

RAPPEL ANCHOR FAILURE, HASTE, RAINY WEATHER, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT

Colorado, Notchtop

On the morning of August 5, 1983, Skip Hansen (36) and leader, Chuck Layton (26), started off to climb the Spiral Route on Notchtop. We arrived at the base of the route at 0930 and began climbing at 1000. We did some of the lower variations, and, after four moderate pitches, we reached the grassy ledges of the meadow. An approaching storm was noticed at this point. We decided that rather than rappel, we would ascend the next two, relatively easy pitches to the notch and take the fourth-class descent off the North Ridge and West Gully. After the next pitch the storm swiftly engulfed us, and the hail soon turned to heavy rain. The leader discovered a small nook just below the notch at 1300 and it was decided to wait the storm out. After two hours of nonstop rain, the leader decided to proceed to the notch and check the descent route. It appeared to be obscured and exposed, and the rock was extremely slippery. The leader was equipped with the gear for a bivouac, but the other member had left his rain gear and extra food and clothes at the base of the route. After realizing that the rain was not going to let up, it was decided to rappel the route. The first rappel off of a fist-size, jammed rock went well and brought us to a pedestal that had previously been used as a belay stance. Several large slings were used to wrap around a stack of blocks the size of a small refrigerator. After testing the blocks and a backup sling, Hansen rappelled first. Instead of stopping at the first bench and downclimbing easy grass ledges, he rappelled on down to the end of the ropes. This caused considerable bouncing on the anchor. The leader then removed the backup anchor and rappelled. When he was eight meters above the first bench, the leader felt a small drop and then a complete failure of the rappel anchor occurred. The leader fell and hit the first ledge and slid and bounced down another eight meters. The ropes and about 150 kg of rock fell close behind and barely missed both the leader and the second, but not the ropes.

The sheaths were cut almost all the way through in six places. After ascertaining the extent of their injuries and surveying the ropes, it was decided to continue with the three remaining rappels on the ropes, tying six butterfly knots at the cut places. The second went first and provided a bottom belay for the injured leader, whose right hand was beginning to swell up. We got to the bottom and hiked out in the dark to the car. A trip to the dispensary the next day revealed a severe sprain of the thumb and a break of the carpal bone of the little finger resulting in a half cast being worn for two weeks. Also, a slightly sprained ankle and many cuts and bruises were noticed. (Source: Charles Layton)

Analysis

We should have left at least three hours earlier, as we had noticed during the past three days that the storms were commencing around 1300 to 1400 every afternoon.

The removal of the back-up anchor was a big mistake, but considering the size of the anchor and the size of the one we used on the rappel before, I figured it would be OK. I tested it, but never really noticed that it was only a stack of blocks held tightly together by a keystone effect.

If the second had not left his extra clothing, rain gear and extra food at the base

of the route, we could have possibly sat out the storm in the nook and traversed off the descent route in the morning.

We never took our helmets, and when I think of what could have happened if I had landed differently, it makes me shudder. It was just luck that I landed on my feet and butt and slid down sliding-board style. Also, the ensuing rock fall could have pulverized my partner and me if we had not each found our respective overhangs to duck under. (Source: Charles Layton)

FALL ON ROCK

Colorado, Mount Powell

On September 5, 1983, Donald Thomas (30) fell 60 meters to his death in a gully while trying to rescue his dog, according to Tim Cochran, a member of the Vail Mountain Rescue Group.

Cochran said search parties began looking for Thomas after his wife reported him overdue from a Saturday climb.

Thomas' dog had climbed onto a narrow ledge and could not climb back down. Thomas was trying to retrieve the dog when he (Thomas) fell into the gully, Cochran said. The dog was found uninjured. (Source: *Chieftain and Star Journal*, Pueblo, Colorado, September 6, 1983)

Analysis

This is one of many reports from around the state of Colorado sent to the editor by AAC member Freddie Carter. This hiking accident is one which resulted in death. In each case, the individuals involved were focusing on something other than their footing, such as photography, adjusting a pack, or talking with another person. While not included as climbing accidents, these cases are described for hikers who can easily find themselves in climbing situations should they stray from the trail. (Source: J. Williamson)

FALLS ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION PLACEMENTS, FAILURE OF NUTS, BELAY FAILURE

Colorado, Boulder and Eldorado Springs Canyons

From the months of May through September, 1983, a total of 33 accidents were recorded and categorized by Dr. Cliff Watts. Rather than reporting them individually, this brief summary will provide a general impression of the primary aspects of these accidents.

The majority of these accidents, 29 in all, were falls, and the major contributing cause of injury was inadequate or improperly placed protection. Half the accidents were the result of individuals attempting difficult routes, both in terms of actual difficulty and in relation to the climber's ability. The average age of this group was 26, of whom 29 were males. Seven of those injured were climbing alone and unroped. Two interesting situations were (a) a belayer who fell asleep on a ledge and failed to catch his partner, who fell 30 meters (with no major injury resulting), and (b) a climber who was driving a piton and splintered off a piece of metal which lodged in his eye.