Matt Tuttle, and I started up Touchstone Wall (III 5.9+ C2 1,000 feet). Though we considered trying to climb the route in a day, we decided to spend one night on the wall. We reasoned that this would allow us to be more relaxed during our climb. Additionally, starting in the afternoon would let us stay out of the way of any faster parties that began the route in the morning. All three of us were looking forward to spending the night high above the ground in a spectacular setting.

Matt led the first pitch, James led the slightly overhanging second pitch, and I led the third. The leader climbed on a 70m x 9.1mm Beal Joker dynamic rope, and trailed a 70m x 10mm static haul-line. Upon completion of each pitch, the leader then fixed, or anchored, both ropes to permanent drilled anchors. The two followers then used mechanical ascenders to simultaneously climb the two ropes. We had one set of Black Diamond nForce ascenders and one set of Petzl Ascensions. All four ascenders were in excellent condition. At the time of the accident, James was using the Petzl ascenders.

At the top of the third pitch, we determined that our haul line was long enough to reach the top of the fourth pitch without hauling. We decided to make one long haul rather than two shorter hauls. Matt led the fourth pitch mostly free. While Matt climbed, James and I reveled in the beauty of Zion Canyon and agreed that we were having a wonderful time.

When Matt reached the anchor, he fixed both ropes and attached a Petzl Pro Traxion and swivel to the static rope in preparation for hauling. James and I then lowered out the haul bag so that it was hanging from the anchors at the top of the fourth pitch. James prepared to ascend the haul line while I readied myself to climb the lead line and clean the pitch.

The fall occurred at dusk (shortly after 7:00 p.m.) for reasons that are unclear.

When James fell, I looked up from the anchor and witnessed him falling, quickly and upright, along the rope. Apparently, his ascenders initially provided little or no resistance to the fall. After falling a significant distance, James jerked violently and fell the rest of the way to the ground—a total of 200 feet.

James' fall was mercifully quick and every indication suggests that he died on impact. Two nearby climbers responded to my calls for help and were at the base of the route in minutes. Matt and I returned to the ground safely, albeit slowly. The dark rappels were interminable. Emergency personnel were on the scene by the time we reached the ground.

Analysis

Post-accident investigation of the equipment and the rope indicates that James fell between 20 and 40 feet before his ascenders engaged the rope. When his ascenders did engage, the force of the fall caused the ascenders to sever the static rope's sheath and, shortly thereafter, the core. On the ground, one of James' ascenders was found still attached to the rope, about a foot below the break. There was significant bunching of the rope's sheath above and below this ascender. The other ascender was found nearby. Both devices were still attached to James' harness and daisy chain. No significant rope damage was found above the break, which was located about 60 feet from the haulbag at the end of the rope.

According to Petzl's specifications for the Ascension, rope damage or failure can occur under loads in the range of 5–6 kN. James' fall would have generated a load upwards of 10 kN.

It was dusk, though we were in no particular danger or difficulty, and it was still light out when James fell. Later analysis of our position suggests that we were not as far on the route as we initially thought, because there are multiple anchors in the middle of some of the pitches on Touchstone. It's possible that James was in a hurry, and did not pay close attention to his set-up. Additionally, James primarily used Black Diamond ascenders, which have a slightly different trigger mechanism than the Petzl ascenders he was using when he fell. It is possible that this minor equipment difference contributed to the fall. Also, James was not using a Grigri to back up his ascenders. All three of us had used Grigri backups until this point. However, since the static line was under load, using a Grigri to back up the ascenders would have been impossible. A prusik or autoblock back-up probably would have saved James' life. Also, ascending a loaded rope can introduce difficulties.

James apparently failed to correctly attach his ascenders to the rope he was preparing to ascend. It is not clear how he was under the impression that his ascenders were correctly engaged or how he removed himself from the anchor without first weighting his ascenders. After unclipping from the anchor, he fell about 30 feet along the rope, at which time his ascenders engaged the rope. The ascenders, in the process of catching the fall, damaged the rope to the point of failure.

Upon reaching the high point of the climb, Matt Tuttle attached the haul rope to the anchor and then affixed a Petzl Pro Traxion to the haul rope. There was about 15 feet of slack between the Pro Traxion and the end of that rope, which was fixed to the anchor. Apparently, it is possible to attach a Traxion in such a way that it appears to be correctly engaged and that it will hold SOME weight, but in fact it will not. When James added his weight to the haul rope and began to ascend, the rope slid through the Pro

Traxion and came tight on the anchor. This 15-foot static fall was sufficient to cause James' ascenders to sever his rope. (Source: Perry Hooker)

FALL INTO CREVASSE

Washington, Mount Rainier, enroute to Wilson Headwall

On the morning of May 4th, three climbers left Camp Muir, following a gentle downhill traverse to reach the base of the Wilson Headwall. About ten minutes out from the camp, they stopped to scout and evaluate the need for roping up prior to entering a known crevasse area. While stopped, one of the climbers fell through the snow into a crevasse to a depth of approximately 120 feet. The climbers were able to put out a distress radio call via the park frequency. Climbing ranger Arlington Ashby responded within 15 minutes of the call from Camp Muir and assessed the situation. Climbing rangers Thomas Payne and Joe Franklin soon arrived from Camp Muir to assist in the rescue, with Payne assuming the role as team lead. The stranded climber was wedged head-first deep in the crevasse, giving responders only two feet of vertical space in which to maneuver. After removing his pack by cutting the straps, they were able to haul him out of the crevasse.

“The position of the climber, stranded headfirst at a very narrow point in the crevasse, combined with his hypothermic condition, made time a critical issue and a quick crevasse rescue imperative,” said incident commander David Gottlieb. Due to these factors, the climber was removed from the crevasse, placed on a backboard, and then taken to Camp Muir. A Bell Jet Ranger helicopter was placed on standby to fly him out once the weather cleared. During this time, rangers worked with the Northwest Helicopters pilot to reconfigure the Jet Ranger to carry a litter. Although the climber fell a long distance, he suffered only superficial wounds. (Source: Patti Wold, Incident Information Officer)

PARTY SEPARATED ON SUMMIT – WHITEOUT

Washington, Mount Rainier

On May 4th, two climbers left Paradise at 9:00 p.m. with the intention of doing a single-push summit climb and skiing back down the mountain via Fuhrers Thumb. In the afternoon, the park received a 911 call from one of the climbers reporting that he'd become separated from his partner and lost in a whiteout somewhere on the summit.

That evening, his partner skied down to Paradise. On Tuesday morning, the park brought in a Hughes 500 helicopter operated by Whirlwind Helicopters and organized a two-person observation team. A break in the weather permitted the observation flight around mid-day, during which the observers located the climber on the summit. The helicopter was found to be too heavy to take on another passenger at 14,000+ feet, so the pilot