

RAPPEL ERROR, INADEQUATE CLOTHING, HYPOTHERMIA, WEATHER California, Tuolumne Meadows, Pywiack Dome

On July 23, a powerful thunderstorm swept through Tuolumne Meadows in the early afternoon. My partner and I raced to the top of our route, simulclimbing the last two pitches as the storm bore down on Tenaya Lake. As we reached pavement, the storm cut loose with sheets of rain and violent gusts of wind. On the way to camp, we stopped at the Pywiack Dome pullout to have a look at some climbers who were just topping out on the exit pitches of the Dike Route. We noticed a nearby party on Needle Spoon, a two pitch 5.10a face climb. We checked out the party more closely with binoculars and discovered that they lacked not only raingear, but shirts of any kind (save a jogbra on her).

By now the storm was unleashing infrequent but alarmingly close bolts of lightning. The party began the first rappel from the last anchor station. The woman, who rappelled first, took a long time on rappel, and we began to suspect an epic. As she neared the end of the rappel, which ended on a sloping ledge approximately 200 feet above the ground, I noticed the rap ropes were not even. She stopped at the end of the short side of the rope (which wasn't knotted) and crouched, apparently reaching for the anchors on the first pitch of the Dike Route. As we watched, the rope slipped through her hand and her device and she tumbled approximately eight feet onto the ledge and rolled off. Miraculously, the woman managed to throw an arm onto the ledge to check an inevitable groundier, a move she later attributed to thoughts of her children. Her partner then evened the rope and rappelled down. They then tied off the rope for one full length rappel to a point approximately 25 feet above the ground. The woman reached the end of the rappel and was confused as to the best descent and almost incoherent. The two refused dry clothing and dashed for the car where they began to shiver violently in the heat of their vehicle as we spoke of the incident.

Analysis

The party knew of storms in the high country but chose to forego carrying raingear. Lauren Miller, a resident of California, stated that she had been climbing for 13 years. Still, she fell victim to the, "It's the sunny Sierras!" trap. Even on a short route, sodden ropes, violent wind, cold rain, and haste induced by mild hypothermia can be dangerous factors working against the retreating climber. Had the two been faster climbing to the last rappel anchor and rigging the rappels, they would still have been exposed, shirtless, to the cold rain of the thunderstorm for the duration of the descent, which would ordinarily involve two rappels and a fourth class scramble. In their haste to find shelter, the two neglected to locate the rope's center, to knot the ends, and/or to use a "hands free" backup, with almost tragic results. (Source: Frank Carus, ClimbMax Mountain Guides)

RAPPEL ANCHOR FAILURE—INADEQUATE KNOT and PROTECTION, FALL ON ROCK, HASTE, INEXPERIENCE, SLIGHT HANGOVER California, Tahquitz Rock

On August 11 around 1100, our party of four climbers in two groups proceeded up the route "The Uneventful" (5.5) at Tahquitz Rock. We did not plan to summit, only rappel