



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Inadequate Anchor

Nevada, Red Rock National Conservation Area, Oak Creek Canyon

On December 26, three climbers finished the classic three-pitch route Johnny Vegas (5.7) in Red Rock's Oak Creek Canyon. The three stopped for a brief lunch at about 11 a.m. on the terrace at the top of Johnny Vegas to consider whether they should continue up Solar Slab or rappel to the ground. Because of the cold and windy conditions, they decided to rappel the Solar Slab Gully instead of climbing any higher. The two females in the party made the first rappel from a less commonly used bolted anchor to safely reach an anchor on a large, bushy ledge. As the third member rappelled to join them, he fell approximately 100 feet, landing on the ledge where they were waiting. His partners called for help with a cell phone. Despite efforts to revive their fallen partner, he was deceased when LVMPD Search and Rescue (SAR) personnel arrived. The two uninjured climbers were assisted down the two remaining rappels by SAR.

ANALYSIS

It is difficult to definitively determine the cause of the victim's fall. There was no evidence of a failure in the anchor or a piece of personal equipment. The distance from the rappel anchor to the ledge below is greater than 100 feet, and their dynamic lead rope was measured to be 200 feet in length. The victim was carrying a 6mm "pull cord," sometimes used by climbers to retrieve a lead rope from below. Strangely, the pull cord and the primary rope were not connected.

It is believed the victim initially tied the lead rope to the anchor and his partners individually rappelled on this single strand to the ledge. He then likely rearranged the rappel setup to include the pull cord, so that he could retrieve the main rope after completing the rappel. Because the two-bolt anchor and chains remained intact but the ropes were not connected, it seems that when he weighted the lead rope it was not supported by the anchor and allowed him to fall to the ledge below.

Upon inspection, the lead rope and pull cord had no damage. The lead rope had no knots or hitches. The pull cord had a figure 8 on a bight at one end that was clipped into a closed and locked screw-gate carabiner. The climber's partners report that when he struck the ledge the lead rope was threaded through his rappel device, approximately 15 feet from the end that had been secured to the anchor, but they disconnected him to facilitate CPR.

The evidence suggests he attempted to set up a "biner block" rappel anchor, threading the lead rope through the anchor bolts and then tying it to the carabiner clipped to the pull cord. He likely either failed to connect the two ropes, tied the lead rope to the carabiner improperly, or tied the wrong knot (e.g., a Munter hitch instead of a clove hitch. [Click here for a report of a similar rappelling accident in 2015.](#)) (Source: Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Search and Rescue.)

Editor's note: Another Red Rock rappelling fatality occurred in March, when Todd Jenkins, 41, fell to the ground in Black Velvet Canyon. The experienced climber had completed a sport route that was too long for lowering. He went off-belay and threaded the rope at the anchor, intending to rappel once to a midway anchor and then make a second rappel to the ground. However, the rope strands for his first rappel apparently were uneven in length.

As he was cleaning quickdraws en route to the midway anchor, he did not notice the shorter rope end

pass through his rappel device, causing him to fall to the ground. Greater care with ensuring the rope lengths were even or tying stopper knots in the ends likely could have prevented this tragic accident.

Images

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