

the 10th. At 7:15 a.m. on the 10th, a ground team started up Indian Canyon. At 8:50 a.m., a second team started an air search with a Lemoore NAS helicopter. The air team spotted Tech and Hirsch about ¼ mile west of Indian Canyon and evacuated them about 10:15 a.m. The ground team was flown out about 10:45 a.m. (Source: Bruce McKeeman, SAR Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

## **FALLING ROCK, NO HARD HAT**

### **California, Yosemite Valley**

On May 22, 1981, Jean Ruwitch (25) and Tom Kimbrough (42) were climbing the East Buttress route on middle Cathedral Rock (Y.D.S. IV, 5.10). This route has ten pitches and normally takes less than a day. The weather was warm, sunny and breezy.

Ruwitch and Kimbrough each had several years of climbing experience and had been employed as seasonal climbing/rescue rangers at Grand Teton National Park. Both climb at a level well above the requirements of this route and were in excellent physical condition on this date. In addition, Kimbrough is an EMT-1.

In late morning, on the eighth pitch, they were passed by another party, Russell Reno (21) and Charles Cole (26). This pair was moving "continuously" at times; that is, they were roped together and relying on the protection the leader placed between them but climbing simultaneously, without belays.

Once Reno and Cole were 100 feet or so above them, Kimbrough began leading the ninth pitch while Ruwitch belayed. He had climbed about 50 feet when Reno accidentally dislodged a rock about ½ to one cubic foot in size. Although Reno or Cole shouted, "Rock," Ruwitch was unable to avoid it and was struck on the head and, Kimbrough believes, on the left hand, with which she had tried to protect herself. The time was about 11:50 a.m.

While Reno and Cole finished the route and went for help, Kimbrough tended to Ruwitch. The blow had knocked her unconscious, apparently fractured her skull, and severely damaged her left hand. He supported her with slings, covered her wounds and monitored her vital signs. He began shouting for help.

Dispatch received reports and cries for help in the Middle Cathedral Rock area. Jim Reilly and SAR Ranger John Dill drove there, with size-up gear (telescope, PA), to contact the reporting party.

At 12:50 p.m., just as they met the reporting party, dispatch radioed that one of the climbers from the accident scene (Reno) was at the Visitors Center. They were told the location of the accident and the nature of the injuries. They immediately requested that the park helicopter (Lama) meet them at El Capitan Meadow for a size-up flight, that a Navy rescue helicopter (Huey) from NAS Lemoore be launched, and that a ground party be organized as a backup. Except for the first flight, all operations would be based at the Ahwahnee Meadow for easier logistics and access to the Yosemite Medical Center.

At 1:15 p.m., Reilly, Reno and Dill flew a reconnaissance in the Lama. They located Ruwitch and Kimbrough and tried to talk with Kimbrough via the helicopter PA, but he couldn't understand them. They checked the 2nd-3rd Class area above the route (the regular descent route) for a place to land rescuers, but the pilot decided that, even if there was a spot, the winds were too turbulent that day. Any helispot there would be marginal in calm conditions, although the Lama could probably sling load equipment there. They flew to the Ahwahnee Meadow to get their gear and coordinate the rescue effort.

#### *Reaching the victim:*

Plan A: Reilly and Dill, with medical gear, would rappel from the Navy Huey either

directly to Ruwitch or to the 2nd Class area above (the Kat Walk) and then down the cliff to Ruwitch.

Plan B: One ground party would hike up the descent route. With luck, the Lama could sling all their equipment to the Kat Walk, including 600- to 1300-foot ropes. If necessary, a second team would climb the route, trailing long lines.

*Evacuating the victim:*

Plan A. Via helicopter hoist, directly from her location, if rotor clearance and winds permitted.

Plan B. Lower to the ground (800 feet?). Start with whatever ropes were available. When they met the team climbing up the route, put her on their long lines and go straight to the ground.

The Navy helicopter was the only chance of getting her out quickly.

At 2:10 p.m., Reilly and Dill were flown to the scene in the Navy Huey. The wind was still very turbulent and they were close to a tree, so the Huey landed at El Capitan Meadow, offloaded Reilly, one crew member and unnecessary gear and returned for another attempt.

Dill rappelled to Kimbrough and Ruwitch with climbing gear for additional anchors, if necessary. Two climbers, Mark Mannheimer and Zack Edwards, had reached the scene in the meantime and established backup anchors. The helicopter returned to the meadow.

Ruwitch was supported by her climbing harness and sling that Kimbrough had placed around her shoulders to keep her upright. He was supporting her head.

Ruwitch was unconscious and, according to Kimbrough, had an open, depressed skull fracture and severely avulsed fingers on her left hand. Both her head and hand were bandaged with clothing and Dill did not examine them. Her right eye was swollen shut from a bruise and minor cut over the eye, and there was dried blood in both nostrils. Her right arm and leg were limp.

The left eye was normal size and reactive. Dill did not open the right eye. Her color was good, airway (mouth) clear and she was breathing without difficulty. Although she had bled profusely initially, there was no serious bleeding when Dill arrived.

Kimbrough could detect no deformities along her spine. He had been monitoring her pulse and respirations since the accident. They were currently 80/min. regular and 40/min. regular respectively; since the accident (three hours), they had not changed significantly. With the clinic's consent, it was decided to immobilize her, to forego any O<sub>2</sub> or IV therapies, and to evacuate her as soon as possible. No other people were needed on the scene.

At 3:00 p.m., the Navy Huey lowered a Kendrick Extrication Device and full-body fishnet harness and returned to El Capitan Meadow. Dill and Kimbrough put these on Ruwitch and Dill attached himself to her harness so that he could monitor her and maintain her airway during the hoist.

The Navy Huey hoisted Ruwitch and Dill together and landed in El Capitan Meadow. They were met by Dr. Jeff Folkens and Barbara Lafayette of the Yosemite Medical Group staff and Olga Musko, Navy Corpsman. They started O<sub>2</sub>, IV and decadron therapy.

At 4:00 p.m. Ruwitch was flown to Valley Medical Center in Fresno, with Olga Musko attending her. (Source: John Dill, SAR Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

### **Analysis**

As the number of climbers has increased in the more popular, easily reached areas such as Yosemite Valley, Boulder Canyon, and the Shawangunks, the subjective dangers have increased proportionately.

In this particular case, Ruwitch and Kimbrough were in the more vulnerable position of being directly below another climbing party. As reported in this journal over the years, falling rocks or objects have been the third leading cause of accidents in climbing. Therefore, the odds against this happening to these two climbers were not in their favor. Additionally, the decision not to wear a protective helmet resulted in a direct blow to the head and to the hand trying to protect it. (Source: J. Williamson)

## **FALLING ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION**

### **California, Yosemite Valley**

On June 2, 1981, around 7:30 a.m., SAR Ranger Bruce McKeeman was notified by dispatch that Dana Brown (23) was at the lodge and was reporting that someone was seriously hurt near the top of El Capitan. McKeeman sent Ranger Durr to the lodge to contact Brown and he also notified Ranger Grovert of the report and requested that Grovert meet him at the SAR cache. At 7:40 a.m., McKeeman called Ray Knox, Fire Dispatcher, and requested that the contract helicopter be placed on standby for the rescue. Durr returned to the cache with Brown and McKeeman sent Durr to the El Capitan area to further size up the situation.

Brown said, "About 7:00 a.m. I was at the base of El Capitan and heard people screaming." He reported that a block had fallen and hit a climber two pitches from the top of the Mescalito Route and that he had broken a leg. Brown also said that the ropes were either stuck or cut.

At 7:47 a.m., Grovert and McKeeman had Ranger J. Campbell notify the technical climbers in Camp 4 to prepare for a technical rescue on El Capitan. While Grovert started organizing the gear and notifying some other people, McKeeman contacted Lemoore Naval Air Station and requested their assistance. The contract helicopter was flown to the Ahwahnee Meadow at 9:00 a.m. where it took on the rescue crew and gear. Several trips were made to fly the nine-man crew and their gear to the top of El Capitan.

At 10:30 a.m., SAR Ranger Jim Reilly and John Dill were flown to the top of El Capitan to assist with the rescue of Peter Ourom (23). Ourom, a climber from Vancouver, British Columbia, was located approximately 250 feet down from the top of El Capitan on the Mescalito Route. At 11:30 a.m., Dill and Reilly were lowered to the victim. They utilized two ropes in the lowering, one per man, and were secured to each other via a sling in case one of the ropes failed. They had a litter tied to the end of one of the ropes; the Kendrix device, mast suit, EMT "Blitz Pack" and helicopter pre-reg were lashed to the litter.

The wall above Ourom was almost entirely overhanging and when they had almost reached Ourom they found that they were approximately 30 feet from the wall and a little to the east of him. They threw a rope to Ourom's climbing partner, Walt Shipley, and he was able to pull them onto a ledge as they were lowered the final distance. They found Ourom on a ledge lying on a Portaledge and secured to the wall. He was alert and oriented and told them of his accident. Ourom said that he had been aid climbing the pitch above the ledge and had placed a piton in the crack when a section of rock in that portion of the crack broke away disengaging the piton and Ourom from the wall. Ourom fell 40 feet, hit the ledge with the right side of his body, and fell another 40 feet before being caught by his belayer. Ourom was knocked unconscious in the fall and was hanging upside down from the end of his rope. Ourom believed he was unconscious for about ten minutes. Shipley rappelled down to Ourom and assisted him in jumaring back to the ledge. They found that Ourom's rope had been nearly severed in the fall.

Dill and Reilly assessed Ourom's injuries and found that he had point tenderness in the