



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Failure to Retie Correctly

Idaho, City of Rocks, Decadent Wall

On June 20, Peter (65), Vivien (52), and Amy (50) intended to climb Another Greg Lowe Route (5.8, trad) and then top-rope a neighboring 5.10a climb. All three were veteran climbers, with collective experience exceeding 100 years, and all had been accident-free until the day of this incident.

Peter led the 5.8 pitch and was lowered from an anchor 50 feet to the ground. Vivien clipped into the middle of the rope with a “double figure 8” knot on her locking belay carabiner, and ascended the route to the belay chains. Another party arrived at the base of the climb, intending to climb the same route. Peter then asked Vivien to rig the single anchor to allow both parties to use the anchor. Vivien yelled, “Take.” Peter attempted to take up slack and observed Vivien freefalling to the ground.

Vivien struck the ground only seven feet away from Peter. The surface was relatively flat sand and grass. Vivien was conscious and breathing, but confused. Peter was a physician and was able to determine she had a pelvis and hip fracture and may have sustained internal injuries. Peter immobilized her neck and pelvis, as best he could, and yelled for help. There was no cell phone service at this location. Two climbers on the ground were sent to notify the National Park Service headquarters of the accident.

Two other climbers (rangers Austin Palmieri and Nate Ament from Arches National Park) were climbing an adjacent route. They had a Garmin inReach and were able to send a distress signal. The rangers relayed that a medical helicopter evacuation was urgently required, and that a suitable landing zone was available only 200 yards away. The helicopter arrived within 20 minutes, and Vivien was transported to Portneuf Medical Center in Pocatello, Idaho.

Vivien suffered a cardiac arrest just after arrival at the hospital and miraculously survived a complex resuscitation, which involved transfusions greater than three times her blood volume, and two trips to the operating room. At the time this report was written, four months after the accident, Vivien was neurologically intact, walking, swimming, and continued to be committed to her rehabilitation. She had no recall of the accident.

ANALYSIS

This accident occurred through failure of the climber to retie her knot after reconfiguring her anchor. Vivien was not attached to the climbing rope when she fell. Human error played a role, with contributing factors including: 1) Vivien had tied into the middle of the rope, not her usual procedure; 2) Another party arrived, wishing to ascend the same climb, creating some feeling of time pressure; 3) Peter asked Vivien to rig the anchor such that two parties could use it, and believes his request was distracting; 4) Vivien untied from the middle of the rope while rigging the anchor and failed to tie back in; 5) Vivien called “take,” but it’s believed she did not wait for the pull of the rope or weight-test the system. Given the extent of her injuries, Vivien was fortunate that another party nearby was able to contact EMS with their satellite communication device, which likely saved her life. (Source: Peter Lenz.)

Images

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