



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Scrambling Toward Rappel Anchors

Arizona, Mt. Lemmon Chimney Rock, Standard Route

At approximately 10:30 a.m. on April 12, my brother-in-law, Stephen Whittingham, and I (Chris, 30) were at the top of the Standard Route (5.7) on Chimney Rock, preparing to descend. The rappel anchor was on the far east end of the summit, out of range of the small tree we used for an anchor at the top of our climb. I unclipped from our anchor, grabbed the two ends of the rope, and started moving across the summit toward the rap anchor. That's the last thing I remember before I fell.

As told by Stephen: Out of my peripheral vision I could see Chris take a leaping step in the direction of the rappel anchors. Either his momentum was too great or the ledge he anticipated landing on didn't exist because, with a scream that I will never forget, he fell 30 feet, out of my sight. I took the phone from my pocket to dial 911. I remained on the line with dispatch for a total of 46 minutes. I consciously made the decision to stay at the top after calling 911, because I believed it was most important for me to have a view of the road and direct responders to Chris' position. I am an engineer and don't have any experience related to emergency medicine. From one vantage point, I could see Chris at the base of the rock, and at first he appeared to be unconscious but soon began to stir.

Site of the fall.

As an ambulance came up the mountain, I took a couple of bright climbing slings off my shoulder and began waving them around my head. When the ambulance got closer, the driver honked, signaling that he saw me. A sheriff's deputy arrived, and I tried to yell down the best way for someone to reach Chris' location.

Sometime after noon, I could hear the unmistakable chop of an approaching helicopter. Again, I took the climbing slings from my chest and swung them around my head to capture the pilot's attention, then pointed to the side of the rock where Chris was lying. Soon after, a rescuer was being lowered to the ground. I now made my way over to the rappel station and flaked out my rope for a rappel. Back on the ground, I assisted in placing a neck brace and positioning Chris on a backboard. The deputy maneuvered him into a hoist bag. In mere seconds, Chris was at the helicopter and was flown down the mountain to an awaiting ambulance. I remember looking down at my watch and the time was 12:43 p.m., about two hours after the accident.

As told by Chris: I had a concussion and a number of broken bones in my face but did not have any head bleed or skull fracture. Somehow, both my nose and jaw escaped unharmed, although my lip and left ear had some pretty severe lacerations, and two bones in my right ankle were broken.

(Sources: Chris Czaplicki and Stephen Whittingham.)

ANALYSIS

Like most accidents in climbing, this one was preventable. Although it was not possible to reach the rappel anchor from the anchor I built off the small tree, I could have made the decision to extend it with one or two of the many slings I had with me. Large ledges or summits may provide a false sense of security, and I hope this writeup encourages readers to stay on anchor or build a new anchor while maneuvering across an uneven ledge with potentially deadly exposure. [Editor's Note: Another good option is to maintain a belay while each climber makes the transition between anchors.]

Another lesson I learned from this is the importance of having a means to call for a rescue. While I had a personal locator beacon with me, it was down in my pack at the base of the climb. Thankfully, Stephen had brought his cellphone and we had service. (Source: Chris Czaplicki.)

Images



Site of the fall from the top of Chimney Rock.

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