



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Attempted to Rappel Unanchored Rope

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, East Ledges Descent

Christopher Vale and his partner Luke started climbing the west face of El Capitan around 7:30 a.m. on September 5. (The name of Vale's climbing partner has been changed.) The two had met a few days earlier and climbed the Steck-Salathé on Sentinel Rock as a warmup for El Capitan. They finished the west face on El Cap at around 7 p.m. After topping out, Vale was in a hurry to get back down. (He had plans to go back up on El Capitan the next day to work on Free Rider.) By 8 p.m., the two climbers had descended to the top of the East Ledges rappels.

Vale reached the rappels first and began descending while Luke was still a little ways behind. At the time of their descent, other climbers had left ropes in place for the four rappels. When Luke reached the rappels, he could see Vale's headlamp descending below. Luke heard Vale yell "off rappel." Approximately eight seconds later, Luke heard crashing and saw that Vale's headlamp had disappeared. Luke recognized that his partner had taken a large fall and tried to establish communication with him. Unable to get a response, Luke called 911 to activate a rescue.

Yosemite Search and Rescue dispatched a hasty team up the trail to make contact with the party. Upon arrival at the bottom of the East Ledges rappels, the SAR team found the patient showing no signs of life. After consultation with Park Medical Control, the climber was declared deceased.

ANALYSIS

The East Ledges rappel route descends a vertical cliff approximately 500 feet high. Most climbing teams complete this descent with rappels via bolted anchors. Multiple trees exist on the cliff between the bolted anchors.

Before Vale's fall, ropes had been fixed along the rappel route. These fixed ropes were of unknown origin but were being used regularly by climbers to expedite their descent and for ascending to the top of the wall to access routes from above. Climbers who had descended the East Ledges in the days prior to Vale's fall said they had seen a blue rope hanging adjacent to the standard rappel route and stuck in a flake and tree. In daylight, the climbers said, it was obvious that this rope was "garbage" and was not safe to use, but this fact must not have been easily observed at night.

When YOSAR arrived on scene, they observed a blue rope rigged through Vale's ATC rappel device. While it is impossible to know the exact sequence of events that preceded Vale's fall, it is likely that he arrived at a ledge between the first and second anchors from the top, saw the blue rope in the tree to his right, and considered it to be the next rappel line. He removed his ATC from the first line, called "off rappel" to his partner above, and rigged his ATC onto the blue rope. At some point while he was weighting the blue line, the rope dislodged and Vale fell to the base of the rappels.

Avoid rappelling or ascending ropes unless the condition and security of the rope, including its anchor, is known. In the dark and in a hurry, it is reasonable to assume that Vale didn't inspect the blue line before committing his life to it.

Always test a new critical connection before undoing your previous connection.

For example, after loading your rappel device, you should test-weight the rope while still connected to a trusted anchor.

Slow down. Check that your anchor is secure, your carabiners are locked, and that your device is loaded correctly before each rappel. No amount of time saved is worth skipping these steps.

The climb is not over until you're on the ground. Of the six climbing-related fatalities in Yosemite over the last two years, all have been related to rappelling and descending. Stay vigilant until you are completely done with your adventure. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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