



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Garnet Canyon, Petzoldt Caves

On September 6, between 5:30 and 5:45 p.m., Edward Tom (40) fell 80–100 feet to his death while scrambling within the camping area known as the Petzoldt Caves Camping Zone. Tom had a two-night camping permit for Petzoldt Caves, but when he arrived a large climbing party already occupied the primary tent pads. One member of that group directed Tom, his climbing partner, and a third climber from a separate group toward the location of additional camping sites. The three continued along a social trail in the direction of a series of walled-in caves underneath very large boulders. The social trail appeared to end at the edge of a large cliff band with considerable exposure. There, the climber from the separate group scrambled up and over a “wet, lichen-covered, slick rock” to regain the main approach trail. Tom’s climbing partner thought the move around the rock was somewhat difficult and exposed, with a large chasm below it, so he began looking for an alternate way. At that time it appeared that Tom attempted to scramble down and around the slick rock toward the additional sites. The other two climbers heard the sounds of small rockfall and shuffling, and turned in time to see Tom fall out of sight over the cliff band.

Tom’s climbing partner and several bystanders made emergency calls and sent texts for help, and indicated that Tom was unresponsive and not moving. The total vertical fall distance was approximately 120 feet, with a free-fall distance of 80–100 feet. Tom’s injuries were severe and not survivable.

Analysis

Edward Tom was an experienced outdoorsman, fully capable of the trip he planned in the Tetons. He had much experience with multi-pitch sport and trad climbing in Boulder, Yosemite, and El Potrero Chico, Mexico. He also had mountaineering experience in South America, including a summit of Aconcagua.

The exact reason for his fall cannot be determined with certainty, as it was not fully witnessed; however, it is likely that he slipped or tripped. During the hike to the Petzoldt Caves Camping Zone, two severe waves of precipitation came through in the form of heavy rain and/or hail—the latter was severe enough to cause Tom and his climbing partner to put on their climbing helmets. The rock that he was climbing on at the time of the accident was very wet. Granite can be quite slippery when wet, even when wearing footwear such as the 5.10 approach shoes with “sticky rubber” that Tom was wearing.

The move Tom was attempting would be described as third-class with very high exposure. This means that even though the climbing is not technically or physically difficult, a fall has serious consequences. Tom was wearing a very large overnight pack when he fell, which would increase the difficulty of successfully completing this particular move.

It is important to highlight secondary causes of this accident as well. The large climbing group that had gathered in the primary tent pad area had permits for the Moraine camping zone, not the Petzoldt Caves. After being caught in the hailstorm, they had arrived at the caves area and were contemplating staying the night due to inclement weather. They had not yet set up any tents when Tom and his climbing partner arrived. One member stated falsely that the group had permits for this zone, and another directed Tom, his climbing partner, and the other climber toward the alternate spots. The fact

that this group of climbers was occupying this camping area caused Tom and the two others to search for additional camping spots, ultimately resulting in his fatal fall. (Source: Edited from a report submitted by Sara Beck, Edward Tom's widow, with details and wording from the NPS Search and Rescue Report.)

(Editor's note: There was another fatality in the Tetons this summer, involving a man who fell on snow and was unable to arrest before falling into a moat. The details are confidential at this time.)

Images

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	67
Page	110
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Accident reports