



AAC Publications

Slip on Rock, Protection Pulled Out

Colorado, Front Range, Mt. Bancroft

Alexander Lee, left Boulder around 6 a.m., planning to climb the mostly fourth class Direct East Ridge (II 5.4) of Mt. Bancroft (13,250 feet) in the James Peak Wilderness Area. According to Hermans, “The day was overcast and we had a few big gusts and short bursts of hail, but nothing too rough. The [technical portion of the] climb was not on the main route, but it was easy. Sterling climbed the face with no problem, but walking along the top ledge he slipped, as if on a banana peel or black ice. To our horror his slip propelled him off the ledge, and he rag-dolled back down the face he’d just climbed, smashing and crashing into ledges and the rock wall along the way. At one point a nut placement pulled, causing Sterling to fall further. Fortunately, Alex (on belay) was able hold the fall, and Sterling stopped about eight feet above the ground.” Sterling was upside down, unconscious, bleeding profusely from the head, and making terrible noises. His mouth was full of a foamy, gray liquid. Hermans and Lee called 911 and tended to Sterling as they waited for help to arrive. Hermans continued, “At some points he would try to move, at which point I would need to wrestle to keep him pinned down, as I was afraid of a neck injury and paralysis, and him either sending himself or both of us down the cliff; at this point we were anchored to a steep slope above a perhaps 1,000-foot drop to the valley below.” Sterling’s alertness and orientation slowly improved, but he still didn’t remember what had happened. Rescuers were first airlifted by Flight for Life to a landing zone close to the accident scene at Lake Caroline, but still needed to climb nearly 600 feet up steep, fourth-class terrain to reach Sterling on the East Ridge. Upon reaching the victim, rescuers began the process of getting an IV in and putting him into a sleeping bag and onto a litter. Because of the location and extent of Sterling’s injuries, ground rescuers determined that the safest and fastest way to get him off the mountain was to hoist him via helicopter. Rescuers were able to haul Sterling to the ridge using an improvised 3:1 mechanical-advantage system. He was then belayed a hundred feet along the top of a narrow, exposed ridge to a small ledge to wait the arrival of the helicopter. Upon arrival, the UH-60 Black Hawk crew assessed the situation to ensure the team could safely attempt a live hoist. The litter was hoisted and then secured into the helicopter. Sterling was transferred to a Flight for Life helicopter that took him to a local hospital. He was released the following morning and was back in the mountains a few weeks later.

Analysis

The climbers noted the importance of remaining analytical when assessing risk. “Even though there was very low risk (in the climb), there was still very high consequence. Accidents can happen when you’re in the mountains, even when you’re making good decisions. We felt prepared. We felt we had the right experience and the right gear. Risk is always there.” (Source: Edited from a news report written by Master Sgt. C.D. Theiral, Colorado Air National Guard.)

Images

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	66
Page	52
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Accident reports