



AAC Publications

Rappel Anchor Failure – Sling Untied, Inexperience

Canada, British Columbia, Valhalla Provincial Park, Niselheim

On July 27, my climbing partner (female, 25) and I (male, 31) climbed the east ridge of Niselheim and then began descending the fourth-class northwest ridge. As we were scrambling down the ridge, my partner found a rappel anchor consisting of a single piece of webbing around a good horn with two carabiners attached. The webbing looked new and in good condition, and we assumed someone had recently rappelled from it. I aiked the rope and handed it to my partner. She passed the rope through the two carabiners and began to rappel.

The anchor sling came undone immediately under her weight, and my partner fell approximately five meters on slabby rock. I quickly scrambled down to meet her. We checked for injuries, and luckily she only had minor cuts on her right hand and a bruise on her right hip. I collected the rope, the webbing anchor, and the two carabiners. The sling had come untied during the rappel. I found the webbing with an overhand knot in each end of it.

ANALYSIS

I could not see the knot before my partner began to rappel, because she was blocking my view. My partner has never tied webbing and was unfamiliar with a water knot, used to join the ends of webbing. When inspecting sling anchors, it is important to evaluate not only the quality of the material but also the knots. When in doubt, double up the anchor with a fresh sling. **Just because a previous party has rappelled off an anchor does not mean it's safe.** (Source: Anonymous climber.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The person who left this anchor likely was attempting to tie a water knot or single sherman's knot but instead simply threaded the tail of one overhand knot through the body of the overhand at the other end of the sling. If someone rappelled off this anchor prior to this accident, all that held the webbing in place was the pressure of the loaded sling against the horn, with the tail end of the webbing squeezed by the single overhand. The tail would have gradually worked loose or slipped free as pressure was released. Since the reporting climber quickly scrambled down to the fallen climber, both likely could have downclimbed to avoid this rappel. In many cases, careful scrambling or a quick belay is a more efficient way to descend short steps than rappelling, and often safer than relying on anchors of unknown provenance. If you encounter a dubious or damaged rappel anchor, dismantle or replace it to safeguard subsequent parties.

Images

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