



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Climbing Unroped

Utah, Zion National Park, Spearhead

On October 19, Christopher Spencer (47) of San Jose, California, was killed after falling from the approach to Iron Messiah (5.10+) on the Spearhead formation. Spencer and his partner were scrambling up the easy (low 5th class) but exposed buttress to the base of the technical pitches, when Spencer slipped and fell about 80 feet, hitting several ledges during the fall. He was not roped in or wearing a helmet.

Rangers responded to reports of the incident about 11 a.m. and reached Spencer and his climbing partner by noon. He was airlifted out, and medics were able to stabilize him during the rescue effort, which took nearly three hours, but Spencer died of his injuries at a hospital in St. George, Utah, later that day. (Source: Zion National Park.)

ANALYSIS

Iron Messiah is generally climbed in eight or nine pitches, with a long rappel descent. Eager to start a big day of climbing, many climbers choose to scramble the approach up a bushy ramp system to reach the first “real” pitch. This approach of a couple of hundred feet is 4th class or low 5th class, depending on the exact route followed. Given the exposure and Zion’s somewhat loose, sandy rock, great care obviously is needed. Simul-climbing is an alternative to soloing or belayed climbing on such approaches, but there is potential to snag the rope or pull off loose rocks. Consider shortening the rope for simul-climbing. In addition, helmets should be worn during a technical approach as well as the climb, especially on a popular route when other climbers may be overhead. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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