



## AAC Publications

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### **Rappel Error – Anchor Failure, Inadequate Communication and Teamwork**

California, High Sierra, Palisades, Starlight Peak

**On August 6, a party of two was descending from Starlight Peak (14,200 feet) after climbing the Starlight Buttress route.** Both climbers were experienced but unfamiliar with this particular area. They had planned to descend the northwest ridge to the Underhill Couloir between Starlight and Thunderbolt Peaks and then to the glacier.

While descending, the party deviated from their planned route. Climber 1 (male, 66) believed he had located a gully that could be scrambled down after an initial steep section, and requested that Climber 2 (female, 45) set up a rappel to start down this gully. As Climber 1 rappelled into the gully, Climber 2 continued to assess the proposed route and concluded that leaving the ridge was a major mistake. She yelled to Climber 1 to stop and return, but he did not hear or respond. Climber 2 then rappelled down to Climber 1 and an argument occurred, with Climber 2 attempting to persuade Climber 1 to prusik back up the rope and continue down the ridge, while Climber 1 adamantly refused to consider this option. The party then pulled the rope, committing to the unknown descent.

The climbers completed several rappels down the gully before falling rock and difficulty constructing anchors caused them to leave the gully and begin rappelling diagonally across the neighboring face, leaving gear and natural (sling) anchors. Although they were unaware of it, the climbers were rappelling just right of the climb known as “the X.” The Secor guidebook to the Sierra says, “This is probably the most dangerous route in the Palisades,” because of loose rock.

Sometime in late afternoon, Climber 2 set a rappel anchor on the face, slinging a horn with webbing, and began rappelling. When Climber 2 was about 30 to 40 feet down the rappel, the anchor failed and both climbers fell, coming to a stop when the rope snagged on an unknown feature. Climber 1 was killed in the fall. Climber 2, who was not seriously injured, was crouched on a small ledge, tangled in the rope, with Climber 1 hanging below. Climber 2 managed to access an emergency locator beacon in her pack and activated it at this time.

Climber 2 had minimal gear available, as the majority was with her partner. She was unable to anchor herself and initially unwilling to move, due to the risk of being dragged off the ledge by the weight of Climber 1. After assessing the situation, she decided her position was too unstable to spend the night there without slipping and potentially dislodging the rope. She determined there were two load-bearing lengths keeping the rope tight: one tangled around her leg, pulling upward behind her to the unknown snag, and the other going downward from her jammed rappel device to Climber 1 hanging below. The strategy she implemented was to cut a long cord in two and use the two halves to attach a prusik knot to each of the load-bearing lengths of rope, connecting them loosely with a sling. She then carefully slid the prusik knot on the lower rope downward until she could transfer Climber 1’s weight onto the prusik tied to the snagged rope. She was then able to remove herself from the weighted system, remove the jammed rappel device from the rope, and untangle herself from the remaining strands of rope.

Climber 2 climbed up to a larger ledge, about 20 feet above, where she tied herself to a boulder and remained through the night. Early the following morning (August 7), Climber 2 used the strobe on her emergency locator beacon to signal a guide and clients when they awoke at their nearby camp, and this party made their way across the glacier to where they could communicate. The guide called 911.

Helicopters from Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and California Highway Patrol located Climber 2 but were unable to rescue her that afternoon. Inyo County Search and Rescue determined the area was too dangerous to access by climbing or rappel and requested assistance from Yosemite Search and Rescue. A YOSAR team arrived that evening by helicopter and rescued Climber 2 via a long line, after she'd spent 26 hours on the ledge. The YOSAR helicopter returned on August 8 to retrieve the body of Climber 1.

## **ANALYSIS**

The immediate cause of this accident was that the final anchor set by Climber 2 failed. The difficulty of finding anchors, the lateness of the day, and the shortage of gear available for the descent led the party to rely on a natural anchor on unknown terrain, without a backup. Although it appeared solid and was tested before starting the rappel, it is likely the horn was not solidly attached to the rock. It is also possible the failure was due to other reasons, such as incorrectly tied webbing.

While the anchor failure was the immediate cause, the disagreement and decision to leave the standard route precipitated the event. Both parties should have assessed and discussed the proposed deviation from the standard descent before either climber began rappelling. (Source: Anonymous report from Climber 2.)

## Images



Starlight Peak (right center). The normal descent follows the right skyline to the snow couloir. The attempted shortcut headed down the steep sunlit face.

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