



AAC Publications

Fifty-Foot Ledge Fall – Climbing Unroped

Wyoming, Wind Rivers, Cirque of the Towers, Sharks Nose

On the morning of August 26, I launched from the Big Sandy Trailhead to attempt a Cirque of the Towers traverse in a day. (This route links eight peaks with 5.6 to 5.8 climbing and extensive scrambling and hiking.) I had completed the traverse in one day, car to car, in 2013, and I was familiar with all portions of the route.

At the base of Sharks Nose, about midway through the traverse, I paused to eat and noted that the weather was colder and windier than forecast. I assessed my energy/mojo level at an honest 90 percent. I figured it would be easier to bail, if needed, past the traverse's technical portion. Two technical towers remained.

I forged up the Thoroughfare route on the northwest face of Sharks Nose to the notch between the south and north summits. I had brought gear for the route's rappels and to rope-solo the 5.8 crux mantel on Sharks Nose if conditions warranted, but I elected to free solo, having "floated it" twice before. However, I was unable to complete the move, nor step back down to the spire that I had just stepped off. I held a "beached whale" position for less than a minute and then fell. I latched a very sloping ledge about 15 feet below, but I was unable to hold on and again started free-falling. I landed on a three-foot ledge about 50 feet below. I was pretty intact and never lost consciousness. I shook off the daze and got to work on self-rescue, since my injuries seemed minimal. I declined help from some climbers on the ground (about 500 feet below) who had seen me fall.

I used my 66-meter rope to rappel Sharks Nose's east face, using cordage and gear I had brought or found, as there were no fixed anchors. When I arrived back at the base, my injured knee wouldn't bend enough for my foot to get back into my right running shoe. The party who had offered to help before had waited during my descent, and now I asked for their assistance. It had been about two hours since my fall.

The climbers had an inReach device in camp one mile away, and one of them set out to retrieve it while the other helped me through the talus. Soon, approximately a dozen climbers in the area were assisting with my rescue, including a physician.

My hopes for making this rescue non-technical were dashed as the afternoon turned to evening and I learned that a helicopter was on the way. [Tip Top Search and Rescue (TTSAR) was notified by officials in Fremont County at 4:35 p.m. that a rescue had been requested. Fremont County dispatched a helicopter with an emergency medical services crew.] **The helicopter medics arrived with a backboard, but progress was slow.**

Inefficiencies were introduced with a dozen or so helpers and were compounded by the lack of a clear leader. Ropes were being used in third-class terrain, and gridlock developed. **Eventually, a request was made for a second helicopter with short-haul capability.** [TTSAR flew into the Cirque on a short-haul-capable helicopter. After waiting for winds to calm, near darkness, the patient was short-hauled to a landing zone east of Lonesome Lake and transferred to the other helicopter, whose crew, equipped with night-vision goggles, was able to fly out that night to Lander Regional Hospital. The other helicopter had to remain in the Cirque overnight.]

My injuries included a broken right patella, three knocked-out teeth, five facial fractures, a broken nose, a laceration on my left patella needing 10 stitches, and road rash. Not bad for a 50-foot ledge fall!

ANALYSIS

Though I am used to long days soloing in the mountains, I consciously continued on a large objective even when my self-assessment indicated a (relatively) low level of energy. Overconfidence in the form of “I’ve done this before, I can just blast it out again” overwhelmed me and ended up requiring a non-trivial rescue that put rescuers at risk. I regret the helicopter noise in the Cirque that day and the next morning; it ruined the magic that the Cirque holds, which most of us appreciate and travel long distances to know. (Source: Dave Kesonie.)

EDITOR’S NOTE: The climber, age 39, has been climbing for 24 years, making frequent solo trips in the Tetons and Wind Rivers. The equipment he carried and his ability to self-rescue made a fundamental difference in his outcome. It is worth noting that once outside assistance is requested, one never knows exactly what direction a rescue will take, given the variables of available resources and personnel, including their experience level and climbing ability. As climbers, it is also worth considering the potential cascade of consequences of a rescue—specifically, in this case, the grounding of a helicopter and crew members for a night in the backcountry. (Sources: Dave Kesonie, Tip Top Search and Rescue, and the Editors.)

Images



Helicopter and rescuers in the Cirque of the Towers.

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