



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Darkness

California, Yosemite Valley, Washington Column

On October 30, at approximately 8:45 p.m., Yosemite Dispatch received a report that a climber, Ethan Gillett, had fallen 100 to 200 feet from the South Face Route (V 5.8 C1) on Washington Column and landed on Dinner Ledge. Another climber, a Wilderness First Responder, confirmed that Gillett was unresponsive, not breathing, and pulseless and had sustained injuries not compatible with life. Based on this report, park medical control concurred that Gillett was deceased and a recovery operation was delayed until the next morning. The other climbers at Dinner Ledge—seven in all, including Gillett’s partner, Joshua Schultz—decided to rappel off that night, leaving behind fixed lines to Dinner Ledge. A small team of rescuers hiked to the base of the route to help them down to the valley floor.

The next morning the recovery team climbed to Dinner Ledge. Gillett lay about 20 feet up and left of the main part of the ledge, in a group of large boulders near the start of the route Southern Man. He was wearing a helmet and a rappel glove on his right hand. A Grigri was attached to the belay loop of his harness via a locked auto-locking carabiner. There was no indication of incorrect rigging.

The previous day Schultz and Gillett had climbed the first three pitches of the South Face to Dinner Ledge. They bivouacked there and, according to Schultz, began climbing the remaining eight pitches to the summit the morning of the incident, leaving their bivy gear at Dinner Ledge. After topping out near sunset, they began rappelling the route, intending to retrieve their gear and continue to the base in the dark. This is a common strategy for parties not wanting to haul gear up the route; it also avoids the slippery scramble with large packs down North Dome Gully, the alternate descent from the summit.

Schultz was having problems with his headlamp so Gillett went first in order to find the rappel stations using his functioning headlamp. When they reached the anchor for pitch six they found fixed lines belonging to a party that was now bivouacked on Dinner Ledge, two rappels below. Gillett yelled down to the climbers, asking for permission to use their fixed lines, and the climbers agreed. Gillett and Schultz coiled their ropes and began rappelling a fixed blue rope. Gillett went first to the pitch five anchor, followed by Schultz.

As Schultz arrived at the pitch five anchor, Gillett stated, “Alright, I am going to rap,” and he began rappelling another fixed blue rope. Shortly thereafter, Schultz heard him yell briefly, followed by a loud crash a couple of seconds later. Schultz called to Gillett. There was no response, but a voice on Dinner Ledge said, “CPR.” He pulled up the blue line Gillett had rappelled and discovered that it was only a 40-foot, unknotted tail strand of the same blue rope they had just used to rappel pitch six; this rope had been tied off at the pitch five anchor, leaving the strand hanging below.

Schultz realized Gillett must have rappelled off the end of the rope. He found another rope fixed at the same anchor, white in color, and asked the climbers on Dinner Ledge if it reached them. They responded affirmatively, so he rappelled this line to the ledge.

ANALYSIS

Fixed lines are common on popular wall routes in Yosemite. They can make your descent faster,

easier, and even comforting, giving you a sense of being home before you get there. But those factors also breed complacency, leading to shortcuts in procedure and loss of discipline. We don't know what went through Gillett's mind as he started his final rappel, but it's clear that he missed some steps—steps that were especially important in the dark. Had he noticed that the rope below him was unusually lightweight, or asked the climbers on Dinner Ledge to confirm the rope reached them, or paused to check the rope below him as he rappelled, this accident might have been prevented.

(Sources: NPS rangers Brandon Latham and John Dill.)

Images

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