Analysis

Thin exfoliation slabs are characteristic of granite. You can see the scars of similar rockfalls all around the Valley, and it is pretty difficult to climb walls without exposing yourself to this risk.

Jason: "The quality of granite in the vicinity of the NA Wall is relatively poor for El Cap. It's no wonder the wall overhangs there more than anywhere else, and no wonder the roof above us was so big. I've heard stories of borderline epics on routes like the NA Wall, because even though the climbing is relatively straight forward, the darker dioritic rock is so loose in places that typically solid piton placements become suspect. You often have no way to judge how solid an expanding flake is. In fact, Dale Bard told me that when he did the first ascent of Iron Hawk 20 years ago, he thought Cam's flake would fall off then. But, if you back off every time a piece shifts, you'll never get up a wall and should probably choose a different hobby.

"A helmet definitely would have protected my head if I'd been hit there. I'm pretty damn lucky that the rocks missed my head and that they didn't do more damage to my neck. Cam and I still ruminate over how lucky we both were... that the lead rope wasn't cut above the GriGri, that the GriGri held, that neither of us was crushed by the rock, that we were able to get ourselves down. What a silly sport." (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

FALL ON ROCK– INADEQUATE HAULING SYSTEM

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On May 2, Jeff (40) and Don (20) climbed the first two pitches of Zenyatta Mondatta (VI 5.7 A5) on El Capitan. They hauled most of their gear and returned to the Valley for the night, leaving their ropes fixed in place. The 60-meter lead rope, anchored at the top of pitch two, was 30 feet short of the ground, so they tied on the haul line to get the rest of the way down; the rest of the haul line lay piled on the ground. Since both pitches overhang, the lines hung free all the way from the anchor.

The next morning Jeff climbed the fixed ropes, intent on hauling the last load of gear. When he reached the anchor, he clipped his two daisy chains to the bolts and got off the rope, standing on footholds.

He set up a basic hauling system: He rigged the fixed lead rope through a pulley and pulled all the slack rope up from the ground, through the pulley, until he felt the weight of the haul bag. He held the rope from the haul bag in place with an upside down ascender on the haul bag side of the pulley; as the load came up, the ascender would capture its progress. Now all the slack in the system, about 160 feet of lead rope, hung in an 80-foot long loop between the pulley and where the lead rope was tied to the anchor.

Jeff attached his other ascender to the rope on the loop side of the pulley, clipped the ascender to his harness, and got to work, hauling in short segments by pushing out from the wall. He also disconnected his daisy chains to give himself more range. Now he was supported by his feet on the holds and the resistance of the haul bag. After getting the bag up 40-50 feet and passing the knot through

the pulley, he got tired of the repetition and decided to counterbalance haul (i.e., he would ride the rope down on his side of the pulley while the bag came up on the other side), as he had often done with heavy loads in the past.

With his single hauling ascender clipped on the line (he was not even tied in short), he stepped off. But he had overlooked two facts: He weighed 170 pounds, while the bag—just portaledges and clothing—weighed no more than 50 pounds. Don, standing on the ground, heard a "ziiiiiip!" and lookezd up to see Jeff rocketing down the wall, passing the haul bag like two cars in a game of chicken. Jeff said later that the weight discrepancy never struck him as significant.

If nothing had intervened, Jeff would have fallen until the haul bag slammed into the pulley or he reached the bottom of the loop (which lengthened as he fell). Either case would have sent him about 200 feet (plus stretch), possibly striking the ground or loading his ascender to the breaking point. But the loop had twisted below him, and it entangled him as he fell. He stopped, held in place by a huge wad of rope cinched tightly around his lower legs, hanging upside down 120 feet in the air and 15 feet from the wall. The bag hung 30-40 feet below the pulley, but both sides of the loop were partially supporting him.

Jeff struggled to get himself upright and get the tension off his legs by tying prusiks on the rope with shoe laces and webbing, but they kept slipping. The ropes soon cut off the circulation in one leg. He developed a headache and felt like he was blacking out. After an hour of thrashing around, he asked Don to get help from the Park Service.

Leading two A4 pitches to reach him would have taken the SAR team more time than Jeff could spare, so they used a line gun to shoot a cord up through the loop, where Jeff could grab it. He pulled up a rope and a pair of ascenders; he anchored that rope to his own by attaching the ascenders to one side of the loop supporting him. Team member Scott Burk started up the line, but the haul bag went up and Scott went down. Jeff had clipped the ascenders to the pulley side of the loop! He switched them to the anchored side and Scott climbed up to him quickly.

Scott anchored himself on the lead rope just above Jeff and tied him off. After a few minutes he managed to raise Jeff enough to get him untangled, then he lowered him to the ground with the NPS rope through a descender. At one point Scott noticed an ascender hanging free from Jeff's harness. Jeff had apparently removed it from the line during his struggles, leaving him completely dependent on the snarl around his legs.

Jeff had been dangling there for three hours or more. When he got down, the muscles in one foot were paralyzed because of nerve damage. After being examined at El Cap Meadow by the ambulance crew and the park physician, he refused further treatment, even though he could barely walk. He eventually recovered the use of his foot.

Analysis

On the one hand, this incident should need no analysis. Jeff had climbed over 60 walls in his career. He knew the importance of a secure tie-in, and he should have known the weight of the haul bag. He was used to hauling heavy loads

this way and the consequences this time simply did not occur to him. (There are safe ways to haul light loads, using yourself as a counterbalance.) He also did not have a chest harness, prusik slings, or other gear that would have made a self-rescue easier, and he did not think to tie three-wrap prusiks or other ascender hitches, when his two-wrap prusiks slipped.

There is another factor, however. Everyone at the scene said Jeff reeked of alcohol—Scott smelled it from at least 10 feet away as he climbed the rope. Jeff was belligerent with rescuers and medics. He claimed that he had had only one drink—vodka—that morning, and insisted that he was dead sober on the wall. No legal action was taken against him.

Regardless of his state of sobriety, Jeff came close to dying in several ways, and getting him to safety put Scott at more than normal risk when he relied on Jeff's rigging. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)
(Editor's Note: We are reminded of the famous Buster Keaton comedy routine involving a pulley, rope, and wooden bucket of bricks...)

FALL ON ROCK, PLACED INADEQUATE PROTECTION

California, Mount Whitney

On May 15, Graeme Taylor (39) and Keith Reid (37), both experienced climbers, were in the Giant Staircase of the East Face route on Mt. Whitney. Graeme was about 40 feet out on lead when a snow mushroom he was standing on collapsed. Graeme fell 40 feet to one of the stairs. He briefly lost consciousness and suffered injuries so that he was unable to climb further. Keith placed him in a bivy sack, tied him in, and solo climbed to the top. He descended via the trail and notified the Kern County Sheriff.

Analysis

Place pro even when your skill level might not require it, especially in questionable terrain. Err on the side of caution when on mixed terrain. Both climbers were wearing helmets. Graeme's helmet was severely damaged in the fall, but it probably saved his life. (Source: Werner Hueber, China Lake Mountain Rescue Group)
(Editor's Note: There was one other incident reported from Mount Whitney. A 64-year-old man lost control when glissading, resulting in a fractured fibula. Though he had 48 years of experience, he still chose to wear crampons, and when he hit a hard patch of snow, his right crampon caught.)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE BELAY, POOR COMMUNICATION

California, Yosemite Valley, Lower Yosemite Falls

On June 24, Raj Dhingra (39), my brother Hugh (34), and I—Dan Sakols (37)—decided to tackle Commitment (three pitches, 5.9), one of the "Five Open Books" west of Lower Yosemite Falls. We got an early start to avoid the crowd and finished the first two pitches, both 5.8, with no complications.

Hugh led the third pitch, which starts with 5.9 moves around the right side of a big roof, then finishes up a right-facing 5.8 corner. After Hugh climbed out of sight at the top it was impossible to communicate, even by shouting.