

A ten-person rescue team started hiking at 2230 and reached the top of the route at 0017. Two rescuers went over the edge at 0130 and reached the climbers, 500 feet below, at 0200. Everyone was safely on top by 0530. Ott and Orellana were cold and exhausted. They were given food and warm drinks and assisted to the Tioga Rd.

Analysis

Orellana was dressed in climbing tights and a T-shirt. Ott was wearing shorts and a short-sleeved shirt. Neither climber had additional clothing for low night-time temperatures or a change in the weather, nor had they brought a watch or headlamps. They had studied the route topo but had left it in the car, and had brought water but no food. They had two ropes and a large rack of hardware—several full sets of nuts and cams.

The Regular Route, on the north face of Fairview, is approximately 800 feet high, involving eight pitches of 5th class and three pitches of 4th class climbing. This makes it one of the longest routes in the Tuolumne Meadows area, a serious undertaking that may require most of a day. Since the altitude of Fairview Dome lies between 8800 and 9700 feet, temperatures frequently drop below freezing at night. (The low on August 10 was 34° F and the wind chill was much lower.)

Orellana had been climbing five years and leading for three. He had climbed at other areas, including one route on El Capitan. Ott was a novice, having very limited experience since taking a four-day course the year before.

On the day prior to attempting Fairview, they had completed two one-pitch climbs and a four-pitch climb, in the Tuolumne Meadows area, which gave them the confidence to tackle Fairview. Those routes, however, are much easier and far less committing than the Regular Route.

Ott and Orellana recklessly created a hazardous condition for themselves by starting the climb at a late hour and choosing to climb into the evening when they did not have headlamps. Their clothing was inadequate for the length of the climb and the possibility of spending the night on the route, and they had all the gear they needed to rappel the route before dark. Ott and Orellana were cited for Disorderly Conduct (creating a hazardous condition), 36CFR 2.34 (A) (4). They were each ordered by the court to pay half the cost of the rescue—\$990 apiece. (Source: Dave Page, NPS Ranger.)

FALL ON ROCK, NO HARD HAT

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On August 16, about noon, Brian Biega (23) was leading the 6th pitch of the Salathe Wall, belayed by Andreas Zegers (24). Their goal was to make Mammoth Terrace in two hours. They had 40 minutes to go, and Biega, nearing the end of the slab section, was “French-freeing,” i.e. grabbing fixed pieces as handholds rather than free-climbing or using etriers.

Suddenly Biega called, “Watch me,” and fell. Zegers saw the rope catch behind his leg, flipping him over. Biega fell backwards, headfirst, struck his head and stopped. He was unconscious and bleeding from the back of his head. He had fallen about 20 feet and was now hanging 30 feet above and 15 feet to one side of the belay.

Zegers yelled for help, then lowered Biega on the belay line and pulled him to the anchor with the haul line. He bandaged Biega’s head wound and checked his vital signs: he was still unconscious, his pulse was rapid and weak and his breathing was shallow, so Zegers worried that he might be in shock from blood loss.

They had passed a large team of Japanese climbers a couple of pitches below, and now several of them came up to help Zegers lower Biega five pitches to the ground. At about this time Biega regained consciousness, although he remained confused and vomited several times during the descent. They reached the ground at 1320.

Meanwhile one of the Japanese climbers had rappelled off the climb and notified the NPS. A ground team, the park helicopter, and a medical evacuation helicopter from Modesto all responded immediately. The ground team reached the base of the wall just after Biega did and found him conscious but disoriented. Given the likelihood of a serious head injury, he was given oxygen, immobilized, and shorthauled by the park aircraft to El Cap Meadow. About 1440 he was flown to Modesto by the Medi-Flite helicopter. Biega had suffered a skull fracture but he has recovered completely except for a large gap in his memory. He remembers grabbing a copperhead and clipping a piton driven upward, but little else until he woke up in the hospital.

PROTECTION PULLED, FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, NO HARD HAT

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

While Biega was being rescued (see previous account), Kirk Bland (33), Luc Mailloux, and Kevin McCracken (23) were fixing pitches on Mescalito, several hundred yards to the east. The second pitch, A2, was Bland's lead. Just before reaching the belay he placed a birdbeak on top of a deadhead (the broken remnant of a fixed copperhead). As he reached for the anchor the deadhead blew out. The last fifty feet of the pitch had been completely fixed with copperheads and, since he rarely trusted such placements, he had not clipped the rope to any of them. He fell at least 100 feet.

McCracken looked up just in time to see Bland fall backwards and upside down, striking his head on the rock. Mailloux, the belayer, was pulled upward ten feet as he stopped the fall. Bland hung there unconscious, as blood poured down the rock from a head wound.

They called to a climber at the base to go for help. Then they lowered Bland about 20 feet and pulled him over to the belay. He regained consciousness at that time. McCracken clipped himself to Bland, and Mailloux lowered both of them to the ground. Other climbers provided a first aid kit to bandage Bland's headwound while they waited for help.

The NPS team had just driven away from El Cap Meadow after Biega's rescue when they got word of the Mescalito accident. They circled back to the trailhead and headed to the scene. The situation was identical to the previous incident and so were their actions: Bland was immobilized in case of spinal injury, given oxygen and an IV, shorthauled to El Cap Meadow by the park helicopter, and flown by medivac helicopter to a hospital in Modesto.

Bland suffered a scalp laceration and a concussion. Like Biega, he remembers nothing of the fall.

Analysis

Biega and Bland were both experienced wall climbers. Neither was wearing a helmet, but they do now. Also, Bland now clips every piece in sight! (Zegers later told Bland that his favorite method for cleaning deadheads is to weight them with a birdbeak.)

The self-rescue dilemma: Good work by several climbers made for a fast rescue in each case. Had either victim suffered from serious intracranial bleeding—where time is critical—their actions could have saved his life. However there is always danger in mov-