

Ranger Sherwood interviewed one of the two groups climbing the face of Half Dome at the time of the incident. Group #1 had started climbing early that morning (about 0600) and had passed Group #2, who were on their third day. Neither had noticed the group below or admitted knowing of a rock falling at the time of the incident. (Source: Kathy Sherwood, Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

FALLING ROCK, FAILURE TO TEST HOLDS

California, Mount Whitney

On July 3, 1986, Mike Meteyer (27) and Jim Raymond (28) were climbing the Classic East Face route on Mount Whitney. In the early afternoon they were at the lower portion of the Grand Staircase when a basketball size block that Mike had moved up on broke away. Jim was hit a grazing blow by this falling block but not seriously injured. Mike fell about three meters and sustained what turned out to be three broken ribs. They continued to climb to the top of the Grand Staircase where the difficulty again increases. Unable to continue, they called for help and were able to attract the attention of two climbers just finishing the Keeler Needle. These two climbers came to their assistance with extra clothing for Mike and then one of them hiked out with Jim to call for a rescue. Arriving in Lone Pine in the middle of the night, they waited at the U.S. Forest Service office until it opened to ask for help. They should have called the Inyo County Sheriff. The China Lake Mountain Rescue Group was called at 0700. With Forest Service contract helicopter support, we were landed on the summit and got to Mike by late morning. After applying first aid and providing food and water, we were able to climb with Mike to the summit where he was flown to the hospital. (Source: Al Green, China Lake Mountain Rescue Group)

Analysis

Mount Whitney East Face climbers should be aware that there is considerable loose rock on this route and great care must be exercised for their own safety and for those below them. This particular route is becoming increasingly popular and the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group has several operations there each year. (Source: Al Green, China Lake Mountain Rescue Group)

FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING ALONE AND UNROPED

California, Joshua Tree National Monument

On July 16, 1986, at 0946, I contacted D. Michalakis (23) in campsite #9 of the Hidden Valley Campground concerning his extended stay in the park. I confronted Michalakis about several violations that I had observed. After a citation was issued, Michalakis advised me that he had fallen 20 meters while solo rock climbing on July 4. Michalakis received injuries to his right ankle, head, chest area and both arms. Most injuries consisted of lacerations and contusions. Michalakis stated that he did not know that he was required to report injury accidents to Park Rangers. Therefore, Michalakis reported the incident to no one and sought his own medical attention.

Michalakis was advised that he would have to leave the park no later than July 23. Failure to comply with request would result in his arrest. It was also learned during the interview that Michalakis was involved in a traffic accident on June 14 that he also failed

to report to ranger staff. (Source: David Peterson, Ranger, Joshua Tree National Monument)

(Editor's Note: We've all tried various ploys to gain the sympathies of an officer about to give us a ticket. This is an example of one that probably won't work too often...)

FALL ON SNOW—INTO MOAT, PARTY SEPARATED

California, Little Slide Canyon

On Saturday, July 20, 1986, Bruce Raabe reported that his partner, Lester Needham (45), was missing. They had been hiking up Little Slide Canyon on July 19 with the intention of making a two day loop trip into and out of the park. Around 0830, the two separated to explore different routes up the canyon, and Raabe never saw Needham again. He searched the area until Sunday morning, then reported the incident in the afternoon.

A large-scale, coordinated search and rescue operation ensued. At 1300 on July 22, Needham was found, alive but injured, by a WOOF dog team. He was eight meters down in a moat which was in a snow field 360 meters downstream from Maltby Lake. He was suffering from fractures and hypothermia.

Ground personnel treated Needham, carried him out of the moat, and loaded him aboard the Navy helicopter as it hovered. He was flown to Bridgeport at 1720 and was transferred to a medical helicopter and taken to Reno.

The following details of this accident were obtained from Judy Cross, WOOF unit leader, who discussed the incident in depth with Lester Needham and with Marty Cross, whose dog, Zeke, made the find:

Not long after Needham and Raabe separated, Needham fell on a snowfield, slid 40-50 meters, struck a boulder with his feet, and fell through a gap about one half meter wide between the snow and the rock. The gap formed the top of an eight meter deep moat, much wider at the bottom, formed by snowmelt and a stream that ran under the snowfield. He landed on his back on a rock at the bottom, crushing his external frame pack and injuring his back.

His legs were in running water and a three meter high waterfall in the stream sprayed on him. He managed to wriggle partly out of the water but his left foot remained immersed, and he lay on a wet patch of gravel with water seeping through it. Pain in his legs and back prevented him from moving farther, and he was unable to lift his right leg, possibly due to nerve damage.

Needham was able to get on some wool clothing and wrap his synthetic-fill sleeping bag around himself. They provided some protection but soon became soaked by the cold water. He ate very little, but did drink lots of water.

The opening in the moat was so narrow that Needham knew he might not be found and might die there. He tried stacking tent poles together with a bandana tied to the top of one as a flag, but just as he was adding the last pole, the whole thing collapsed. Noise from the waterfall was deafening, preventing him from knowing if searchers were nearby and preventing them from hearing his shouts, had he known when to call out. However, he spent some time banging a pot-lid on a rock. He also planned on shining his flashlight on the edge of the moat if a helicopter flew by at night, but none did.

Cross and Zeke were glissading down the snowfield, heading for another area, when Zeke suddenly turned and looked uphill, on alert.