



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall — Rappel Off End of Rope

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan

On October 1, Balin Miller fell when he rappelled off the end of his rope near the top of Sea of Dreams (VI, A4+). The spot is marked with a red circle. Photo: Jarek Tuszynski

On October 1, Balin Miller (23) fell 2,400 feet to his death while rappelling off the top of El Capitan.

Miller had topped out after rope soloing Sea of Dreams (VI 5.9 A4) and was descending to free a stuck haulbag on the last pitch. He rappelled off the end of his rope.

Observers in El Cap Meadow had been following the ascent through a spotting scope over several days. They reported that Miller began moving up the final pitches around 10 a.m. and neared the top at around 1 p.m. As he finished the climbing and began to haul, one of his bags got stuck on a small roof on the last section of climbing. Miller began to rappel his lead line in order to free the snagged load. About 25 feet above the bag, his rope ran through his rappel device and he fell the height of the wall to the base.

Longtime El Capitan photographer Tom Evans, who watched from the Meadow, witnessed the fall. He and a second observer called 911. Park rangers and emergency personnel responded.

ANALYSIS

Miller was among the most capable young alpinists in North America. In the years prior, he had soloed massive routes in the Canadian Rockies and the Alaska Range. His last actions were livestreamed. While the immediate accident cause is obvious, what led up to those last moments requires some analysis.

Solo aid climbing involves a climber leading with a self-belay system. After they get to the belay anchor, they fix the lead rope. They then attach the haul line into a hauler usually pulling up the slack until the captured side of the line becomes taut and then one begins to haul the bag.

From the video, Miller had been rappelling down on a single line. While this might have been either the lead line or the tail of the haul line, it was around 30 feet short of reaching the bag and did not have a stopper knot. Evans noted that Miller did not appear to have recognized this.

There are several very plausible scenarios of what led up to this final moment on the web. Some present credible scenarios. Whatever the specific sequence of events, Miller's system was not closed: there were no stopper knots, and there was no backup on the brake strand.

Fatigue and exuberance probably played a role here. At the very top he could not celebrate but had to go back over the edge to undertake yet another dangerous task. Andy Kirkpatrick, who himself soloed Sea of Dreams, wrote on his Substack, "I'm sure this was the last thing he wanted to be doing so close to the top (there is a short scramble left), and all he wanted was to get down, eat pizza, have a shower, shoot the shit. He was probably also buzzing with excitement, and some relief, as soloing the Sea of Dreams is not without risk."

Rappelling and lowering errors continue to kill novice and experienced climbers at a rate out of proportion to how routine these acts feel. (Sources: The Associated Press, NBC News, Explorersweb,

Tom Evans, Andy Kirkpatrick, and the Editors.)

Images



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