



## AAC Publications

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### **Lowering Error – Inexperience**

California, Mammoth Lakes, Clark Canyon, Area 13

**On July 25, as he was preparing to lower from a ledge, a climber fell about 15 meters to the ground.**

The climber was a member of a three-person team attempting a “mock multi-pitch climb” in preparation for a real multi-pitch objective later in the week. Climber 1 (male, age unknown, with moderate experience) conducted this practice session with Climber 2 (male, age 32) and Climber 3 (female, age 40). Both Climber 2 and Climber 3 had little outdoor climbing experience.

Before the fall, Climber 1 led up a climb (believed to be Chop Chop, 5.8) to a single bolt at a ledge approximately 15 meters up. He used this bolt as a belay anchor to bring up the other climbers. Before climbing, Climber 2 tied into the middle of the rope using a figure 8 on a bight clipped to his harness with a locking carabiner, and Climber 3 tied into the end of the rope.

Climber 2, still clipped into the rope via a figure 8 on a bight, attempted to lead the bolted climb above the ledge (Pachuco, 5.8) as the second pitch of their route. He was able to climb to the next bolt but felt “sketched out” and asked to be lowered to the ledge. Once there, Climber 2 asked to be lowered to the ground. Climber 2 recalled that, “the rope was a mess, with loops everywhere.”

Concerned that he wouldn’t have enough rope to lower Climber 2 from the bolt clipped on the route above, Climber 1 attached a second belay device to his harness, then redirected what he believed to be a length of rope leading to Climber 2’s knot through the anchor. Just as Climber 2 leaned back, Climber 1 realized that he was belaying “just a random loop” and Climber 2 fell to the ground.

Nearby climbers with medical experience and an AMGA-certified guide heard the scream of Climber 2 and came to assist. They stabilized Climber 2, who had a suspected spine injury and right forearm fracture, and called 911. Climber 1 and Climber 3 were shaken by the fall and were unable to self-rescue. The guide, belayed by another climber, ascended to their position and assisted them to the ground. Climber 1 sustained moderate rope burns to the inside of one hand, while Climber 3 sustained partial- and full-thickness rope burns exposing the “fatty” layer across her forearms and biceps. (Source: RL, climber who assisted in the rescue.)

### **ANALYSIS**

Climber 1 said after the accident that this was the first time he had used the mock multi-pitch method of teaching and he was “coming up with most of it on the fly.” He remarked that it quickly became “way too complicated.”

When climbers are standing on a ledge, as in this instance, it can be difficult to identify the correct strands of rope to use for belaying, rappelling, or lowering, as none of them may be weighted. This makes the fundamentals of such transitions all the more essential. Climbers should be secured to an anchor prior to transitioning to another rope, and then should weight-test the rappel or lowering system before unclipping from the anchor. See Molly Loomis’ Essentials article on this subject in *Accidents 2017*. (Sources: the Editors and RL, a climber who assisted in the rescue.)

## Images



Rescuers on scene after a ground fall in Clark Canyon.

## Article Details

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