



## AAC Publications

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### **Rappel Failure – Inadequate Anchor, Piton Pulled Out**

Utah, Canyonlands National Park, Monster Tower

**On May 30, a 47-year-old man from Colorado was killed when his anchor failed while descending Monster Tower, above the White Rim in Canyonlands National Park.** The victim, Climber A, was climbing with two companions, Climber B (27) and Climber C (15). The weather was hot, and in addition to their climbing gear all three carried daypacks with food, water, and extra clothing.

After some trial and error, the group found the base of the Kor Route (5.10 R), their intended climb for the day. The approach to the base of the route involves about 50 feet of 4th-class scrambling with a short section of easy 5th class. The three noted that this section, while easy on the way up, might be more difficult to downclimb with their packs at the end of the day. They opted to leave two of the packs above the scramble, at the start of the actual route, and climb the tower with one small pack. They anchored to an old piton at the base of the Kor Route, and Climber A began leading.

After climbing through pitch five, only Climber A wanted to continue to the summit, as the others were getting tired and thirsty. They considered rappelling, but didn't want to descend on the worn and aged anchors of the Kor Route, so after Climber A topped out, he lowered back to the other two climbers, and all three descended via the bolted anchors of the North Ridge Route. The three reached the saddle between Monster Tower and Washer Woman without incident and continued to the ground.

They still had to retrieve the packs at the base of the Kor Route. Climber A, followed by Climber B, hiked around the tower and scrambled up the approach again, planning to lower the packs off the old piton at the base and then either rappel or scramble back down. Climber A threaded the rope through the piton and set up a rappel as Climber B changed out of her climbing shoes. Climber A began rappelling, and then Climber B heard the sound of metal pulling out of the rock and a yell, and she saw that the piton and rope were gone. Climber C was screaming but didn't respond to questions from Climber B. Within about five minutes, Climber B had downclimbed the approach to Climber A, who was tangled in the climbing rope, with the old piton still attached. His skin was white. Climber B found no pulse or respiration. They had a cell phone signal, and Climber B told Climber C to call 911 while she began CPR. Climbers B and C performed CPR for the next hour while communicating with climbing rangers and the sheriff's department.

With daylight fading, the SAR team decided there wasn't enough light to deploy a helicopter and were forced to drive in to the basin. They reached the party at the base of the tower around midnight and helped Climbers B and C back to the vehicles, where they all camped for the night. The next morning, a helicopter was sent in to retrieve Climber A's remains.

### **ANALYSIS**

Though Monster Tower is remote, it receives regular ascents, and several climbers in an online forum attested to having recently rappelled off the same piton without incident. Nonetheless, antiquated fixed hardware, especially in the soft sandstone of the desert, should be thoroughly bounce-tested (with a backup) before committing to it. When rappelling off fixed gear, it's always prudent to back up the anchor with removable pieces when possible, until the last climber descends. And if there is any doubt about the integrity of a single piece of gear, leave a backup.

According to Climber B, the unexpected heat of the day and the resulting exhaustion and dehydration likely contributed to their decision-making, both in choosing to rappel instead of downclimb from the base of the climb, as well as to rappel off the piton without testing or backing it up. Carry plenty of water when climbing in the desert, especially during the hotter months. (Source: Anonymous first-hand account.)

## Images



Approaching the Kor Route on the east side of Monster Tower in Canyonlands. The piton anchor that failed was located at the base of the most obvious chimney crack.

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