



AAC Publications

Rappel Error/Failure, Climbing Alone, Exceeding Abilities, Failure to Follow Directions (Off Route), Inadequate Protection

Alberta, Banff National Park, Castle Mountain

A climber left Calgary on the morning of August 4, telling his wife that he was going to Castle Mountain. He did not return home that evening. Banff Dispatch was contacted the following morning by a friend of the missing climber. The friend reported that the subject was likely going to climb Eisenhower Tower on Castle Mountain, and that he was supposed to have met them on the morning of August 5 to climb something else.

The report was transferred to a Visitor Safety (VS) Specialist, and a trailhead search for the subject's vehicle was performed. His vehicle was located at the Castle Lookout Trailhead. This is the standard parking area for some routes on Castle, but not for Eisenhower Tower. An aerial, ground, and dog search commenced, and VS crews searched the high-probability areas throughout the day. The search was called off at dark with no clues regarding the missing person.

On August 6 the aerial, ground, and dog search continued. More searchers were called in, and an expanded search strategy was developed. Research was conducted on the subject's profile and where he might be expected to go. The subject was a somewhat experienced scrambler but had just started climbing recently, and he had never done a multi-pitch climb. However, his friends described him as a skilled and fearless scrambler who liked to "go straight up to the peak." He did not usually do any research on his objectives, but was usually bold enough to reach the summit, even if off route. His friends said that he knew about Eisenhower Tower and really wanted to climb it. However, he had parked in the wrong spot for Eisenhower. He had also left fairly late, and would have been climbing on Castle in the heat of a hot summer day. This information helped VS Specialists form a picture of where the subject may have gone. Still, the subject was not found.

On the afternoon of August 7 the subject was finally located by helicopter on the upper reaches of Castle Mountain (near Bass Buttress). He was in a tight gully feature where he was difficult to see from the air. He was in the vicinity of an established route, but not on it. The subject appeared to have rappelled off the ends of his rope and had fallen about 40 meters. The subject appeared to be deceased. A recovery attempt was made in the afternoon but was aborted due to high winds.

On August 8 three VS Specialists recovered the body in the early morning via a sling rescue. This was a complex operation involving rope work in technical terrain and precision flying. The VS specialists were slung onto a nearby ledge, from where they climbed easy terrain until they were above the deceased. One of the VS specialists was lowered to the deceased to attach a rope and prepare the body for transport. The helicopter arrived at the original ledge system, the rope was attached to the rescue line, and the body was slung off using approximately 100 meters of line. This approach was taken because the gully was too tight for the helicopter to fly directly above the accident site. The winds were calm in the early morning, which made the operation much safer for everyone involved.

Analysis

This was an extended search and recovery operation for the VS Specialists. All of the highest probability areas were in technical terrain, which made it difficult to use larger groups of untrained searchers. Although much of the terrain could be seen from the air, numerous tight gullies along the

cliff face made effective airborne searching difficult. The subject profile also left it very open as to where he may have gone. Unfortunately, this search did not end with a positive outcome.

VS Specialists pieced together the subject's approximate itinerary from pictures found on his camera. Amazingly, the subject had summited Castle by climbing somewhere in the vicinity of Bass Buttress. He may have been on the route, but this is unlikely. Most likely he climbed one of the gully features to the summit of Castle. This is an impressive feat, as it would involve fifth-class climbing in loose, untraveled terrain without the protection of a rope. The subject decided to rappel the face he had climbed, and had made three or four rappels before he got into trouble. He had no gear to build anchors; he was following off-route anchor stations. He had no knots in the ends of his rope when he found himself dangling above a steep, sheer wall with little opportunity for natural anchors. He was most likely searching for the next anchor when he rappelled off the ends of his ropes. He fell approximately 40 meters into the gully and most likely died on impact.

There are a few lessons we can learn from this:

1. Tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return. This is a big one, and although it may not have changed the outcome in this case, the subject would have been found in much less time. This is especially important when climbing alone.
2. Carry a communication device.
3. Research your objective. Find out where established routes and descents are, what gear to bring, and how long it should take. There are multiple established descents off Castle, including a walk-off and an easy scramble with a few 30-meter rappels off bolted stations. Sadly, these are located within 300 meters of where the subject perished.
4. Get proper training and instruction before heading out on your own.

It was quite a feat to pioneer a new route and descent on Castle solo. It is unfortunate that it ended with a rappelling accident that could have been avoided by simply tying knots in the ends of the ropes.

(Editor's note: Using an autoblock backup system can prevent rappel mishaps of this kind. In addition, anyone rappelling multi-pitch routes should have the basic knowledge and skill to improvise with the limited gear they carry and ascend their rappel lines, in case their rope is too short or they cannot find the next rappel station.)

Images

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