



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock – Downclimbing Fourth-Class Terrain

California, Sierra Nevada, Palisades, Thunderbolt Peak

At approximately 4:30 p.m. on August 26, two climbers were descending loose 4th-class terrain in the North Couloir of Thunderbolt Peak when a male climber (31) took a tumbling fall of approximately 300 feet, suffering major trauma. This climber had belayed his partner (female, 38) down this passage and was downclimbing to her when he fell. He ended up in a low-angled scree- and talus-covered area at 13,400 feet. The party had a personal locator beacon (PLB), which was activated immediately.

An air search located a headlamp high on Thunderbolt Peak that evening, but due to waning daylight and high altitude, no rescue was possible at that time. On the morning of August 27, the Inyo County Sheriff's Office initiated a helicopter response. The crew reported strong and turbulent winds near the climbers' location that prevented them from approaching the party or landing below their position. After picking up an Inyo County Search and Rescue team member, the helicopter crew found that westerly updrafts near the ridge crest would permit them to lower the Inyo SAR member onto the ridge at 13,800 feet. (This is likely one of the highest-elevation helicopter lowers ever performed in California.) Over the next five hours, four additional rescuers and equipment were lowered to the ridge.

The Inyo SAR team members descended to the climbers' location, initiated care, and packaged the injured climber in a full-body vacuum splint and Sked stretcher for extraction. The patient was lowered approximately 250 feet down low-angle rock, snow, and ice to a point where an Army National Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopter could hoist and transport him to medical care. The climber's injuries included several unstable cervical vertebrae fractures, other fractures throughout his body, and a pneumothorax. He lost consciousness for a significant period of time but was verbally responsive by the time the Inyo SAR team arrived. SAR team members and the partner descended to the bottom of the couloir and bivouacked nearby. They were evacuated by helicopter the next day.

ANALYSIS

The cause of the actual fall is unknown. The injured climber had belayed his partner down the 4th-class terrain, but it is unknown whether she placed protection for him or was belaying him as he downclimbed after her. The terrain where the accident occurred, like many couloirs in the High Sierra, has abundant loose rock and scarce opportunities for reliable protection or belay anchors. The party's method of descent was typical for such terrain, which generally must be treated as "no falls" territory, requiring constant attention. [See "Know the Ropes: Safer 4th Class" in ANAC 2018.]

Even though the party carried a PLB, enabling a quicker response, approximately 27 hours elapsed between the time of the accident and evacuation. Fortunately, the party was well equipped for an unplanned overnight stay. Additionally, and under very challenging circumstances, the partner was able to maneuver the patient to a stable position and keep him warm while awaiting rescue, which improved his chances of survival and recovery. (Source: Inyo County SAR.)

Images



Climber's smashed helmet after a long tumble in the North Couloir of Thunderbolt Peak.



Rescue helicopter maneuvering above Thunderbolt Peak.



Rescuers working to lower an injured climber to a point where he could be picked up by a helicopter.

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