



AAC Publications

FATAL RAPPEL ANCHOR FAILURE

Montana, Glacier National Park, Dusty Star Mountain

The east face of Dusty Star with the new route marked (red) and Jack Beard in the foreground. This picture was taken by Brian Kennedy the day before the pair's fatal rappel accident.

On July 24, two climbers were reported overdue to the National Park Service (NPS) in Glacier National Park. The climbers were Brian Kennedy and Jack Beard, both 67 years old with over 40 years of climbing experience each. They had departed on July 21 to attempt on the north summit of Dusty Star (Point 8084'), via a new route on the east face. Both were found deceased on July 25. The accident was not witnessed. The causes given below are speculative, but they are based on multiple observations, the official NPS report, and some detailed investigation by local climbers including their long-time friend, Adam Clark. Based on photos recovered from Brian Kennedy's camera, the accident likely occurred in the afternoon/evening of July 22.

Adam Clark reported the following to ANAC:

Both men had attempted the east face of Dusty Star the previous summer. They had retreated low on the route due to lack of water and time. This year there was a snowfield at the base of the face for water and they planned for a two-day trip with a return date of July 22.

Kennedy's partner, Denise Davies, was on another climbing trip. She did not return to cell service until the morning of the 24th. When she learned they were overdue, she promptly notified the NPS. Park Rangers found Kennedy's vehicle at a trailhead in the Saint Mary Valley below their stated objective. An air search utilizing Two Bear Air Rescue began that afternoon and extended into the night, but the climbers were not found.

On July 25, the NPS utilized Minuteman Aviation with three Park employees to continue the air search and found both climbers on a ledge on the east face of Dusty Star. Based on their aerial view, it appeared both men had fallen a long distance down the face. Two Bear Air returned to the scene and recovered both bodies that afternoon. The Two Bear rescue technician on the hoist found Kennedy and Beard on top of one another and had to cut the climbers free from the climbing rope that entangled their bodies. The rescue technician also confirmed that both climbers had their belay/rappel devices clipped to locking carabiners on their belay loops, and that one climber had both ropes threaded through his belay/rappel device. Reports from both the NPS and Two Bear Air also noted more equipment on the east face located above and below the body recovery site.

ANALYSIS

Following the accident, a few local climbers, including some of Kennedy and Beard's long-time friends, made two separate trips to Dusty Star to figure out what may have caused the accident.

On July 29, Orrin Weber, Don Scharfe, and John Gangemi made the long, off trail, bushwhack approach to the base of the east face and found Kennedy and Beard's large overnight packs and bivy gear at around the 6,200-foot level. They determined that Kennedy and Beard had made the approach on the 21st, and bivied at the base of the face before starting the climb. It was too late in the day for them to continue higher, so they packed up the deceased climbers' equipment and returned to town.

On August 2, following directions from Weber, Scharfe, and Two Bear Air, Ted Steiner and I (Adam Clark) went to the east face of Dusty Star. We passed Kennedy and Beard's bivy and then scrambled up a thousand feet of class 2 and 3 terrain following a gully to the body recovery site at 7,100 feet. Here we found Beard's pack and some of his personal effects. We also found the climbing rope, cut into several pieces. There were no knots tied in the ends of the rope. The climbing rack (cams, nuts, alpine draws, and a nut tool) was tangled in the rope. There was also a cut piece of 6mm-cord (was tied into a shoulder length runner), a framing hammer, and a piece of tubular webbing that had a single angle piton threaded on it. This webbing had previously been tied in a loop but was now cut and frayed at the water knot. (photo)

One of the larger cams had a wire gate carabiner clipped through the trigger wires (photo). The green cord was also clipped through this same carabiner. This wire gate was part of an alpine draw (yellow, shoulder-length runner) which was partially unclipped as if someone was starting to extend the sling, with the second carabiner on the other end of the sling clipped to another shoulder-length runner that was being used to carry the rack.

We continued up the steepening face (class 3 and 4) and found more equipment on a smaller ledge at about 7,500 feet. The terrain above was steeper still and became vertical near the top of the face. This ledge may have been where Kennedy and Beard had roped up. Here we found two pairs of trekking poles, carefully stashed upright and secured with a flat rock.

Just below the poles was Kennedy's digital camera in a padded case that was mostly unzipped. The camera still worked and on it were several useful photos. One showed Beard at their bivy on the evening of the 21st and another showed Beard starting up the east face at 6:46 a.m. on the 22nd. Two more photos showed Beard leading some roped pitches, one at 11:35 a.m. and another at 12:49 p.m. There were also several pictures of the climbers on the summit of Point 8084' with timestamps between 3:41 and 3:51 p.m. on the 22nd. One summit shot showed that they built a small cairn and left a register with their names in it. These photos confirmed the accident occurred on the descent.

About 15 feet above the trekking poles was Kennedy's pack with some of his personal gear. One shoulder strap was ripped completely off and missing, and the drawstring at the top was partially open. Kennedy was most likely wearing his pack when the fall occurred, but it became separated from him and continued to fall down the face. It most likely coincidentally came to rest just above the stashed trekking poles. We can only assume that the camera fell out of Kennedy's pack sometime during the fall and miraculously landed undamaged below the poles.

We did not continue climbing above Kennedy's pack. We gathered all the items and downclimbed to the body recover site where we packed all the equipment and descended. At about 6,800 feet, we found Kennedy's helmet which was assumed to have come off during the fall and bounced further down the face.

It appears that Kennedy and Beard were descending the technical portion, somewhere above 7,500 feet, during daylight hours on July 22. Then, their anchor failed while one of them was rappelling. Given how the men came to rest tangled very close together in the rope, it seems plausible that the rappelling climber was not very far down from the anchor when it failed. Both climbers had sewn-loop personal anchor systems girth-hitched to their harnesses. It is likely that the non-rappeler was waiting while clipped into the anchor when it failed and was then pulled off. It is also possible that there was a massive failure of the rock around the anchor, which then pushed off the waiting climber. It appears that the piton with blue webbing and the green cord were likely part of the rappel anchor. It's important to note that these were the only slings cut by the Two Bear rescue technician. It remains unclear if the cam with the carabiner clipped through the trigger contributed to the accident.

Kennedy's pack was probably torn from him early during the fall and came to rest on the ledge just above the stashed trekking poles. But the two much heavier men had more momentum and continued falling down another 400 vertical feet.

One of the summit photos shows darkening clouds building to the east of Dusty Star. Other people reported a localized thunderstorm building in the Saint Mary Valley on the afternoon of the 22nd. It is possible that threatening weather may have caused the climbers to be hasty when constructing their rappel anchors. (Sources: Adam Clark and the National Park Service.)

Images



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