

Accidents in North American Mountaineering

2012

Fall on Rock, Poor Communication

Virginia, Shenandoah National Park, Old Rag Mountain

Late on Sunday afternoon June 5, Old Rag Mountain Stewards staff was getting ready to start scenario training when a call came into the park that Dave Rockwell (50+) had taken a fifty-foot fall on the Skyline (aka PATC) Wall.

Initial descriptions of events leading to the injury were that someone in Dave's party led Dobie Gillis (5.8) a climb about halfway up the wall and set anchors for a top rope belay and then lowered to the ground. Based on initial reports, Dave tied into the end of the original lead rope and climbed to the mid-wall anchors. Upon reaching the anchors, Dave and his belayer somehow got their signals mixed up. The belayer thought Dave was off belay while Dave thought he was still on belay. Thinking he was securely belayed, Dave intentionally placed all his weight on the un-secured belay line and fell fifty feet to the rocky ground where he sustained fractures to this left ankle, pelvis, and elbow. He was evacuated by NPS helicopter.

Analysis

The belay contract is a basic skill in climbing that many climbers take for granted. (Emphasis added)

It was very fortunate for Dave that ORMS had trained responders on the mountain and that the weather conditions were such that they were not stressing the patient. Most importantly the weather and time of day meant that a National Park helicopter could respond and rapidly evacuate him. (Source: Edited from a post on oldragpatrolsbyrsl-blook.blogspot.com/)

(Editor's Note: One of several this year.)

2014

Fall On Rock – Miscommunication

Colorado, Eldorado Canyon State Park, West Ridge

In the late afternoon on October 19, a party of four was climbing on the West Ridge in two parties of two. According to one of these climbers, Mark

Hanna, a male climber, 42, and his partner were top-roping the first pitch of Iron Horse (5.11) as their last climb of the day. The climber topped out at the anchors, about 80 feet above the ground, and yelled "OK!" At this point his belayer took him off belay, thinking the climber would descend via rappel, as they had done on previous climbs throughout the day.

The climber leaned back to be lowered and fell about 60 feet to a ledge 15 to 20 feet off the ground. He was caught by a small juniper. A climber on scene scrambled up, secured him, and tried to keep him comfortable until Rocky Mountain Rescue arrived.

The climber regained consciousness after a few minutes and was able to talk and answer questions, which was a positive sign considering he was not wearing his helmet. His injuries included a bad scalp laceration and multiple fractures (leg, heel, and pelvis). He was evacuated by helicopter.

Analysis

This is an all-too-common type of accident. Before starting a climb, the belayer and climber must clearly agree on what the climber plans to do when he or she reaches the anchors. The belayer should never take the climber off until he is certain the climber is off belay. The climber also needs to be precise with instructions once he reaches the anchor. If this climber had yelled "take" or "lower" instead of "OK," it would have made it clearer to the belayer that he was ready to be lowered instead of planning to rappel. The climber also should test the system and, if possible, visually verify that he's still on belay before trusting that he's ready to be lowered. *(Source: The Editors.)*

2011

Climber Unties from Team — Disappears During Severe Weather, Inexperienced Climbing Partners Washington, Mount Rainier, Gibraltar Ledges

On the morning of July 1, Eric Lewis (57) went missing when his climbing companions discovered that he had unclipped from the climbing rope and disappeared. The three-man team was ascending the Gibraltar Ledges route and encountered high wind and low visibility. The climber in the lead, Don Storm, Jr., stopped and was joined by the second climber on the rope, Trevor Lane. At 13,900 feet, as they waited for Lewis to join them,

they discovered only a coil with a butterfly knot when they reeled the rope in. They had caught glimpses of Lewis on the rope just moments before and immediately searched the slope below them. After what they deemed a thorough local search, they proceeded to the summit ridge in case Lewis had somehow skirted around them while they searched below. When Lewis was not found on the summit ridge, they returned to Camp Muir and reported the incident to climbing rangers.

Climbing ranger Tom Payne and two mountain guides climbed rapidly from Camp Muir to the summit looking for Lewis late Thursday (July 1st) afternoon. Arriving in the summit vicinity at 2000, the searchers looked for Lewis or any signs of his presence, but without any results. The search team returned to Camp Muir around 2200. Meanwhile, additional resources were sent up to Camp Muir Thursday afternoon to provide additional searchers and support personnel.

On Friday (July 2) the search expanded, with more than 40 personnel involved. Ground searchers included National Park Service climbing rangers, climbing guides from Rainier Mountaineering, Alpine Ascents International, and International Mountain Guides, as well as a few volunteers from Mountain Rescue. Park rangers aboard a military CH-47 Chinook helicopter from Fort Lewis and a contract helicopter from Northwest Helicopters searched from the air.

By mid-morning one team of ground searchers, which had focused its efforts on the 13,000-14,000-foot level, located the climber's backpack (containing climbing harness, snow shovel, and full but frozen water bottles) at 13,600 feet and then a tiny snowcave about 200 vertical feet above it. Another search team climbed and scoured the entire Gibraltar Ledges route along with the upper Nisqually and Ingraham Glaciers. A third search team concentrated efforts on the West side of the East crater rim, looking in the steam caves when possible.

Yet another search team consisting of rangers from Camp Schurman climbed up and over the Emmons route to thoroughly search the summit rim steam caves and then join the alpine search effort in the vicinity of the Ingraham Glacier and the Disappointment Cleaver.

On the third day of the search, both air and ground operations resumed. Rangers staged at Camp Muir continued the ground search operations, skiing to the base of Gibraltar Chute to search the area for signs of the

missing climber. Having exhausted the searchable terrain on the Ingraham Glacier side the previous day, the ground search was refocused on the Nisqually Glacier side to cover the possibility that Lewis had fallen while down-climbing the Gibraltar Ledges or Gibraltar Chute routes. Rangers thoroughly examined the terrain in the fall line of these routes. They also explored the base of the Nisqually Icefall and the Muir Rocks Ridge leading up to the Gibraltar Chute, climbing up to and into the bergschrund under the chute.

Having searched the area extensively in and adjacent to the climber's last known location and having found no additional clues on the third day of the search, the likelihood of finding Lewis alive had diminished greatly. Given the very cold and very windy conditions during and following Lewis' disappearance and the lack of any emergency gear carried by the climber, survival in such harsh conditions for three days was unlikely. Weather models for what would be day four of the search indicated a front approaching with precipitation and high winds forecast on the mountain. Both air and ground search efforts would be curtailed by the incoming weather.

(Editor's Note: There was more narrative about the continuing and extensive searches. Mr. Lewis was not and has not yet been found.)

Analysis

Weather conditions had a lot to do with this incident, but the most significant contributing factors will probably never be known. The climber who unclipped from his partners' rope did so in very severe weather and for no known reason. Guesses included that he didn't want to slow his group down, had to deal with some personal problem, or had a mental lapse due to fatigue, hypothermia, or some altitude related illness. All were mentioned as possible reasons for him leaving the rope. It is also unknown how long Mr. Lewis was able to survive before succumbing to the cold or a fall from which he could not have survived. The discovery of his pack and a small "snow cave" high on the Ingraham Glacier provide clues that Mr. Lewis did survive for some time after losing contact with his party.

Lewis had left for his climb with very little in his pack, presumably to go "fast and light". As a result, Lewis had little to rely on when he separated from his team, especially given the weather conditions. He did not have a

sleeping bag, tent, or any additional clothing beyond that which he had on his back.

While his party members did do a preliminary search when they realized Mr. Lewis was no longer on the rope, weather and inexperience hampered this effort. Mr. Lewis was actually the most experienced of the three climbers, although not the most fit of all of them. The area searched by the two climbers was just the radius of one rope from where they realized Mr. Lewis had gone missing. They did not feel comfortable backtracking even a few hundred feet down route, which was very likely the spot where Mr. Lewis had unclipped. By returning to Camp Muir and alerting NPS rangers to the situation, the climbers were able to summon people with more knowledge and experience to help search, but with the weather conditions and limited information on the exact location Mr. Lewis was last seen, search efforts were not successful.

Being able to navigate and deal with unexpected situations in all types of weather are required skills for traveling safely in mountain environments. Also, knowing yourself and your climbing partners' limitations are vital for successful climbing trips. (Source: Edited from a report by Glenn Kessler, Climbing Ranger)