

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

center of his left clavicle, dull pain along his right hip and dull pain throughout his lower back with the exclusion of his spinal column. Ourom also had lacerations, contusions and abrasions on the right side of his head and face. Dill and Reilly obtained vitals and found his BP 114/70, pulse 92/min. and respiration 12/min. They placed Ourom in the Kendrix and secured the litter next to the Portaledge; next they moved Ourom into the litter and then into the mast suit. The mast suit was not inflated but was there as protection against shock in the event that should occur during the hoist or while en route to the clinic. Dill and Reilly secured Ourom to the litter and the litter to the haul line and the belay line. Reilly tied into the two lines and functioned as the litter attendant. A tail rope was left below the litter to guide it out to the vertical position. Ourom, the litter and Reilly were then raised to the top of El Capitan using a power winch to do the hauling. Once at the rim, Ourom was carried to a helispot and flown from there to the Ahwahnee Meadow in the Lemoore helicopter. Ourom was taken to the clinic and treated by Dr. Folkens for a fractured left clavicle. Ourom was kept at the clinic for a number of days for purposes of observation. (Source: Bruce McKee-man and Jim Reilly, SAR Rangers, Yosemite National Park)

Analysis

The pitch (A1) off the bivouac ledge is a steep, clean crack behind the right side of a huge exfoliation slab that is parallel to the face of the cliff. The party's belay anchors consisted of nuts and Friends in the crack and two or three bolts several feet apart and to the left of the crack. Shipley's tie-in was connected to the bolt farthest to the left. He was belaying with a Sticht plate.

As Ourom began the pitch, he clipped through one or more carabiners at the anchor points in the crack. He then climbed about 20 feet on nuts and/or Friends, cleaning them as he went. At this point, he clipped through a fixed, broken-off aluminum bong (2½", I think) but *did not test it with a hammer*. He continued leapfrogging nuts and Friends for another 20 feet or so. At this point he was standing in aid slings attached to a Friend. *His rope was not clipped through either placement*. Because he could not set a nut or Friend in the next placement, he began driving a 1¼" angle. The slab forming the left side of the crack was fairly thick and a piton scar indicated previous placements there; however, the force of his piton broke off a large (c. 3' × 1¼' × 1') chunk of rock. It hit the belay ledge, damaging some of the party's ropes. Ourom was either knocked out of his aid slings or lost his balance dodging the rock. He fell 30–40 feet, bounced off the ledge, pulled the fixed bong, and continued another 40 feet at least. He was stunned and injured but regained consciousness after a few minutes.

There was enough slack in Shipley's tie-in so that the force of Ourom's fall pulled him several feet across the ledge and jammed one of his hands into the protection carabiners. (It was injured sufficiently that he later had trouble jumaring.) He tied Ourom off with a prusik, yelled at him until he finally got a reply, and rappelled to him on their remaining good rope. Somehow he was able to get Ourom into his jumars, and somehow Ourom managed to jumar back to the belay ledge where he remained, in a Portaledge, until we arrived.

Breaking off the slab is just one of those things that happens. It's often surprising and unavoidable; the piton scar indicates that plenty of other climbers had made placements there.

It does seem, however, that Ourom might have prevented or shortened his fall by: (a) properly testing the bong before he relied on it for protection and (b) leaving more protection along the way. He needn't have fallen as far as the belay ledge.

In addition, Shipley's belay could have stood some improvements: (a) his tie-in should

have been snug; (b) had the tie-in bolt failed (ample precedence for this, in Ourom's own experience), Shipley would have had several more feet of slack. He should have been tied in, parallel and ideally equalized, to at least both bolts and preferably to the placements in the crack as well.

Both climbers could have been more seriously injured. In either case, Shipley might not have been able to get Ourom to the ledge (had there even been one) or to make him comfortable where he was hanging. With different injuries or in more remote surroundings (where Shipley might have had to get Ourom to the top by himself), the consequences could have been much worse.

Ourom mentioned in his report: (a) "The hours" it took to get him ready for evacuation. It was much shorter than hours. Time was spent assuring proper medical treatment. Shipley and Ourom were understandably eager to get out of there. (b) "The rough handling" he received at the lip (top) of the cliff. He's correct. Lips are difficult to negotiate and require careful coordination. The winch operator was unable to hear the litter attendant's radio calls until it was too late. We've grounded the winch until we can do more work on the problems of tension control and radio headsets.

Sticht plates produce higher stopping forces on the falling climber than do body belays. Ed Leeper of Boulder, Colorado, thinks that these higher forces have been responsible for reported instances of protection failure in climbing accidents involving leader falls stopped by Sticht plates. I don't think that is the case this time because (a) Ourom never tested the bong and (b) there appears to have been so much (*too much*) give in the belay system that the peak stopping force remained low. (Source: John Dill, SAR Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

LOOSE ROCK, FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION **California, Yosemite Valley**

On June 11, 1981, Shift Supervisor John Daley received a report from climber Fred East that he had heard cries for help on El Capitan. East had been at the base of El Capitan preparing for a climb at 7:00 a.m. He said that he heard cries for help coming from climbers approximately 1000 feet from the top of El Capitan on the Pacific Ocean Wall route (Y.D.S. IV, 5.9, A5). Mike Tschipper (20) and Ward Robinson (28) told East that Tschipper had fallen and had injured his ankle and needed to be rescued. East went to the Valley District Office and relayed this information to Daley. Daley dispatched Rangers Durr and Thompson with the size-up equipment to the El Capitan Meadow to check on the injured parties. Durr made contact with the injured climbers and ascertained that one climber, Tschipper, had an injured ankle, but that they were on a large ledge and were in a stable place. Durr returned to the rescue cache and notified SAR Officer Grovert; a rescue effort was undertaken. The Naval Air Station was notified and placed on standby, and the contract helicopter was dispatched to the Ahwahnee Meadow. Several climbers from Camp 4 were contacted and requested to go to the rescue cache. Rangers Taylor and Reilly were dispatched to the El Capitan area to act as spotters. Durr was assigned to be in charge of rescue operations on the scene. Several loads of personnel and equipment were then flown to the top of El Capitan to begin rescue efforts.

Thompson and climber Williams were lowered to the victim where they stabilized his injuries and prepared him to be raised to the top. At 3:00 p.m. the victim was on top of El Capitan. He was carried to the landing site and flown to the Ahwahnee Meadow.

These are the events leading up to the accident as described by Robinson: