



## AAC Publications

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### **Rappel Anchor Failure – Loose Rock, Overconfidence,**

Washington, North Cascades, Eldorado Peak, West Ridge

Sam (30), Matt (26), and I (24) were planning to climb the West Ridge of Eldorado Peak (alpine terrain plus 10 pitches up to 5.8) and the Southwest Buttress on Dorado Needle (13 pitches, 5.7 ) over five days in August to help Matt prepare for his AMGA advanced alpine course. Sam and I are also aspiring alpine guides, one to two years behind Matt in the progression. The approach to these climbs took longer than expected (1.5 days), and we were all tired from a summer of alpine work. Matt had a bad cold.

On August 14, Matt was mock guiding us on the West Ridge route, and Sam and I were both end-rope on our single-rated 8.9mm rope. Progress was slow, and as we approached the crux at 4 p.m., still 1,700 feet below the top, our planned summit bivy seemed unlikely. Looking at a hard-to-protect 5.8 slab traverse under a chossy downclimb, we decided to bail back down the ascent route after seven pitches.

We were set up at an obvious notch before the first tower on the ridge, and our first rappel anchor was set back behind a block. The rope ran around a sharp corner, and we spent several minutes padding it. We rigged for a 60-meter single-line rappel, planning for a rappeller to place protection so Matt could then down-lead the pitches and avoid leaving gear for intermediate anchors.

I rapped first since I was the heaviest. As soon as I loaded the rope, the rope slipped off the padding. I was leaning back and about to drop over a lip (five feet from the stance) when I saw the sheath shredding and the core exposed. I was barely able to unweight the rope before the core cut. Had I fallen, it would have been a deadly fall. We isolated the core shot in a butter fly knot and re-rigged for double-strand 30-meter rappels. These went well, and we were able to conserve gear. (We had 12 cams and many rappels remaining.) As we descended, the rock quality deteriorated and we had to look harder for anchors.

One to two raps before a 3rd-class ramp led to a at spot on the ridge where we expected to bivy, Sam built a temporary anchor at a hanging stance, using a crack that appeared to be between two structural pieces of rock, with a number 1 and number 0.75 cam. A hard thwack on the more suspect side of the crack (a vertical column) suggested it was solid, and I inspected the gear before clipping in. We both fully weighted the anchor for several minutes while Matt rappelled to us.

As Sam and I waited, we decided we could sling the column forming one side of the crack (about one square foot on top and 10 feet tall) and use this for a rappel anchor if we could clean some debris from the back of the crack. Matt arrived and began cleaning the slot as Sam and I waited, clipped to personal tethers. As Matt cleaned, the column shifted and both cams in the crack released. Sam and I both fell approximately 15 feet into a small gully before tumbling down loose, steep 3rd-class terrain for another 50 feet. We slowed and stopped as the ridge flattened and widened. Matt was able to downclimb to reach us. Both Sam and I were injured, but it was immediately clear that her injuries were more serious than mine. We immediately pressed the SOS button on our Garmin inReach and were in contact with the National Park Service in 20 minutes. By this time, it was about 6:45 p.m. and the sun was setting, so we prepared for an evening on the ridge neither Sam nor I could move over technical terrain with our injuries. However, a Navy helicopter was able to rescue us via long line at approximately 9 p.m. (in the dark and with night-vision goggles ) and fly us to Seattle. I had a broken left wrist and torn right bicep, and Sam ended up with a concussion and the worst bruises of her life.

## ANALYSIS

The obvious analysis is that a two-piece, one-feature anchor was insufficient. But in that situation, we were either going to downclimb steep, chossy 4th-class terrain or rappel. The rock looked solid or at least as solid as anything we'd used already (a heuristic trap).

The more subtle but important takeaway was our mindset. All three of us are working alpine guides, hot off big seasons crushing easy objectives and looking like heroes in front of clients. That obviously will generate some hubris. Add to the mix the fact that Sam and I were more relaxed on beta and planning than usual because Matt was "guiding" us, yet our expectations for planning and risk assessment differed from his, and we should have discussed this as a group.

We all had our minds elsewhere as well. I had a high-stakes trip coming up, Matt had his advanced alpine course, and Sam was joining a new company. None of us totally had our head in the game. The final, and perhaps most interesting, issue was that the AMGA had used this route for an advanced alpine course two weeks before we got there. Every time the rock quality deteriorated or the climbing got worse, we looked at each other and shrugged, saying, "The AMGA uses this route." This "AMGA stamp of approval" created a bizarre expert halo. [Editor's Note: It's not unusual for guides to belay two clients on a single rope, and these climbers were in the middle of an extended traverse and thus trying to save weight. However, doing alpine routes with two ropes will greatly speed an unplanned retreat and provide access to many more anchor options.] (Source: Spencer Dillon.)

**Images**

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