



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Rappel Error--Ropes Uneven

Utah, No Man's Canyon

It was with special interest that I obtained the 2012 edition of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, because the "Know the Ropes" section focuses on rappelling. My brother, Louis Cicotello (70), did not survive a fall while on rappel at the exit of the North Fork of No Man's Canyon, a slot canyon in southeastern Utah, on March 6, 2011. As a result of his fall, I was stranded for six days on a ledge until rescued by Wayne County SAR.

That day we carried only one rope that was 60 meters (200 feet) long. I have every confidence that Louis checked the midpoint of that rope, which was always marked with a piece of white tape (either climber's or first-aid tape), and that he coiled it correctly at home as he made preparations for our trip. The rope was in the truck until he packed it in his bag that morning. We had warmed up the day before in a nearby canyon, but used a shorter rope to complete the rappels.

We had pulled that rope through four different rappels in No Man's Canyon prior to the set-up of the second stage of the exit rappel (the 100-foot section). Louis set up each rappel and I assisted. Each time we watched for the tape mark. Each time Louis went first on rappel. The first three rappels in the canyon were short, each one in the 25- to 30-foot range. There was no issue of having plenty of length for both strands of the rope on each of those rappels. In fact, one of the descents was described in the guide as a "downclimb," but Louis took precaution to use the rope and set up a rappel. He remarked, "After all, I am 70 years old."

The exit rappel had two stages. The first was in the 40- to 50-foot range, and the rappeller had a view from the pour-off launch point to the landing area below. The surplus length of each strand was clearly visible once the rope was tossed down.

The second stage of the exit rappel was set up from a bolt and hanger on the canyon wall near the top of a narrow crevice. The crevice sloped like a sliding board, with only enough space between the canyon walls to allow one person to go down at a time. The crevice was nearly 20 feet from the top to the bottom, where it met the edge of the canyon wall. The sling that Louis and I set up was 10 to 12 feet long, so that the rappel ring would lie beyond a groove in the middle of the slope to avoid any possibility that the rope would get stuck when pulled from below. At the bottom of that crevice, near the edge, was enough space for the rappeller to stand (if he wished) before beginning the descent.

Louis went down first. He tied into the sling near the anchor, backing down the crevice. He did not stop and stand at the edge before beginning his descent. As he was maneuvering himself over the edge, he told me to be careful not to get my hands pinched between the rope and the lip of the rock face. Once over the edge, Louis told me that he was on the free portion of the rappel. He was out of my sight as soon as he went over the edge. A few seconds later, Louis called up to me that he could see that the ropes were unequal but that it was "no biggie." Those were his last words. Almost immediately, the rope whipped through the rappel ring and disappeared below.

Analysis

The fall was not related to any failure of equipment. It was a case of uneven ropes that was tragically discovered too late. Louis was an experienced climber and had summited many of the fourteeners in Colorado. I was a latecomer to climbing, having begun in 2006. The two of us planned and completed annual weeklong trips through many technical canyons in Utah.

What happened to make those strands unequal? In all the set-ups in which that rope was used before and during that canyon trip, Louis always looked for that piece of tape as the center point. The rope had a darkish, stained section in the middle of it. Louis used a piece of first aid or climbing tape as a visible marker in the center of that stained section. It was not always firmly attached to the rope, and he repeatedly vowed to "fix" the position of the tape more securely as a future project when he was at home.

That tape marker started out in the middle of the rope. Whether it gradually moved each time the rope was pulled through the rings/quick-links on the previous rappels, or whether the majority of the slippage occurred on the first stage of the exit rappel, I can't say for certain. As we threaded the rope for the second stage of the exit rappel, we watched for that piece of tape on the rope, and when it came near the rappel ring, we stopped threading. We based everything we did from that point on what we thought was the middle of the rope.

At that juncture, the rope strands were tossed down the crevice and over the edge. As a result, there was no tying the ends of the strands into a knot.

One afternoon, after returning to Colorado Springs, a family friend and I laid that rope out to check its length. The 60-meter rope laid out nearly 200 feet, so it was long enough when double-stranded through the rappel device to complete a 100-foot rappel. What we noticed was the tape was nowhere near the center of the rope. It was approximately 10 feet from one end.

(Editor's note: This accident was not reported to us for the 2012 edition. We are grateful to David Cicotello for sending it to us this year. It is worthy of inclusion because of the issue of the use of tape for marking the center of a rope. Holding the ends of a rappel rope and coiling it until coming to the center, combined with knotting the ends with stopper knots, are both recommended.)

Images

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