



AAC Publications

Rockfall, Anchor Failure

Montana, Beartooth Mountains, Granite Peak

On July 2, Emma Ely (25), Randy Smersh (36), and I (Zach Eiten, 28), all experienced mountaineers, set out to climb the Notch Couloir route on the north face of Granite Peak (12,799 feet), Montana's high point. The Notch Couloir is described as "steep snow followed by a 5.4 ridge to the summit." We approached via Huckleberry Creek, bivouacked between Avalanche and Cold lakes, and on July 3 we were underway around 4 a.m. The boulder fields surrounding Avalanche Lake slowed us significantly, and when we reached the cirque below Granite Peak, Randy decided to split off and climb the standard (east ridge) route via the Tempest-Granite saddle. We maintained contact throughout the day via walkie-talkies. Emma and I started up our route and simul-climbed most of the couloir with only a couple of belays.

At the saddle atop the couloir it began to snow, and we paused in case it became necessary to bail. Conditions in the Notch Couloir had been deteriorating as the daytime temperature increased (the forecast called for temperatures in the 30s to low 40s Fahrenheit), and we had seen some very small sloughs and minor rockfall, so we felt inclined to wait for the storm to pass rather than bail down the couloir.

As the squall subsided, we assessed the north ridge, which was more iced up and snow-packed than hoped, and opted for a line just to the east of the saddle in mixed condition. I started up a gully that felt like M3, with loose rock; I was able to place only a single nut and a number 1 cam. At the top of the pitch, I slung a refrigerator-size block and placed a 0.75 cam in the crack formed by the intersection of the block and the main face. I knew this belay was insecure, so I didn't weight the anchor; I had only a six- to eight-inch-wide ledge to stand on. It was around 1 p.m.

As I began pulling up the ropes to belay Emma, a microwave-size rock fell spontaneously from the gully above me. This large block and ensuing cascade of rocks collided with my anchor block and launched it off the edge. Instantly I was falling. Thankfully, the pitch below formed a series of steps, with vertical sections separated by ledges; I was able to arrest my fall on one of these ledges. Had I not done so, I would have fallen another 20 feet or more before being arrested by the cam I placed on the ascent.

One of the blocks had crushed my left foot during the barrage. I managed to place a bomber nut and sling a good horn that allowed Emma to lower me to her anchor. After confirming my toes were likely broken, I established radio contact with Randy, who was descending to the basin after retreating from his route, and asked him to try to contact search and rescue.

Emma and I began rappelling the Notch Couloir. It took six 70-meter rappels to reach the snow apron at the base. My foot was quite numb at this point, which allowed me to cautiously glissade and heel-step down the snowfield. We reached snowline around sunset, and at 3 a.m. we arrived back at our base camp.

Meanwhile, Randy had encountered a party at Huckleberry Lake who used their Garmin inReach to initiate a rescue. Around 7 a.m., Two Bear Air, a philanthropic rescue crew, arrived in a helicopter but were unable to land due to strong winds. Gallatin County SAR, on standby, responded shortly after and was able to land its helicopter near our camp. I was flown to Absarokee, Montana, where an ambulance took me to a clinic for X-rays. I had multiple broken bones in four of the five toes on my

left foot.

ANALYSIS

The natural rockfall was very unfortunate. I cannot say what would have happened had I remained anchored when the rocks fell onto my position, but at the end of the day I made the mistake of settling for a subpar anchor. The slung block and the cam placed between it and the wall both failed when the block dislodged, so the anchor was not actually redundant. I could have pounded my ice tools in cracks or turf and/ or tried to excavate a secondary feature to find protection that would have affixed me to the mountain as well as to the boulder.

Another factor was the lack of solid freeze on mixed terrain. The fact that we'd been slowed throughout the day (the boulder field, waiting out the brief snowstorm) meant the temperature was higher than it would have been if I'd reached this stance earlier in the day. Every now and again while mixed climbing you reach an anchor position with less than ideal gear, and massive blocks or relatively sketchy horns become your friends. However, this is generally when everything is frozen over in late fall or winter, and in the afternoon in early July, Granite Peak was far from solidly frozen. (Source: Zach Eiten.)

Images



The north face of Granite Peak, showing the Notch Couloir and the accident site on the north ridge. The east ridge is in the left foreground.

Article Details

Author	Zach Eiten
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	62
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports