

The helmet probably saved my life. It didn't prevent all my head injuries, because I hit partly on my face, but it obviously took a good whack because the internal harness had ripped partially loose from the shell.

Finally, our cell phone got help fast, but that's no reason to be careless. It's better to climb as if you had left it at home. (Source: Scott Earnest and John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

RAPPEL ERROR – UNEVEN ROPE ENDS, FALL ON ROCK

High Eagle Dome, Shuteye Ridge, California

On October 31, after setting up a toprope, I (45) tossed down it down and rappelled. About two thirds of the way down the route, I saw one taped end of the rope slipping through my rappel device, an image I will remember forever. I fell 20–25 feet to a broad, relatively flat granite ledge below.

I was in immediate pain and slightly amnesiac, but did not lose consciousness. My right pelvis and leg were extremely painful, and I was unable to bear any weight on that leg. I was bleeding from a cut in my scalp. My partner, Nancy Bleile, a physician, quickly assessed my medical condition, then ran to catch up with friends who had just left to drive home. They returned and assisted in my evacuation. The evacuation to the car required about two hours, compared to an approach time of about 20 minutes.

Subsequent medical evaluation revealed four fractures: one in the sacrum and three in the transverse processes (bumps on the sides) of my lumbar vertebrae.

Analysis

I failed to bring the rope to its midway point before starting to rappel. I have climbed quite a bit over the past twelve years, and I read ANAM, so I am well aware that rappelling is a dangerous aspect of the sport. I generally double check the rappel system before starting down, and in this instance I double checked my harness buckle, the gear placements, and carabiner positions. But I forgot to even out the ends of the rope.

There was no good excuse for this mistake, but several things may have contributed to my haste. This was to be our last climb of the day, and as the sun began to sink in the sky, we could feel the late afternoon chill beginning to move in. Gear placements were somewhat hard to find, and I had to tinker to get solid placements. As I built the anchor and set up the rope, I was in a rather uncomfortable position. I was eager to get down and try the climb. The rope was moderately tangled, so I tossed it down, hoping it would straighten itself out.

Knotting the ends of the rope would have prevented the accident, though we had just done a nearby climb and we knew there was plenty of rope to reach the ground, had it been evened out. Or a partner on the ground, observing the toprope setup, could have stopped me before I got into trouble.

Had I rolled off the ledge, I might have fallen several hundred feet further. Had I landed differently, I might have sustained even more serious back or head injuries. I was not wearing a helmet, but I will be much more likely to do so in the future. (Source: Sam Gitchel)