



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock, Rappel Error - Inadequate Rappel Anchor, Failure to Follow Route**

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Emerson

On July 6, a female climber (42) was seriously injured while descending the southeast face of Mt. Emerson (5.4). Sometime around 1 p.m. she fell approximately 100 feet down a wide, 85° chimney while she was rappelling off the route. A single nut or cam was used as the anchor and it failed. Falls of such a distance are often fatal, so she was fortunate to survive the accident. She sustained serious injuries, including a traumatic brain injury, broken pelvis, severely broken ankle, a broken jaw, a broken nose, and numerous deep lacerations. Her helmet was found broken into three pieces.

Hikers on the Piute Pass Trail heard screams coming from Mt. Emerson and reported the incident to the Inyo County Sheriff's Department. The victim's climbing partner was unable to rescue her friend, and the fallen climber was unable to rappel any further due to her injuries. The uninjured partner made the difficult decision to stabilize her and seek help. The victim was left alone approximately 200 feet above the base of the mountain, on a nearly vertical rock wall, in a very disoriented state.

Due to the life-threatening nature of the accident, Inyo County Sheriff's Office (ICSO) requested helicopter support from California Highway Patrol. The ICSO also requested support from Inyo County Search and Rescue (Inyo SAR). The pilot spotted the victim at approximately 5 p.m. and attempted to get close enough to the wall to lower a flight medic to her position. After several attempts, the pilot determined that he could not safely get close enough to lower the medic. Windy conditions and the steepness of the rock wall prevented the helicopter from accessing the victim's position.

Two Inyo SAR members hiked in and climbed 180 vertical feet up to the victim, reaching her position, near 11,700 feet, just before sunset. Her head injury made her extremely disoriented and uncooperative, and put her at risk of falling again due to the steep, precarious position she was in. She was safely anchored to the wall by the team leader and given a medical evaluation. A determination was made that her condition was serious and potentially life threatening.

Without any helicopter support, four more Inyo SAR members had to carry in over 200 pounds of medical and technical rescue gear. The Inyo SAR team of six volunteers initiated a two-line technical rescue, which enabled them to lower the patient on a backboard in a titanium litter down the steep rock face. Three SAR volunteers climbed to the patient while three remained on the ground. The transfer of the patient to the backboard and litter was complicated by the steep wall and the serious potential for rockfall. By this time, the patient's mental state was deteriorating and she was becoming combative, requiring additional restraints. The technical lower was a very complex operation due to her precarious position and sensitive medical condition. It was accomplished with the absolute minimum number of SAR personnel possible: two belayers and one litter attendant descending with the victim. The darkness, high elevation, loose rocks and vertical terrain, and the victim's mental state made it extremely challenging to facilitate a smooth rescue.

After the technical lower was finished at approximately 2:30 a.m., two SAR volunteers with EMT certification assessed the victim's condition. She was given supplemental oxygen, her broken ankle was stabilized, and her lacerations were treated. The victim was packaged for transport down the remainder of the mountain. The terrain below involved 500 vertical feet of loose rocks and talus slopes to the trail. Once the Piute Pass Trail was encountered, a wheel was attached to the bottom of the litter and the victim was transported over 1.75 miles of steep, rocky trail. She was lifted into an

ambulance at sunrise, approximately 15 hours after the accident, and was hospitalized in Reno, Nevada. It was expected that she would eventually make a complete recovery.

## **Analysis**

The southeast face of Mt. Emerson is an attractive route to beginning backcountry climbers. It is not far from the trailhead, appears to be easy (a 5.4 rating), and it is now in the High Sierra Supertopo guide. However, this route actually has two short sections lower on the face that are closer to 5.6 or 5.7. Higher up on the route, there is a lot of routefinding that is difficult to document on a topo.

This party apparently got lost higher on the face and decided to retreat. Their retreat involved downclimbing until they got to the higher of the harder sections. At this point, the patient decided that she did not feel secure downclimbing and asked to rappel. It is not clear why only one piece of gear was used to make an anchor. (The other climber was planning to clean the anchor and downclimb this section.) The anchor failed and the climber bounced down the chimney system that defines the lower portion of the climb.

Backcountry Sierra Nevada routes are rarely easy and require:

Routefinding in complex terrain Building anchors in often less than perfect rock Climbing on less than perfect rock A high degree of self-reliance Someone in the front country must know what you are doing and when to call 911. (Source: Edited from a report by Julie Vargo, Ariana Wylie, and Paul Rasmussen, Inyo County Sheriff's Posse SAR.)

(Editor's note: This narrative is included both for its climbing lessons and to provide the reader with an understanding of what may be required for a rescue.)

**Images**

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