

STRANDED – ROPE STUCK, POOR COMMUNICATION – WIND, INEXPERIENCE

California, Yosemite Valley, Sunnyside Bench

After an hour of getting nowhere, Peter called the NPS for help. The ranger taking the call asked if Peter could rappel or Prusik down and free the rope. Peter replied that he didn't want to rappel and didn't know how to Prusik. Ranger Scott obviously didn't want to force the issue, so two rescuers responded. By the time they reached Nora, the stuck rope had been freed by another passing climber. Nora now had a safe upper belay but the rescuers found her clinging to the rock and afraid to move. Todd continued up to Peter, built his own anchor, and belayed both Nora and Colleen up the pitch. Everyone finished the climb and scrambled down the Sunnyside Bench descent path to the Valley.

Analysis

Nora was a beginner, so it was wise of her to be scared and careful. Peter claimed that he had several years of climbing experience at a high grade, including multi-pitch routes. The rescuers noted that he had an adequate anchor for himself and plenty of gear to descend, so not knowing what to do or how to do it was the likely culprit.

Peter and Nora were very appreciative of the rescuers' help, but one comment from Peter stuck in Ranger Scott's mind: "It's great to climb in the Valley. No matter how much trouble you get into you can just dial 911 for YOSAR." As long as Peter lacks basic self-rescue skills, we're likely to hear from him again. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger)

OFF ROUTE, FALL ON ROCK – PROTECTION PULLED WHEN WEIGHTED, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, COMPLACENCY

California, Yosemite Valley, Half Dome

On May 31, Maeve Devlin (19) and I, John-Mark Toth (22), hiked up to the classic Snake Dike route. From the base of the climb I led up the polished, low angle fourth class section to the 5.7 traverse that goes left under the roof. Here I placed my first piece, a .75 Camalot. "Bomber!" I thought. When I looked at the traverse, I saw hand and foot holds, so I started left, but after a few moves, it began to feel harder than 5.7—maybe 5.10a. I'd only climbed a few other pitches in Yosemite thus far and I thought, "Maybe this is a typical rating and it just feels harder." I was doing fine so I kept going. About 15 feet from the Camalot and 90 feet off the ground, with just one more move to the end of the tricky part, my left foot slipped. If you know anything about friction climbing you know this spells disaster.

I yelled, "Falling!" and turned around so I would slide on my butt. I looked at my protection, waiting for it to catch me. Much to my surprise, my placement wasn't so "bomber". The Camalot ripped off a two-foot by one-foot chunk of rock, leaving me with no protection

at all. I managed to stay on my butt and slide feet first down the pitch, but I wasn't able to miss one little feature that caught my left foot and gave me my only serious injury—an ankle fracture. Not bad for falling 90 feet. I hit the ground. Luckily, my chunk of Half Dome hit a few feet to my left, also avoiding Maeve and a couple of other climbing parties.

I immediately knew I was hurt and everyone at the base started helping me. The rangers decided to fly me out because carrying me in a litter back to the trail was almost as difficult and risky as me exiting on my own. They advised me to keep my climbing shoe on the injured foot, which worried me, because if they later decided to cut it off, I would be very sad. While waiting for the helicopter I kept my foot elevated and packed in snow to help with the swelling. I surprised myself by staying in high spirits and making jokes to manage the pain.

The helicopter came back, I was hooked in, and we took off for the Valley. When we landed I made my shoe-cutting policy clear to the ambulance crew. Luckily they were also climbers and managed to save my TC Pros. At the hospital I learned that my fibula was broken in two places near the ankle.

Analysis

First, I should have doubled up my protection. I'd fallen on lots of trad gear with no failures before this one, but you can't fully judge the rock with only a whimpy tap or tug test. My piece looked so good that I didn't even consider a backup, though other placements were available. The easy climbing up to the roof and the fact that I can lead up to low 5.11 trad may have added to my complacency.

Second, I tried the "5.7" traverse 15-20 feet too high. My friends had climbed it and simply told me, "Go to the roof and go left," and I didn't notice on the topo that after placing protection under the roof, you drop down for the traverse. I looked over, saw holds, and nothing stood out as being an easier way. That's just the nature of climbing, and it's partly why I fell, but inadequate protection is why I broke my leg and hit the ground. (Sources: John-Mark Toth and John Dill, NPS Ranger)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION CAME OFF

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan Muir Wall

Although I had climbed several walls in Zion, I had never climbed El Capitan; in fact, I had never even been to the Valley. Yosemite, and El Capitan in particular, had been built up in my mind, the ultimate destination and the ultimate goal.

Finally, on June 3, I arrived in Yosemite Valley with five weeks to climb. I carefully packed eight days worth of supplies, gear, ropes, and hardware into my haul bags, and within an hour of entering the Valley, I was humping loads to the base of The Captain.

After a day and a half climbing to the top of pitch eight, a gathering storm threatened several days of rain. I storm-proofed my gear and