

I like to believe that accidents aren't really accidental, and I believe that is true here. Some part of me didn't want to climb that weekend, and when I didn't listen, it found a way to get my attention. I was tired from a long week of work, and I wanted to stay home, rest up, work on the house, and socialize in town. I was also coming to believe that exploring the possibility of a new relationship might be a lot more of an adventure than exploring another rock climbing route. But I had made a commitment to my partners to go, and although I knew they wouldn't really mind if I didn't, I felt I had given my word and was duty-bound to carry through. And when we got up on the Lost Brother, some part of me was not really enthusiastic about exploring those ugly-looking chimneys. It was an idea we had, but I felt little joy at the prospect as I led out. In short, I wasn't psyched to climb, and that is a vulnerable state to be in when leading.

In the end, I paid a price for not honoring my own spirit. The consequences were harsh, but far less so than they could have been. I consider myself the luckiest unlucky guy in the world. (Source: Paul Minault)

(Editor's Note: Paul Minault's analysis covers a lot of ground, and as a result, fewer narratives on California are included this year. We thank Paul, one of the pioneers for The Access Fund, for his contribution.)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT, WEATHER

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

At 4 a.m. on September 30, I (Tom Randall—22) started up Eagle's Way, VI 5.8 A3, on El Cap, in an attempt to break the solo record. I had checked the weather with the rangers at the Wilderness Center and was given, "...sunny for the next two days," (ample time for me to do the route) and received the same from a telephone weather line two hours before I started.

I climbed straight through the day and was cleaning pitch 11 after dark that evening when my headlamp battery ran out. I had a brand new spare with me, which turned out to be a total dud and gave out after half an hour on pitch 12. No big problem. I just lowered off to the belay and settled down for a night in my comfy harness—but it did put me ten hours behind.

The next morning, I finished leading pitch 12 and got all racked up for 13. I was belaying with a Grigri connected to the belay loop on my seat harness by a brand new DMM Belay Master locking carabiner. To back up the Grigri I periodically tied a knot in the free side of the rope and clipped it to my harness, leaving several feet of slack between the knot and the Grigri so that I could do a few moves.

The pitch went bolt (which I back-cleaned), rivet (to which I attached a big, beefy, hanger), copperhead (back-cleaned), RURP (back-cleaned), RURP (back-cleaned), copperhead. I was on the copperhead and had just taken my adjustable daisy from the RURP and was reaching up to the next placement when, "PING!" the copperhead pulled.

I fell 20 feet back to the rivet, the hanger broke, and I continued directly onto the belay—factor 2! The rope came tight on my Grigri, but then the

locking carabiner just snapped off and I continued to fall for another 20 feet, which was the slack to my backup knot—all that kept me from the talus field below. When I came to a stop, the Grigri was 20 feet above me still on the rope. The total fall was about 60 feet.

On the way down I flipped upside down and took some pretty bad rope burns to my left hand (I'm left handed). I could hardly use the hand and the fall had inflamed an old back injury.

I ascended to the belay and weighed my options. I badly wanted to do this route in a good time. How fast could I lead, clean and jug each pitch now? It had taken me 20 minutes to jug 40 feet to the anchor. Also my Grigri is mangled—a screw sheared off and the plastic piece pushed out by the loss of the 'biner—so I'm going to have use a slower system. I can stand up straight, but bending over or exerting my back muscles in any way is killing me. To cut a long story short—I asked for a rescue. Yes, I hated myself for it and I know that it was the wimp's way out. But at least I'm a wimp who gets to live another day.

The rescue went fine, despite the fact that the “sunny” forecast had turned into a stormy afternoon, with rain and snow showers. The rescuer was lowered from the top, as vertically, I think I was only a few hundred feet below the rim. We then lowered together on 1200-foot-long ropes tied together to reach the ground.

Analysis

The Belay Master is normally equipped with a plastic guard that prevents cross-loading the 'biner, by separating the harness and the Grigri. But the guard on mine had been stolen so I had decided to go without one. We never found the 'biner, but I think it most likely became cross-loaded between the Grigri and the harness loop, dropping its breaking strength to well within the danger zone.

Does the Grigri itself create stopping forces that are dangerously high? Petzl does not approve it for this type of climbing, but a lot of us use it anyway.

Was I wrong to have back cleaned the bolt? It was my first—and only—solid piece and it would have decreased my fall factor. I thought about it, but the bolt was about six feet to the right and level with the belay, and the belay was built to take an upward pull. I could have put a long sling on the bolt, but straight above was a nice rivet. So I decided to take what I thought at the time was a small risk: I would keep the belay aligned by back-cleaning the bolt and clipping the rivet. That was the BIG error. I didn't think I was going to fall in the first easy 25 feet of climbing, and I didn't think that a big rivet hanger would break. And next time I'll take along some shock absorbers for those critical pieces.

ALWAYS tie a back-up knot!! I have always been one to say, “I won't happen to me!” or, “His gear only broke because it was probably 15 years old and he kept it in a bucket of acid...” But now we know—these things do happen to me and it could be anyone. I can't really express how glad I am that I took the precaution.

I don't remember who said that about the combination of errors and bad luck that leads to failure situations, but I couldn't agree more. Think of all those days out when one little thing happens and it leads to nothing and you think, "Oh, that was lucky." Well one day, all those little things may happen at once. (Source: Tom Randall)

NPS Comments

Tom made several mistakes in his selection and use of climbing gear. Our main issue, however, is not his choice of belay or protection technique, but his preparation for surviving on El Cap in case he were stranded in bad weather—as happened in this case. Like most speed climbers, he took only a lightweight set of clothing—a couple of warm undershirts, a fleece top, a storm jacket, a hat, and gloves—but no other storm gear or shelter. This was completely insufficient for sitting out a storm. Furthermore, he had only one rope for retreat and less than a day's worth of food—especially given all the calories required of a solo ascent. Finally, he took one used headlamp battery and only one spare—that failed.

The weather, in fact was cold, windy, and cloudy, with intermittent rain and snow squalls. Our concern wasn't Tom's injuries, which seemed stable (though painful), but hypothermia during the night to come, given his lack of gear. A large search was in progress in the high country, which tied up most of our resources. To get a team quickly to the top of El Cap we had to pull our helicopter and some team members off the search, and then hope for a safe flying window during breaks in the weather. We managed to fly between squalls, and decided to lower Tom all the way to the bottom of the route rather than raise him, because another flight—to get him off the top—was not guaranteed. After the rescue, the team rappelled the East Ledges descent route.

Tom based his decision to start the route on the weather forecast, which he checked from two different sources, but both sources use the same original information. Every experienced climber should know that you should not rely upon the weather forecast in the mountains.

Tom is right about the compounding effect of a series of errors and bad luck. How many of each can you find in this account? For more on this accident see "British Soloist Charged with Reckless Endangerment" in the aid climbing forum on www.rockclimbing.com. (Source: John Dill—Park Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

FAILED TO TURN BACK, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT, WEATHER, POOR POSITION—BIVOUAC SITE

California, Split Mountain

In October, the climb up our twelfth 14,000-foot peak, Split Mountain, did not go well. One member of our climbing party, Dave French, was hospitalized for frostbite afterward and is still recovering.

It was early October. Dave, his son Sean, Sean's friend Matt, their college professor Tom Campbell and I were expecting late summer conditions with fair weather and little wind. We did not realize however, that a