

Analysis

John Dill's usual thoroughness comes through in this report. A personal letter from one of the victims requested that names not be used, which we have done. It is apparent both from the report and the letter that these climbers did not wish to be a burden. They are also viewed by their rescuers to have been generally well prepared and almost adequately equipped. They most assuredly will rectify the latter deficiency on future climbs. The victim stated, "This has been about the worst experience of my life, and I really (intend) to learn my lesson and just put it behind me." Many climbers have been in or very close to the situation described—and have similar feelings afterward! (Source: J. Williamson)

FALLING ROCK, FALL ON ROCK, SEVERED ROPE

California, Yosemite Valley

On May 20, 1988, around 1230, Robert Dietmar Kuhn (24) of West Germany was leading the Pancake Flake pitch just above the Great Roof on the Nose Route of El Capitan. He was being belayed by his climbing partner, Peter Cuthbertson (34). According to Cuthbertson, Kuhn pulled a large block of granite rock (pyramid shaped, about one meter in height) loose from near the top of the pitch, causing Kuhn to fall. The block of granite then apparently hit Kuhn's belayed climbing rope and severed it. Kuhn then fell to the ground, a distance of approximately 600 meters, and was killed instantly. (Source: Robert Wilson, Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

Analysis

On May 22, I interviewed Peter Cuthbertson. Also present were Rangers John Dill and Kim Korthuis.

Cuthbertson said he had been in the U.S. since February 22, and he had been in Yosemite since May 6. Cuthbertson said he knew "Robbie" Kuhn from West Germany where he and Kuhn occasionally climbed together.

Cuthbertson and Kuhn had climbed the East Buttress of El Capitan together along with two other friends from West Germany.

On May 18, Cuthbertson and Kuhn fixed four pitches to the top of Sickle Ledge. They were also climbing with Manfred Koenninger up to this point. On May 19 Cuthbertson and Kuhn climbed through the first 21 pitches of the Nose Route and bivouacked at Camp 4 that night. Koenninger decided to rappel off the route because there were too many climbers above them on the same route.

On May 20 (the day of the accident), Cuthbertson led the first two pitches, including the Great Roof pitch. While Cuthbertson was belaying Kuhn through the Great Roof pitch (the 22nd pitch of the Nose Route), Cuthbertson received information from a party of German climbers who were two pitches above Cuthbertson. One of the climbers warned of a loose block of granite near the top of the Pancake Flake pitch. Cuthbertson said he suggested bypassing this loose block by using aid techniques rather than free climbing this section, which is usually done using as a lie-back. The climber told Cuthbertson that there were two loose blocks near the top of this pitch (#24 of the Nose Route).

Cuthbertson told Kuhn of the hazardous block and of the recommendation to aid climb around the blocks. As Kuhn began to lead this pitch, Cuthbertson was belaying

him using a Sticht belay plate in front from his harness for better shock absorption in the event of a fall. The rear of Cuthbertson's harness was attached by carabiner and sling to the anchored bolt on the wall. Cuthbertson said Kuhn was climbing the pitch very confidently, safely and fast, but being cautious. Cuthbertson described Kuhn as being very physically fit. Kuhn climbed through the pitch aid climbing at times and free climbing at other times depending on the difficulty through each section of the pitch. When Kuhn reached the hazardous loose blocks (about one to two meters below the top of the pitch), he was free climbing rather than aid climbing as Cuthbertson recommended. Kuhn was belayed by an 11 mm purple rope that was three years old with a history of frequent weekend use. Kuhn was also attached to a yellow 9 mm rope being used as a haul rope for their additional equipment. This rope was attached to the carabiner that was attached to the same anchor as the haul bag and belay rope. The yellow 9 mm rope had a history of ice climbs and was four years old.

Cuthbertson was watching Kuhn as he placed a Friend for protection and then moved up and to the left in front of the loose block that they had been warned about. Cuthbertson said Kuhn was about "chest high" with this pyramidal shaped block. Kuhn appeared to be a little nervous about this hazard and he started to move back down to the right to a resting place to analyze the problem.

Cuthbertson then remembers looking down toward an American party of two climbers on pitch #22. The next thing Cuthbertson remembers is hearing a noise and then getting hit "like a slap" on the shoulder by something. Cuthbertson thinks it may have been Kuhn as he fell by. Cuthbertson said he instinctively ducked into the wall at the belay station as rocks fell by and he was showered by granite dust. Cuthbertson also told us that he remembered what sounded like a rope sliding down the face of the rock about the time he felt the "slap" on the shoulder.

When the rock stopped falling, Cuthbertson looked up the pitch where Kuhn was before the rockfall. Kuhn was no longer on the face and the severed end of the purple climbing rope was directly across from him at the belay station. Cuthbertson said it was then he realized that Kuhn had fallen. He could not see Kuhn anywhere and could only assume that Kuhn had fallen to his death. He could no longer see the loose block of granite near the top of the Pancake Flake pitch.

After the accident the party below (American party) called up and asked if the falling climber was Cuthbertson's partner and they asked if Cuthbertson was all right. Cuthbertson then yelled up to the German party above him and asked if they could lower a rope down to him so he could jumar up to their party to continue the climb so that he would not have to be rescued. Cuthbertson said one of them rappelled down to the top of the Pancake Flake pitch and lowered a rope. Cuthbertson then jumared up to Camp 5, joined the German party, and finished the climb with them. They bivouacked at Camp 6 that night. They topped out about 1400 on May 21, then hiked down the Upper Falls Trail and arrived at Sunnyside campground about 1730.

After further investigation and discussion, we were unable to determine which end of the yellow haul bag rope had been attached to Kuhn and which end had been attached to the anchor at the haul bag. One end of the rope had a carabiner that failed and the other end had a knot that failed for an unknown reason. We were able to determine that the purple haul rope was severed by the falling rock, since it had granitic dust embedded in it at the point where the rope was severed, but we were unable to determine why the yellow haul bag rope did not stop Kuhn from falling to

the base of El Capitan. (Source: Robert Wilson, Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

STRANDED, EXPOSURE, WEATHER, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, INEXPERIENCE

California, Yosemite Valley

On the evening of May 26, 1988, Yosemite experienced a cold storm which laid snow on higher elevations of the park. A two person climbing team consisting of Charles Hampson (33) and William Enger (32) were on the Northwest Face route of Half Dome. During the night they could not stay dry and became extremely cold. The following morning they yelled for help. The weather on May 27 was cold, with Half Dome clear of the clouds only occasionally.

Rangers communicated with the party via loud speaker and observed their responses through a telescope. In this way it was determined that the party felt they needed to be rescued and that they would not survive another night with the equipment they had.

Rescue efforts were begun about 1300 with the park helicopter. However, Half Dome was clouded in until about 1500, when a flight was made to attempt to lower survival gear to the party. Three flights to the dome were made between 1500 and 1715 in an attempt to get equipment to them. Each time the face of the dome clouded up before the equipment could be delivered. Because it was questionable if the weather would allow us to deliver the gear to the stranded party, a ground team of 12 persons started hiking the 14 kilometers and 1500 meter climb to the top of the dome. They carried equipment to perform a rescue of the party by lowering a rescuer from the top.

At 1730 the helicopter was able to get a bag of gear to the party. Then at 1851 a two person team with enough gear to do the rescue was placed on top of Half Dome by the helicopter. By 1915 a second bag of gear was delivered to the stranded party. With the equipment that we delivered to them, we felt confident that they could survive another night of bad weather if we were unable to evacuate them on Sunday.

The two person rescue team on the top was able to lower ropes and one rescuer descended to the party. He assisted them in rigging for ascending the ropes and both climbers were able to jumar under their own power to the summit. The rescuer rigged the climbers' gear and all the survival gear we had flown to them to the end of the rope so it could be hauled later, and then he ascended to the summit, arriving on top after dark. The rescue team then accompanied the climbers down the Half Dome cables and hiked to Yosemite Valley, arriving there about 0030 on Monday morning.

On Monday morning at 1033, three rangers and a helitack crew member were flown to the top of Half Dome to recover the ropes and equipment. They hauled the gear to the top, recovered the ropes and were flown off by 1430. (Source: Daniel Horner, Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

Analysis

On May 30, Ranger John Dill and I interviewed Charles Hampson at the rescue cache in Yosemite Valley. The following is the essence of some of the information he told us about the climb of the Regular Northwest Face Route of Half Dome which he and William Enger did from May 27 to May 28 and the subsequent rescue on May 29.