



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Falling Rock

New Mexico, Sandia Mountains

In the early afternoon of March 29, parties called 911 and reported “cries for help near the Upper La Luz Trail in Upper La Cueva Canyon.” Bernalillo County Sheriff officers located Carlos Cox (35) by helicopter at the northeastern base of the Tridents, near the top of the upper, snow-covered couloir. There was no report of movement and large amounts of blood were seen from the air. Albuquerque Mountain Rescue and other SAR personnel were paged out at 2:30 p.m. Firefighters, already in the field, reached the subject and reported him dead.

Transfer of care of the subject was passed from the fire department to SAR personnel to perform a technical, low-angle snow and talus evacuation down to the La Luz Trail for a continued trail carry-out to the Sandia Crest.

Analysis

Carlos was an avid mountaineer and beloved member of Albuquerque Mountain Rescue. His fervor for becoming a great rescuer led him to evaluate likely rescue locations, including the week prior, when he was evaluating high-probability routes along Second Tower Ridge, over the Tridents, and on to the La Luz Trail. His return to the area on this day was a continuation of that project, according to family. On the morning of the 29th, Carlos notified family of his plan for the day and was equipped appropriately and prepared to handle a possible egress during his travels up his planned route. Carlos notified his family that he planned to travel alone. The atmospheric conditions in the Sandias that day were clear, warm, and dry.

This area of the Sandias is composed of highly fractured Precambrian granite, formed approximately 1.4 billion years ago. Over the past 10 years drastic drought conditions have killed many of the large trees and altered the delicate cliff microenvironment, leading to an accelerated erosive pattern. Larger freeze-thaw cycles are now active, where root systems and grasses once held topsoil in place, leading to increased lubrication and dislodgement of large rock features. This has been noted on trade routes where good rock protection was easily placed and now gear placements are dubious. Local climbing development has been geared toward face climbing and increased bolt placement rather than relying on traditional, removable protection.

Although the exact cause of Carlos’ fall will never be known, it is highly likely that he passed across an unstable area that dislodged underneath him by surprise. This type of event in the Sandias has been repeated many times. It is very rare to have a climbing fatality while climbing an established route in the Sandias, however the approaches and descents are more dangerous, especially when unroped or on fourth-class terrain. (Source: Albuquerque Mountain Rescue, J. Marc Beverly, UIAGM Guide/Senior Rescue Leader, and Erin Weber, Technical Rescue Specialist.)

Images

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