



AAC Publications

Rappel Error

California, Yosemite, El Capitan, The Nose

On May 27, five climbers had gathered near Camp VI on the Nose—a team of two and a team of three had been climbing alongside each other over the previous days. A member of the team of three was leading midway up the Changing Corners pitch, above Camp VI, when a piece of gear dropped and landed on a small ledge, roughly 25 feet below Camp VI. In a quick conversation, Tyler Gordon, a member of the team of three, decided to rappel to the gear and retrieve it. The team witnessed Gordon lean back and then fall from the Camp VI ledge. He fell to the end of the rope, landing at Camp V. The leader immediately lowered to Camp VI and then continued to Camp V.

It was obvious to him that Gordon had died from injuries sustained in the fall, and the leader called YOSAR to initiate assistance with the recovery. A team of rescuers was flown to the top of El Cap, along with 2,400 feet of rope and equipment to rig two lines for accessing Camp V, which is roughly 1,000 feet below the rim. Two lower and raise operations were completed just before darkness to get the team off the wall.

ANALYSIS

In an accident like this, it can be hard to determine exactly what happened. To the best of the team's knowledge, Gordon unclipped from his tie-in point at the anchor before falling from the Camp VI ledge. His belay device, a Grigri, was seen clipped to his harness and closed shut, so he either fell before attaching the device to the rope or assumed the device was rigged properly when it was not.

As climbers we often change our personal anchor or tie-in when switching locations at ledges, rigging rappels, changing over from jugging to belaying, or trying to clean up clusters at belays. On big walls, after days of hanging in a harness, ledges become places to relax—and thus may lead to moments of inattention. Whenever you switch from one point of attachment to another (for example, from the anchor to a rappel device), make sure that you are secure on your next attachment before unclipping. It is good practice to check untested systems with a backup before committing to them. Look out for your partners too. (Source: NPS ranger Brandon Latham.)

Images

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