



## AAC Publications

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### **Anchor Failure – Off-Route**

Wind River Range, Pingora Peak

**On August 28, Sublette County sheriff's dispatch center received a satellite telephone call from a backpacker in the Cirque of the Towers. The caller had witnessed two climbers fall from the northeast face of Pingora (IV 5.8+).**

Tip Top Search and Rescue responded directly to the scene with Sublette County's contract helicopter. Pilot Mario Nickl and volunteers Tony Chambers and Shawn Streeter were able to locate the backpacker, along with the two fallen climbers at the base of the northeast face. The helicopter landed at Lonesome Lake and then returned for two more rescuers, volunteers Milford Lockwood and Andrew Masters. Tony and Shawn hiked the short distance to the scene and found the two climbers, Jonathan Peter MacDonald (23) of Lander and Keith Murray Hendersen (57) of Cheyenne, deceased from their fall.

The evidence found at the scene showed that Keith had Jonathan on belay with about 30 feet of rope in service. Jonathan was tied in to the rope with a figure 8, which was found tight as if from a fall. Keith had the rope through a belay device but was not tied in to the other end of the rope. He was clipped into a piece of webbing and a piece of cordelette, both of which were badly faded and frayed, and which appeared to be the remnants of an old rappel anchor. He was clipped to the old anchor using a single sling with non-locking carabiners. There was no other gear placed between the two climbers. Both climbers were wearing helmets, but Jonathan's had come off during the fall. The reporting party stated he had seen the two climbers descending before their fall.

A few days later, Tip Top Search and Rescue received a phone call from a separate pair of climbers, Reuben and Breezy, who had encountered Keith and Jonathan earlier that day on the northeast face. Reuben stated that they caught up to Keith and Jonathan after the first pitch, which is a traverse. Jonathan and Keith were moving very slowly, and offered to let Reuben and Breezy pass, which they declined. Reuben stated they waited about 45 minutes while Jonathan and Keith climbed the second pitch. Reuben led closely behind the others and then set up a belay some distance above them. Reuben recalled hearing the two discussing that they had underestimated the difficulty of the climb, that it was getting late already, and that they should retreat.

Reuben and Breezy pushed on and later recalled that Keith and Jonathan rappelled down the second pitch but elected not to traverse back along the first pitch. Instead, they continued to rappel straight down the steep slabs below. Reuben stated he saw one of the climbers walking around on a ledge, looking for a way down. Reuben and Breezy had no other contact with the pair but heard them yell "Rock" at one point. They had no idea anything was wrong until they saw the helicopter respond to the base of the climb.

### **ANALYSIS**

While it is impossible to know exactly what happened to Keith and Jonathan, two different parties saw them descending before the accident. It appears that Keith had put Jonathan on belay to downclimb, traverse, or climb back up toward the route line. One or both of them fell, and the old rappel anchor to which Keith was clipped then failed. Though both of the anchor slings were badly faded and frayed, they were found still intact, which would lead one to believe that either the rock horn holding the slings failed or the old slings came off the top of the horn. Lessons from this incident

include:

1. Back up or replace faded or tattered slings and cordage at anchors.
2. Test natural rock anchors (horns, chockstones, etc.) by pushing, pulling, and knocking on the rock, with a backup if possible.
3. Research escape routes before a big climb and observe anchors and other “bail” options as you climb.
4. Use locking carabiners for anchor tethers
5. Make sure the chinstrap on a helmet is fastened snugly and securely

(Source: Tony Chambers, Tip Top Search and Rescue.)

## Images



The northeast face of Pingora begins with a long traversing pitch. When two climbers tried to avoid retreating across this traverse and instead rappel straight down the face, they fell to the ground after an anchor failed.

## Article Details

Author	Tony Chambers
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	116
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports