



## AAC Publications

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### Rappel Anchor Failure

Alaska, Juneau Icefield, Mendenhall Towers

Southeast buttress of Main Tower in the Mendenhall Towers. (1) Location of rappel anchor that failed. (2) Ledge where rappeller landed after anchor failure and eventually was rescued by helicopter. **A party of three experienced climbers (male, ages 23 to 25) planned to attempt the southeast ridge of the Main Tower in the Mendenhall Towers. The party arrived in the early evening of June 26 by helicopter, set up base camp, and prepared for an alpine start the next morning.**

All three had previous experience in the Mendenhall Towers. Two of the three had previously climbed Main Tower, by different routes, and Climbers 1 and 2 had attempted the southeast ridge of the Main Tower in September 2018. This attempt was stopped short after about 1,000 feet of climbing when a loose rock caused a laceration on Climber 2's pinkie finger that resulted in stitches.

In 2019, the party of three left base camp at 6:30 a.m. and, after a long day of swapping leads, they summited around 10:30 p.m. In high spirits they enjoyed the sunset over the Juneau Ice field and began their descent around 11 p.m.

The climbers descended via the ascent route. The nature of the southeast ridge made for numerous short rappels. Old tat, wires, and slung horns were found throughout the descent and used as rappel anchors. The climbers added or replaced these anchors when needed; however, they did not back up the anchors with removable protection while the first and second climber were rappelling. Climber 1 led the rappels throughout the night because he had previous experience with the descent.

After eight to ten rappels (about 1,000 feet), they arrived on a spacious 15- by 20-foot ledge at 1:30 a.m. Each climber was fatigued, dehydrated, and lacking nutrition. However, with base camp now in view, they were motivated to keep going.

The rappel anchor at the large ledge was one bomber large hex and one medium wire, poorly equalized with a cord and a quick-link at the masterpoint. A visual inspection revealed that one end of the cord was frayed and without much space between the knot and the fraying end; Climber 1 also noted the anchor cord was the same as he had seen on this anchor the year prior. After a short discussion, the climbers concluded the anchor was good enough. The party began rappelling without replacing the cord or backing up the anchor.

Climber 1 started down, and in an effort to save time he bypassed the next spacious ledge, about 40 feet below, and continued down the ridge on rappel to a small ledge, descending a total of about 100 feet. He found a suitable horn to sling and went off rappel. Climber 2 rigged his rappel device, walked from the anchor to the lip of the ledge (15 feet), weighted the rope, and instantly the anchor failed. Climber 2 fell to the next ledge 40 feet below, taking the rappel rope with him in his fall. Climber 1, down below, did not witness the fall, only heard a very loud thud. Climber 3 witnessed the anchor failure: Both pieces of rock protection were still in the wall, but the cord that had connected the pieces was at his feet.

Climber 3, perched on the ledge above, was able to see and hear Climber 2 after the fall. He was lying on his side and not responsive, only moaning. Immediately, Climber 3 called 911 and informed dispatch of the severity of the accident and the need for a helicopter; this phone call took place

around 1:45 a.m. Climber 1 and Climber 3 both carried cell phones, and Climber 1 was able to use GPS services from the phone to relay their location to 911 and the Coast Guard. A Coast Guard helicopter was dispatched from Sitka shortly after 2:30 a.m. with an ETA of one and half hours to Juneau, followed by a short flight to the Mendenhall Towers.

The accident had left Climber 3 without a rope or gear to descend to Climber 2's position 40 feet below. Climber 1 was about 70 feet lower and held the ends of the rappel rope, but since the rope was no longer anchored, he could not ascend it. As they waited for help, Climber 3 continued to monitor Climber 2 from above, and around 3:30 a.m., in the first light of the morning, he was able to communicate directly with Climber 1. He relayed that Climber 2 was not moving and that blood had flowed from the back of his head. Climber 1 decided to climb up to Climber 2, whom he reached around 4 a.m. He noticed minor sounds of moaning and a light pulse from climber 2's radial artery.

Shortly before 4:12 a.m., the Coast Guard helicopter arrived. The climbers used the red flashing mode on their headlamps to signal the helicopter. (A crew member later said the red flashes were very helpful in pinpointing their location on the large, dark wall.) Climber 1 prepared Climber 2 for the helicopter by cutting his rappel device from the rope and untangling the rope. Climber 1 noticed the quick-link from the failed rappel anchor was still connected to the rope. At 4:30 a.m., the Coast Guard rescuers efficiently plucked Climber 2 off the mountain and flew him to Bartlett Regional Hospital in Juneau.

Back on the wall, Climber 1 was able to throw some gear up to Climber 3 so he could rig a rappel. Both climbers then rappelled safely down the rest of the route and returned to their base camp at 8 a.m. They flew back to town by helicopter, arriving at 10 a.m., and joined Climber 2 at the hospital. Sadly, the injuries the climber sustained were not survivable, and he died at 11:27 a.m. on June 28.

## ANALYSIS

The party's decision not to replace the old tat on the rappel anchor proved to be a fatal mistake. This decision was made in a very fatigued state, and the climbers' judgements were impaired. They prioritized getting back to base camp quickly over taking extra time to ensure the safety of their anchors. This seems like a very misguided error, but in the early hours of the morning, running on little sleep, dehydrated and hungry, you may make odd decisions you would not otherwise.

In addition to replacing or supplementing the old tat on the anchor, the climbers could have backed up each of their anchors while the first two climbers were rappelling. The third and lightest person to rappel could have removed the backups before starting down.

Complacency in the face of risk led the climbers to decide the rappel anchor was good enough. These climbers were young and had had an abundance of positive experiences in climbing. They had completed more than half of the rappels already. They let their guard down too early. (Source: Climber 1.)

**BRYSON ALLEN WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE FUND:** Friends and family of Bryson Allen (Climber 2) have established a scholarship fund for incoming University of Montana students who might otherwise not be able to participate in the annual Freshman Wilderness Experience. Find more info [here](#).

## Images



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