

Ulrich's injuries were later diagnosed to be two fractured vertebra in the neck, several broken ribs, a broken nose, and severe head lacerations. Surgery was required to repair the neck injury and the prognosis for recovery is good. The doctor stressed that had the vertebra shifted as little as one millimeter, complete paralysis of the limbs would have been likely. (Source: Mark Dale)

Analysis

Climbing through steep woods gives one a false sense of security, due to vegetation available for holds and the thought that if you fall you only have to grab a tree to arrest yourself. This plus the fact that rope-handling in dense vegetation is difficult is reason enough for most climbers to forego using a rope for protection on this type of terrain. However, as indicated by this accident, extreme care and good judgment must be used when climbing through high-angle timber. (Source: Mark Dale)

FALLING ROCK, CLIMBING UNROPED, WEATHER

Washington, Olympic Mountains

In the past year, the Olympians Hiking and Climbing Club had embarked on a program of teaching basic climbing skills to improve safety on the long cross-country traverses through the Olympics traditionally scheduled each year. Mostly Class 2 and 3 climbs were undertaken on these traverses.

The club had been scheduling technical climbs regularly only for the past year or two. On April 20, 1986, our group of 11 climbers, including Phil Courcy (65), set out just before 0700 to climb Brothers Peak. During the morning, the group climbed into a foggy layer and the weather was sometimes windy, the snow soft. There had been a sharp warming trend during the weekend, and we were prepared to turn around if we found unfavorable avalanche conditions. The climb was tiring because of the soft snow, but otherwise there were no problems, and the weather seemed to improve as we approached the summit. A physically very strong man in the party had checked up a fork of the main snow chute about the 1900 meter level, and had gotten a view of the summit from the southeast. When we arrived at a point where the main snow chute levels off and bends to the right, he wanted to check up a narrow gully. While I felt the route was plainly along the main chute, I thought it would be good practice to scout the way, as if we were on a less well-known mountain.

The group rested below the gully and mostly above the fall-line below it where rocks might travel, but Courcy sat on bare ground in line with it. The gully turned out of sight, but did not appear to be very steep from what we could see of it. None of the experienced members of the party remarked on possible rockfall danger.

The main scout later told me that he encountered two very large and unstable rocks, and took care to go around them. However, he said he dislodged a small rock that in turn broke loose the big rocks. He immediately yelled rock, and most of the party jumped to their feet and ran uphill. However, Courcy was slow to react. He was often known to misunderstand words, a hearing handicap his family immediately suspected as a cause of the accident.

There was a great outcry, however, and he did turn around. The man in the chute said he seemed to react quickly enough, but didn't ever look up. He appeared from my position to look along the ground, and try to dodge the rocks.

I was later told that his philosophy was that you were better off trying to stay in one spot and dodge than trying to run.

A rock some 60 centimeters across struck him in the chest, and he was knocked into the snow and started sliding down the mountain. He appeared to strike a couple of rock outcroppings and stopped about 150 meters down the mountain. I glissaded down to him, closely followed by Rick Silvan, chairman of the club climbing program, and we found severe head injuries with multiple skull fractures, fixed pupils and bleeding from the head. I am a former volunteer fire department EMT and we also had a nurse on the trip. We applied a very loose head dressing and dug a platform in the chute, stretching him out on it using sit pads for insulation. His reactions reminded me of a serious stroke victim I had seen.

One member of the party was sent for help—a variation from recommended procedure—but the member was so strong that he reached the road in two hours. But Courcy died within 45 minutes of the accident. Within four hours, an Olympic Mountain Rescue Team began the body recovery operation. (Source: Edited from a report by Bryn Beorse, leader of the climb)

Analysis

The mountain was widely regarded as a “walkup” snow climb, and hardhats were not recommended. In this case, a hardhat might have reduced the injuries, but with such a large rock, I don’t believe it would have changed the outcome. It later came to my attention that there had been other rockfall accidents in the same spot in recent years, and Olympic Mountain Rescue is now recommending hardhats in that area of the route, as well as a path to avoid rockfall potential.

Among the measures that could have prevented the accident are more research on the route in the form of calling a member of mountain rescue to find out the hazards, vigilance in warning people away from the possible path of rockfall at the foot of the gully, and perhaps most of all, a warning to the group below about rockfall potential before trying to pass obviously loose rock. The snow was shallow this year—one reason the climb was about a month ahead of when it might have been attempted in a typical year. But the lighter snow cover may have contributed to the rockfall hazard.

For the rest of my climbing days, I’ll see rockfall lines under gullies in my mind’s eye. That might be a good habit for any mountaineer, particularly in the Olympics.

Certainly it’s plain that in going to an accident scene to help, you should avoid knocking loose more rocks or snow. Also, scouting little-used gullies now sounds like a hazardous activity to me. (Source: Edited from a report by Bryn Beorse, leader of the climb)

(Editor’s Note: An Olympic Mountain Rescue member suggested that (1) the warm and deteriorating weather conditions as well as the size of the group warranted an earlier start and that (2) roping up would have prevented such a long fall. During the rescue, one OMR member was struck by a head-sized rock, and then later fell through a snow bridge, badly cutting his wrist.)

FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING UNROPED

Washington, North Cascades

On June 22, 1986, Bob Richards (36) and I (36) had just climbed the West Ridge of Triad and were descending. We were off the pinnacle and could have descended a long easy route back to the high camp, but we elected to descend a rocky ridge. We had ascended