



AAC Publications

Rappel Anchor Failure – Complacency, Fatigue

California, Sierra Nevada, Evolution Ridge Traverse

On July 1, I (43) was climbing with three partners near the midpoint of the Evolution Ridge Traverse (VI 5.9). It was our third day on this long, multi-peak traverse. During a scrambling section that afternoon, I caught up with my partners as they were discussing whether to downclimb or rappel a 10-foot steep section. They felt it would be an awkward downclimb with packs, and I did not investigate the descent myself. We decided to rope up and lower/rappel. There was just a single weathered-looking cordelette anchor in place, unlike the multiple slings at previous rappel anchors on the traverse. The likely reason for this is that most parties downclimb this section.

I slung a hay-bale-size rock with a new runner and belayed two of my partners down into the short gap before removing the runner. My other partner rappelled from just the weathered cordelette, but did not weight the rope fully. I then followed on rappel. After only a few feet, the cordelette snapped and I fell ten feet into the gap before tumbling another 40 to 50 feet.

I suffered fractures to my left clavicle, multiple neck vertebrae, and left metatarsal, along with a dislocated toe on my left foot, badly bruised and cut left heel/foot, cut upper left shin, and badly bruised left elbow. I was wearing a helmet, and this, along with my backpack, prevented more serious injury. We immediately contacted Inyo SAR, but due to high winds, they were unable to respond until the next morning, when I was hoisted and transported by helicopter to the hospital in Bishop.

ANALYSIS

This accident was caused by the failure of a single piece of cord that was not tested or backed up. I've never relied on gear in questionable/unknown condition before. It's possible my decision-making was compromised by the previous days of climbing.

My takeaways from the accident:

- (1) Whenever possible, perform a standardized self-check and partner check of your system prior to climbing, rappelling, or during any transition.
- (2) Consider resting or aborting the trip if feeling physically or mentally fatigued.
- (3) Acclimatize sufficiently before strenuous and technical trips at high altitude.
- (4) Back up and test single-piece fixed anchors. Avoid using weathered anchors if not backed up or replaced with new material.
- (5) Avoid very short rappels if it would be reasonable to downclimb.

(Sources: Sean Reedy and the Editors.)

Images

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