

of sight of belay. Belay saved my life, as did my helmet, because I hit my head enough to cause unconsciousness.

Lesson I learned: 1) Do NOT climb beyond experience level; 2) make all placements BOMB proof before proceeding; 3) do not remove hand or feet from rock, even if you know you "got it made." The climb ain't over until your butt is hooked in on top. (Source: Douglas Hoyt - 48)

## **WEATHER, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT**

### **California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan**

On Saturday, November 22, Tim Burnett (26) and Chris Abbott (45) arrived in the Valley for a climb of the Nose. At the Visitor Center the forecast was for clouds but no major storms in the next few days. They asked for an extended forecast, but the ranger helping them got called away and they decided not to wait. They fixed six pitches that day and started up their ropes around 1000 the next morning. They were equipped with waterproof bivy sacks, down sleeping bags, pads, Cortex parkas, waterproof overpants, fleece tops and bottoms, fleece hats, and insulated gloves.

By Monday evening, after two days of great weather, they were bivouacked on El Cap Tower with four pitches fixed above them. They got an early start Tuesday morning under partly cloudy skies, but lost a lot of time waiting for a party ahead of them. They stayed at Camp 5 that night after fixing most of the next pitch, and Abbott set up his bivy on a ledge about 20 feet above Burnett's. At about 1700 it started raining. The party above had pulled well ahead, continued in the rain, and apparently topped out after dark.

Soon it was raining extremely hard and turning to sleet. Burnett was able to stay dry and warm, but Abbott was in a spot where the water drenched him; he was soaked and cold almost immediately. In his 24 years of climbing and mountaineering he had never been in such a storm. The wind shrieked and howled, and the rain pelting their bivy sacks was so loud they could barely communicate to each other.

Eventually Abbott became so miserable that he felt they would not be able to get themselves off the wall. He was sitting up in his bivy sack to avoid the water running down the wall, but was soaked anyway. Burnett suggested that Abbott come down to his more protected ledge, but Abbott declined, afraid that rappelling even 20 feet would be too difficult. Finally, about midnight, without discussing it with Burnett, he started flashing SOS signals with his light.

Burnett was able to stay fairly comfortable for the first part of the night, except that he had to occasionally push himself back up the down-sloping ledge, exposing himself to running water. As time went on, his bivy bag gradually filled and he had to place tennis shoes behind his shoulders and butt to lift himself out of the puddle inside.

At about 0100 Abbott saw a car stop as he was flashing his light. Someone flashed back and the car left, headed toward the village. Forty five minutes later Abbott and Burnett heard a voice hailing them with a loud speaker, but they could not make out the words over the noise of the wind and rain. At one point Abbott thought he heard, "Get to Camp 4. Rescue will start up from the bottom in the morning." [He heard incorrectly.] Eventually the vehicle left.

The rain, snow, and wind continued all night, and they were still soaked in at day-break. They stayed sealed in their sacks for another hour and a half, then decided that no one could rescue them in the existing conditions. Abbott told Burnett that they had to make a run for it by rappelling. When Burnett heard that, "a light went on," and he realized that Abbott was right. They decided that the haul bag with the soaked down

bags, pads, and bivy sacks would slow them down, so they threw that gear off the wall, knowing that they were now committed to making it down that day.

At 0730 they started down with their rack, most of their clothing, a copy of the descent topo, their two 60m ropes, and a chunk of rope they'd chopped from their fixed pitch. They warmed up as they rappelled, and their gloves helped a lot, but they were still soaked to the skin. At one point they hung up a rope while trying to pull it, but managed to get it free.

Near Dolt Tower they didn't realize that the descent swings east around a corner, so they continued off route for two or three rappels until they found a fixed rope. By tying their chopped rope to it, they were able to swing east to other fixed ropes leading to the ground (belonging to a party waiting out the storm on Dolt Tower). They now made good time, touching down at mid-day.

The NPS had begun preparing for the rescue immediately after confirming the SOS signals at 0200. We requested the rescue helicopter from Naval Air Station Lemoore, but air operations were questionable given the weather, so a large team prepared to hike (8 miles) to the summit. We canceled our efforts once we were sure that Abbott and Burnett would make it down, nevertheless, gearing up the team to that level required 45 people and the Navy helicopter.

### Analysis

A friend with lots of El Cap experience had advised Abbott and Burnett that any precipitation in November would be snow, so they decided down sleeping bags would be OK. However, they had also read "Staying Alive," the safety article in the Yosemite climbing guide, that warns of cold rainstorms throughout the winter and clearly describes conditions on the walls in such weather and the inadequacy of down bags. It also stresses the importance of a rain fly, which Abbott and Burnett lacked.

Experience in the last few years has shown us that plastic sheets and even portaledge flies with bivy sacks are not completely reliable on rock ledges. There are too many ways for water to creep in, especially if you wind up in a bad spot. Although it's a hassle to take along, a portaledge with a properly seam-sealed fly in good condition is your best bet.)

The next best option is to get the hell out of there, but Abbott and Burnett had few defenses if anything went wrong on the descent: 1) They were already wet to the bone, with no storm protection. 2) They had no spare rope and got one stuck, but luckily freed it. (Hint: They could have taken their third rope along instead of chopping it, if, noticing the threatening weather, they had rigged their fixed pitch as a rappel.) 3) Finally, they got off route but stumbled across a fixed line that saved them. (Source: Dan Horner and John Dill, NPS Rangers, Yosemite National Park)

*(Editor's Note: There were six climbing accidents reported from Joshua Tree National Park. Five were falls, including a climber who rappelled off the end of the rope. The five were exacerbated by the fact the protection was inadequate. The injuries to all were fractures, including a fractured skull as a result of no hard hat.)*

### **HANDHOLD CAME OFF—FAILURE TO TEST HOLD, FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, INATTENTION**

#### **Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Lumpy Ridge**

On March 2, Hayner Brooks (44) was climbing with Ken Miller on the route Three's Company (I, 5.7), pitches one and two, into the final (third) pitch of the Thunder