

## Analysis

As you can tell from the Leo's narrative, he and Cindy came away with lots of valuable take-home points. Here they are, along with some NPS comments:

- If you're relying on a topo then consult it thoroughly – but don't trust it blindly. As they learned much later, "We were at station No. 9 and should have rappelled down a ramp to the right."
- If your ropes come up short, either the anchor below or the one you're hanging from may be off route.
- Be aware of your mental state and that of your partner: tired, hungry, thirsty, frustrated, and/or focusing on home.
- Competence at ascending your rope is a core survival skill. To their credit, Leo and Cindy had at least introduced themselves to ascending with friction hitches, but they were inefficient at it and dead tired. Even after committing to his jury-rigged sling extensions—the ends of which he had wisely clipped to himself—he could have reversed his course with various rigging tricks.
- When they got home, Leo and Cindy bought family band radios. These may be the most reliable communication devices for climbs since they are independent of a network but cell phones may be better for seeking help where there's a chance you'll have service. If weight isn't an issue take both.
- A follower needs competency with every skill while protecting on the lead, including route finding, building anchors, rigging rappels, and ascending the rope.
- Leo felt he should have waited until he had more experience before trying Royal Arches. (Sources: Leo Wu and Cindy Lu; and John Dill, NPS Ranger.)

(John Dill: A similar incident occurred at the same anchor in November 2007, but while trying to reach the bolts the rappeller fell off her ropes and was seriously injured. See *ANAM 2008*.)

## FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, COMPLACENCY California, Yosemite Valley, The Rostrum

On August 12th, my long time climbing partner (27) and I, Bud Miller (27), set off to climb the 1000-foot North Face of The Rostrum (8 pitches, IV 5.11c). The route was new to both of us and sure to push our limits, but it's considered relatively safe due to its protectable cracks and steep, clean falls. Although we weren't confident of on-sighting the route, at the worst we might take a few short falls.

To get to the route, you hike/rappel a steep gully to the base, then after climbing to the top, it is a short hike up to the road. There seemed to be no reason to bring our approach shoes so we grabbed our gear and descended bare-foot.

Tommy took a short fall leading the 5.11 crux of Pitch 2, and I needed plenty of expletives to follow it. However, as self-proclaimed 5.10

climbers, this was no surprise, and we had forecasted a long day. At the belay we decided I would lead the next few pitches. Tommy passed me the rack and I took off.

Pitch 3 is long but not hard in relation to the rest of the climb. An initial 5.10 bulge is followed by a long 5.9 hand crack that starts thin and slowly widens. This grade and type of climbing had become comfortable for me after four months of climbing in Yosemite and to my stubborn mind it did not warrant throwing in much protection. So after the bulge I placed a green (.75) Camalot and climbed as fast as I could, never entertaining the idea of falling. As I got higher, I knew that I should add a piece but the pitch was so good that I just kept thinking, "Another move or two." Then, suddenly, my hand slipped out and I was falling backwards with plenty of time to realize that the Camalot was at least 25 feet below me. The piece held, but my fall, including rope stretch, was about 60 feet.

When I stopped I was hanging next to the belay. Tommy looked at me in horror; I looked back at him, upside down, and said, "I'm ok. My right foot is broken but I'm okay."

We stayed there half an hour, weighing options while I got my adrenaline under control. It was clear that my foot was 100% non-weight bearing, and whenever I bumped it the pain was excruciating. Prusiking the pitch after Tommy, negotiating the traverse, and scrambling one-footed up the gulley was to be avoided if we had another choice.

If we rapped the route, we faced crossing the Merced River to reach Highway 140 on the other shore. Although painful, the rappels went fairly smoothly. Scrambling down the forested scree slope from the climb to the river, perhaps 20 minutes on two good feet, took four hours. We made it with me sliding on my ass, Tommy holding me up on his shoulders, and fashioning a crutch with a stick, a shirt, and climbing tape.

The river was a mix of white water and deep, fast current and while Tommy could swim it, there was no way I could safely cross on my own. It was also out of the question to work our way up or down stream through huge boulders to a gentler crossing, so Tommy crossed with the climbing rope and some gear. He set up an anchor well upstream from where I was, fixed the rope, and then swam back with the loose end. We tightened the line with a Munter/Mule Hitch to give me a safe way to cross. I clipped a sling from my harness to the rope, hopped in the river, and pulled myself to the far shore. When we reached the road, we looked like characters out of Mad Max, but the first people we saw were kind enough to stop.

I had badly broken four metatarsals. After six months with a cast and physical therapy, I was back to climbing, hopefully a bit wiser.

### **Analysis**

The reason I fell was the same reason I had under-protected, complacency due to over-confidence. I had climbed many cracks of

this difficulty without ever falling, so I had begun to think I never would. Climbers usually place less gear on easier terrain but I discovered the hard way a reason for caution. (Source: Bud Miller and John Dill, NPS Ranger)

(NPS comment: Here are two other reasons for protecting more often: First, ratings are subjective. You never know, especially in Yosemite, when the rater's "5.9" pitch will surprise you. Second, placements fail, sometimes from user error and sometimes from an unnoticed fracture in the rock. The latter is true of handholds as well.)

## **FALL ON ROCK, OFF ROUTE, PARTY SEPARATED - CLIMBING ALONE, INADEQUATE CLOTHING, EXCEEDING ABILITIES**

### **California, Kings Canyon National Park, Thunderbolt Peak**

On August 21, Robert Levin (62), Steven Most (60's), and Mathew Most (20s) hiked from South Lake to camp in Dusy Basin in Kings Canyon National Park planning to climb Thunderbolt Peak (14,003-feet) in the Palisades via the Southwest Chute #2 route. After acclimating for two nights the group began their climb on the morning of August 23. They intended to climb a class 3 or 4 route without technical equipment. The group appears to have erroneously taken the Northwest Chute (class 4) on Starlight Peak rather than their planned route. About 1230 on August 23, Steven and Matt Most turned back because they felt the route was too exposed and more difficult than they were capable of. They attempted to convince Levin to join them, to no avail. Levin was determined to reach the summit and continued on without them. Two hours after the group separated, the Mosts heard Levin yelling, "Help!" from up on the peak.

Knowing neither the nature of Levin's predicament nor feeling technically capable of ascending the peak to assist, Mathew Most hiked to the trailhead to seek assistance while Steven Most remained near the base of the mountain at 11,000 feet.

A ranger hiked in on the morning of the 24th. The ranger heard occasional yells of "help" coming from below Thunderbolt Peak. Levin had spent the night alone, injured, with no equipment on a wall below the summit. He was wearing shorts, shirt, hat, and mountaineering boots. He had with him a fanny pack with one water bottle, energy bars and chocolate.

Levin was located after two hours of aerial searching in the vicinity of the West Rib route. He was perched on a two-foot sloping ledge, having fallen vertically over 100 feet.

Rangers Johnson and Corrao climbed fifth class terrain and reached Levin by 1800, thirty hours after the accident. He was dehydrated and hypothermic. Rangers stabilized him and due to approaching darkness prepared to lower him 100 feet into a sandy chute to bivy until a technical lower could be completed the following day. When a window of calm wind arrived, Levin was flown solo in a Bauman Screamer Suit