Rappel Error – Inadequate Equipment, No Backup

Vermont, Green Peak, Bat Caves

On October 21, GR, a 45-year-old male from Vermont, and TW, a 43-year-old male, went to Green Peak near Dorset to climb in the Bat Caves area. They hiked to the top of a 40- to 50-foot cliff, where they used a static line to anchor themselves as they set up a top-rope anchored to a pair of bolts.

After completing the setup, the men decided to rappel the steep face rather than take the trail back to the base of the cliff. GR went first, even though he was the less experienced climber. He threaded their 7mm dynamic rope through his belay device, a Black Diamond ATC. His partner observed that the rope was too thin for the ATC, and suggested that GR add a second carabiner for additional friction, since he wasn't using a friction hitch or other backup. However, GR proceeded to rappel with a single carabiner connecting the ATC to his harness, and he started the rappel by jumping away from the cliff. As he dropped out of sight, TW heard him yell. Rather than rappel, TW descended the trail to the base and found his friend dead, with severe head trauma. GR was not wearing a helmet.

ANALYSIS

This accident was caused by improper use of equipment and inadequate rappel backup, which stripped GR of any ability to control his speed or stop his descent. Black Diamond recommends the ATC be used only with ropes that are 7.7mm or thicker (up to 11mm). As his friend suggested, GR could have clipped a second carabiner through the bights of the rappel ropes, adjacent to his main locking carabiner, creating additional friction in the system. He also could have employed a backup below the belay device by tying a friction hitch—a klemheist, Prusik, or autoblock—with a piece of accessory cord. Alternatively, he could have rappelled after his more experienced partner, who could have given GR a fireman's belay by tensioning the ropes from below to control his descent.

GR initiated the rappel by jumping out and away from the cliff, instead of proceeding slowly until he was confident that his rappel setup was adequate to control his speed. We do not know whether GR tested his setup while still safely anchored; if he had, he might have noticed the lack of friction in the system before untethering from the anchor. (Source: Neil Van Dyke, Search & Rescue Coordinator, Vermont Department of Public Safety.)

Images

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