



AAC Publications

Trapped By Talus Boulder

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Conness

On July 29, after climbing North Peak, Kimberly Luba and I descended to the basin below Mt. Conness. While resting by a small alpine lake, we heard cries for help. We headed up the talus field under the north ridge of Conness, following the screams. Before long I located a 21-year-old male, Adrien Costa, who had been making a solo attempt on a direct line up to the north ridge. At around 11,400 feet, a large piece of unstable talus had shifted and fallen onto his leg, just above the knee, trapping him. The incident occurred at approximately 12:45 p.m. It was now 1 p.m.

Primary assessment revealed a crushing injury to the right leg caused by the granite block, which was roughly 5x5x1 feet in size and weighed about two tons. There was no sensation or mobility below the injury but slow capillary refill in the calf. The femur, knee, and lower leg all had significant deformity. The patient had significant bleeding from the site of the injury that appeared to be arterial. He was alert and oriented with stable vitals and but severe pain. I applied an improvised tourniquet with a small piece of rope and a carabiner at 1:05 p.m. and activated my SPOT device. (It was later determined the device never sent the message despite it reporting a successful transmission.) We waved a red jacket and used a whistle to signal another party on Mt. Conness, who called for help on their cell phone.

We provided fluids to Adrien, but he had no appetite for food. The tourniquet successfully stopped the bleeding, and his vitals and level of consciousness were stable. At 4 p.m., unsure of whether help was coming, I left Kimberly with Adrien and began hiking toward the car, planning to call 911 and then return to the accident site with bivy gear. After 20 minutes, I intercepted a Mono County Sheriff's Department SAR team and escorted them to the site, where they took over the scene at roughly 4:45 p.m.

The SAR team called the National Guard for a helicopter extraction. Meanwhile, they rigged a 9:1 ratchet system to prepare to move the boulder, as well as other systems to stabilize the stone once it was moved. A Blackhawk helicopter arrived and lowered a flight paramedic, who took over medical intervention. Once the helicopter had burned enough fuel to accommodate the weight of the patient, the boulder was moved off Adrien, six hours after he became trapped. He was packaged into a litter and carried over the talus and onto the glacier, where he and the medic were winched into the helicopter and flown out. Adrien's leg was later amputated above the knee.

ANALYSIS

I am unaware of the events leading up to the accident, as we arrived shortly after it happened. Obviously, care should be taken when crossing loose talus. Although Adrien was not on the traditional route to the north ridge of Conness, I believe he intended to take the line he followed. There are risks in climbing alone. [Editor's note: Indeed, the patient was very fortunate there were people nearby who could reach him quickly and were able to control his bleeding.] (Source: Sam England.)

Images



Preparing to move a two-ton talus block from a trapped climber (center, red jacket) below Mt. Conness.

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