

Analysis

Megan Polk had been climbing about four years and had led trad 5.11b routes. Her partner was experienced enough to lead this 5.11b climb. Both were experienced enough to know about proper rappel set-ups.

In an interview, Polk stated that she seldom ties stopper knots in the ends of rappel ropes. In this case, she also chose not to use an autoblock system. Many climbers will forego this because the situation seems so “simple.”

The 70-meter rope was more than long enough. Polk was responsible for verifying that both ends reached the belay, first by asking O’Day, second by checking during the descent. We are also reminded that partners should check each other’s rigging whenever possible. Unfortunately, her memory of what she thought and did (or didn’t do) on the rest of the rappel was wiped out by the blow to her head.

It’s obvious that Polk was extremely lucky, given her injuries and the fact that she was not wearing a helmet. The steep dirt/rock slope may have helped cushion the blow, but one rock in the wrong place could have killed her. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, and Jed Williamson)

STRANDED—ROPES STUCK IN CRACK, INADEQUATE CLOTHING, EQUIPMENT AND FOOD, FATIGUE

California, Yosemite National Park, Fairview Dome

At 2048 on August 13, Matt Ciano was solo climbing the regular route on Fairview Dome when he heard cries for help. Ciano stopped midway up the route to investigate. He made verbal contact with two climbers. They told him that their ropes were stuck in a crack, that they were unable to continue, and that they needed a rescue. Ciano topped out on the regular route and came to the SAR campsite in Tuolumne Meadows campground to report the incident. The SAR response was initiated.

At 2130, SAR members Roberts and Clayton hiked to the base of Fairview Dome and made contact with the stranded climbers, Andre Colmenares (23) and David Allfrey (21), who stated that they were in between pitches 7 and 8. They had no warm clothes, no headlamps, no food or water, and were too tired to continue. They needed assistance.

Around 2300, Roberts and Clayton arrived on top of Fairview to spot the focal point, fall line, and rigging site for the operation. This was done with assistance from Ranger Lawler on the Tioga Rd. Through his patrol car, he made contact with Colmenares and Allfrey. He had the climbers flash their cigarette lighter in order to locate them on the rock face. By radio, he and Roberts were able to get an exact location on the summit of the focal point. At 0030, all SAR personnel, including Ranger Ramsdell, were on top and beginning rigging for a high-angle rescue. All ropes were rigged and ready for operations by 0155.

Adhering to NPS protocols, a main line and a belay line were implemented. Roberts was lowered over the edge to locate and make contact. He was then lowered about 400 feet to their position on a small three-foot by six-foot ledge. Colmenares and Allfrey said they were very cold, dehydrated, and hungry. Roberts provided them with warm clothes, food, and drink. They were uninjured and in a fairly good mood.

Being properly secured to the ropes by Roberts, Colmenares and Allfrey jumared one-at-a-time to the top. This was accomplished by jumaring the main line while they were being belayed on the line from above. Both were on top and clear of the ledge by 0332. Roberts cleaned the anchor on the rock face and also jumared to the top on belay. He was clear of the edge by 0408. The rigging team demobilized all anchors and ropes and was ready to hike out by 0425. The team and climbers hiked down the back side of Fairview together. Everyone was back at the SAR Cache by 0545.

Analysis

Around 0545, I talked with David Allfrey about the incident. Allfrey said that he and his partner began climbing the Inverted Staircase around 1030 on August 13. Both climbers had done the regular route on Fairview earlier in the year and felt they were up for the challenge of this route. Both have less than two years climbing experience. (Source: Edited from a report by Ted Roberts, Search and Rescue Technician)

FALL ON ROCK, POSITION—FACING OUT DOWN-CLIMBING SLABS

California, Yosemite National Park, Lembert Dome

On August 14, Aaron Barnett (19) and Dustin Holcomb (21) were going to climb the NW Books (5.6) on Lembert Dome. Holcomb had led it before and would lead today. The approach to many of the routes in this area, including the NW Books, involve 2nd and 3rd class slabs. Barnett and Holcomb were deliberately off route exploring the area when they decided to descend to the base to make the approach to their intended climbing route. They were taking slightly separate routes down the slabs when Barnett slipped and slid about 100 feet. His left foot hit a crack and spun him around, fracturing his ankle and twisting his foot almost 90 degrees to one side.

Holcomb hiked out to tell the NPS about the accident. The SAR team reached Barnett about thirty minutes later and carried him to the ambulance for transfer to Mammoth Hospital.

Analysis

Both had plenty of experience peak bagging and were comfortable on normal 3rd class. They were both ski and snowboard instructors and comfortable in out-of-bounds terrain in those sports. They had skied or snowboarded on Mount Shasta—couloirs, etc. Barnett had less climbing experience. He had followed a couple of trad routes but did not lead.