



## AAC Publications

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### **Fatal Fall, Possible Rappel Error**

California, Yosemite Valley, Fifi Buttress

**On November 17 two friends of Niels Tietze hiked to the base of Fifi Buttress to look for their overdue friend.** The two knew that Tietze had been up on the formation, working to establish a new route, and had been doing so alone, using fixed lines and self-belay techniques. It was late in the season and he was most likely removing his ropes and gear from the wall. Nobody had seen Tietze since earlier in the week, and he had missed climbing plans with friends the day before.

When the two arrived at the base of the cliff they discovered Tietze's body and immediately recognized that he had taken an unsurvivable climbing fall. At approximately 2 p.m. they notified SAR by cell phone.

At the scene, park rangers found Tietze wearing a climbing harness. His shoes were off, but there were two climbing shoes found nearby. He had climbing gear clipped to his harness, including cams, carabiners, and slings. There was also an adjustable wrench and round wire brush. A low-stretch, 254-foot rope was found strewn about the scene. The rope was not connected to the harness. There were no knots in the rope. The midway point was looped into one slot of a rappel device as if for a single-rope rappel. The retention cable of the friction device was broken. The rappel device was not attached to the locking carabiner found on the harness.

The carabiner attached to the harness belay loop had a screw lock with the screw in the locked position; however, the gate was effectively locked open because the nose of the carabiner was not captured by the screw lock.

Since Tietze was by himself at the time, no one can know for sure what happened. The findings at the scene suggest he might have accidentally weighted a rope set for a doubled-over rappel with only one strand of rope in the device and carabiner. However, the fact that the ATC and rope were not connected to his harness when he was found detract from this theory and could be explained only if they had managed to come out of the "locked open" carabiner during the fall.

A second option would be that an unknown event interrupted Tietze as he was rigging for rappel—after he passed the rope through the ATC but before the ATC was clipped to the carabiner in his belay loop. An attempt to grab the rope could explain how it made it to the ground. There is simply no way to know if this was the case.

The broken retention cable on his rappel device is unusual, but in and of itself would not have caused an accident to occur, as the retention cable does not assist in the operation of a plaquette device. The "locked open" carabiner certainly could have played a part in the accident. However, the fact that the middle mark of the rope was through his rappel device strongly suggests a rappel rigging error.

### **ANALYSIS**

The following lessons are among those that can be drawn from this tragic incident:

- Always clip in directly to each anchor while preparing to rappel. Whether using a manufactured or home-rigged PAS (personal anchor system), a Purcell prusik, or the slings on hand, it is extremely

important to attach yourself to the anchor while rigging for rappel.

- Test your system. After going in direct and rigging for rappel, weight and test your system before unclipping from the anchor. Verify that you have done everything correctly before trusting your life to a rappel.
- Always use a “third hand” backup. When you attach a third-hand backup such as a kleimheist or autoblock prior to loading your rappel device, you have a preliminary point of attachment to the rope. If all else fails, it could save your life.
- Be extra cautious when alone. No one else is there to check your systems, and no one is there in case of an accident.
- Beware complacency. Niels Tietze was a climber of the absolute highest caliber. He had spent years of his life rescuing people off the walls of Yosemite. It only takes one bad rappel after thousands of well-executed ones for something like this to happen. Stay sharp. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

## Images

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