

(Editor's Note: This is another case of a scrambler ending up in a climbing situation. This individual had indeed come to Yosemite to do some climbing and had led climbs up to 5.10 prior to this. He is a member of a prominent college outing club in New England.)

FALL ON ROCK – OFF ROUTE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, NO HELMET California, Mono County, Inyo National Forest, Third Pillar of Dana

On August 30, Jeff Maurer (47) and Jo-Lynne DeNapoli (36) were planning on climbing the Regular Route of the Third Pillar of Mount Dana (Grade III 5.10b, six pitches). The climb is approached from Tioga Road just east of Yosemite National Park and is located in Mono County. After a three-mile hike to the Dana Plateau, climbers scramble about 700 feet down a third-class gully to the base of the rock formation.

Jeff and Jo-Lynne were both experienced climbing in the Sierra Nevada (Jeff over 20 years and Jo-Lynne ten years) and led up to traditional style 5.10 free climbing. They had not climbed a multi-pitch route together before, but were good friends and were confident in their abilities to climb the route. They carried a standard rack of gear and a 60-meter rope.

The following is Jo-Lynne's account of the accident:

"When we arrived at the base at 9-9:30 a.m., there was a party on the first pitch of the Regular Route and we had passed two more parties on the approach trail coming to climb the same route. So we decided to try an alternate crack system about 30 feet to the right of the Regular Route that we thought was Lenticular Limbo (Grade III 5.10c). After three pitches, this route joins the Regular Route. By the flip of a rock at the top of the plateau, Jeff had won the lead of the first pitch. Full of energy, he led up the initial corner. After about 30 feet, the crack split in two directions.

"Because we weren't sure which crack to follow, Jeff and I both checked our topos. I had a hand-drawn map copied from the Don Reid-Chris Falkenstein guidebook, *Rock Climbs of Tuolumne Meadows*, and Jeff had a page ripped out of the same guidebook as well as the description from R.J. Secor's *Peaks Passes and Trails*. We both concluded that we were not on Lenticular Limbo and didn't know what climb it was.

"I had a feeling that Jeff should come down and we should just climb the Regular Route, but I never voiced this opinion to him and still regret my silence. We did agree that once he got to the halfway mark of his rope, we would decide whether to keep climbing or retreat and climb the Regular Route.

"Jeff chose to go to the right crack system in a shallow dihedral. He yelled down that the climbing was low angle, implying that it was not too difficult. Soon after that, a few small golf-ball-sized rocks came down, so I moved to the right to get out of the fall zone. From this position I could no longer see Jeff climbing.

“All of a sudden Jeff said something. As I replay it in my head I think he said ‘Whoa!’ but it was not loud or concerned. I felt the rope go slack as if there was a fall and I quickly pulled in one arm-length of slack and held my brake hand down preparing to catch the fall.

“Jeff had placed five pieces of gear at that point, each about ten to 15 feet apart. I am guessing that he was about 50 feet up. As he fell, I felt the rope come tight and then ‘pop’ or release twice. I then saw his body rushing down in a fall line five to ten feet from me. I could hear the sound of him ripping through the air, but I don’t remember hearing Jeff say anything as he came down. The rope did not come tight and Jeff hit the ground full force.

“I do not remember walking over to him. My first memory is looking at his face and seeing he was unconscious. I yelled for help and stabilized his head and neck and covered his head with my hands to try to stop the bleeding. At first I wanted to move him into a better position, since his head was below the rest of his body on the talus, but I was afraid of damaging his spinal cord if I tried to move him myself. At this point I tried to gently lift his head above his heart. As I moved him, I heard air move through his mouth and then a rattling sound from his lungs. I looked at his eyes and his pupils were dilated. I couldn’t feel a pulse and did not observe any breathing.

“I didn’t have a watch, but I’m guessing the sequence of events from the time that Jeff fell to my initial assessment lasted less than one minute. I continued to scream for help to the party on the Regular Route. They were around the corner and I could not see them. I remember wishing that they would have just fixed the line and descended as fast as possible, but they chose to do two rappels to come down to the base.

“Squatting, I continued cradling his head in my lap and I begged the team descending to help me and offered to replace any gear they needed to leave behind. Although in my head I knew Jeff was dead, my heart could not suppress the thought that with a little more care, he could still live. I also craved a second opinion so that the responsibility of his diagnosis was no longer on me. I continuously screamed for help as my legs cramped holding Jeff’s head.

“When the climbers on the Regular Route, Joe Stock and Cathy Flanagan, arrived safely at the base, Joe felt for Jeff’s pulse and confirmed that he was dead. Joe is not a doctor nor did he state having medical experience. Joe took some pictures at the scene, and I told him Jeff’s name and that he worked for the National Park Service in Yosemite as a Wildlife Biologist.

“Joe ran for help and I sat with Cathy. She did her best to support me and I was grateful that I was not alone. We waited for what seemed like hours for help to come. Finally, I could see a helicopter flying in from the southeast. Shortly after it came into view, it turned around and flew back the same direction.

“I grew impatient with the waiting and was thankful that Jeff was not suffering and dying as we waited for help. In hindsight, I think that Jeff liked spending a little more time out in the mountains, but my fear was that he was still alive and that I was not caring enough for him. This, coupled with my own need for friends and comforting, was torturous.

“I did not want to leave Jeff alone, but by 6:00 p.m., it was getting cold and the possibility of a rescue that night was becoming less likely. I said goodbye to Jeff and we walked up the gully to the plateau and back to my car at the Tioga Lake trailhead.

“In the days that followed I wished I had had more of a ceremony for Jeff. Death is so removed from our being. So unexpected. The rock-climbing ‘How to’ series could use the ‘How to deal when your partner dies’—poems and prayers and songs to sing as your friend passes from this world to the next. I felt trained for dealing with an injured partner, but not a dead one.”

(NB: The next day, after another aircraft effort was cancelled due to wind, the Yosemite and Mono County teams raised Jeff’s body 700 feet to the plateau and flew him out by helicopter.)

Analysis

Jeff and Jo-Lynne decided to head up an alternate crack system (thinking it was Lenticular Limbo), and from the ground they thought it didn’t look that bad. It was later discovered that Jeff was climbing the first pitch of “The One That Almost Got Away,” (5.10d/11a) a newer route not in the guide. The pitch looks easier and lower angle than it is and it abruptly gets more difficult with only sparse placements for “thin” and “dirty” protection.

The cracks in High Sierra granite, especially those that haven’t seen much traffic, can be flaky, grainy, or fragile. If protection is marginal, climbers should assume it will fail.

A helmet may not have saved Jeff’s life after a fall of 75 feet, but we know that helmets save lives and prevent or minimize injury from leader falls, seconding falls, and rockfall. (Source: Chris Simmons, Joe Stock, Jesse McGahey, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park—with special thanks to Jo-Lynne DeNapoli.)

FALLING ROCK – FALL ON ROCK

California, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, Mount Whitney

On October 3rd, two men were climbing the East Buttress route (5.7) on Mount Whitney. They were on a ledge at 13,500 feet when a large rock fell from above and hit one of them on the helmet and upper back. The impact pushed him down to the ledge and caused him to experience neck and back pain with numbness and tingling on his entire left side. The uninjured climber assisted his partner in rappelling down two rope-lengths, but his companion’s pain was so intense that he could not continue.