

Mystery of Two Icy Deaths

by Tyson Hausdoerffer

On the morning of November 17, 1984, rescuers in El Capitan Meadow spotted two climbers on the final pitch of the Nose. Through a scope, they could see that the climbers were in awkward positions and, as the accident report put it, “the pair was sheathed in ice, which reflected the sun, and icicles hung from outstretched arms.” A helicopter reconnaissance flight confirmed that the two were dead. They were less than 50 feet from the top.

After finishing other rescue efforts on Zodiac and North America Wall, five rescuers rappelled down to the dead climbers. What they found was puzzling. Both of the climbers and nearly everything they had with them—all their technical gear, three ropes, a tent fly, and several stuff sacks—were attached to a single bolt located about one foot above a “sturdy, multiple-bolt anchor” that had nothing at all clipped to it. The upper climber, Sadatomo Keiso, was tied into a rope clipped to the single bolt above him and was partially straddling the lower climber, Kenji Yatuhashi, who was himself clipped into their huge tangle of climbing gear only by a shoulder sling. Although Yatuhashi was found partially sheltered by a tent fly, Keiso was completely unprotected and bent over backwards at the waist in a pitiful position.

Neither climber was appropriately dressed for

storm conditions. Keiso was wearing cotton sweatpants and a lightweight down jacket over a sweater; Yatuhashi wore red climbing pants and a nylon windshell over an unspecified top layer. Cotton, nylon and down—no waterproof materials, no wool, no synthetic insulating layers.

We will never know exactly what sequence of events led to the disaster. It seems probable, however, that they reached the limit of their endurance, were seized by hypothermia, and were rendered incapable of rigging an effective anchor, establishing shelter, or climbing the final few feet to the top.

The storm that hit that week was typical of the wintry storms that can pound Yosemite during almost any month of the year. The storms feature strong winds up to 55 miles per hour and heavy precipitation with a snow line ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 feet.

Climbers can better their chances of survival by keeping up-to-date on the weather (both before and during their climb), by bringing storm-resistant clothing (waterproof or Gore-tex top and bottom, wool or synthetic insulating layers, and waterproof gloves), by having effective bivouac equipment and, especially, by having the sense to stop climbing and take cover before hypothermia takes hold.

Lessons of a Fatal Plunge

by Tyson Hausdoerffer

The death of Austrian climber Walter Bertsch on the Magic Mushroom route was somewhat less puzzling than the 1984 Japanese fatalities on the Nose, although equally preventable. The experienced team of Bertsch and his Swiss partner, Albert Vinzens, had in seven days climbed to Chieftain Ledge, four pitches and a half-day to the summit. Vinzens had led the pitch that ended on Chieftain Ledge, fixed the lead line and hauled the bag while Bertsch had jumared the lead line almost up to the ledge. While cleaning the final placement, just three feet from his partner's anchor, Bertsch fell nearly 150 feet. He was conscious when Vinzens first reached him but died a few minutes before rescuers arrived by helicopter.

The cause of Bertsch's fall cannot be determined to a certainty but there are several clues:

- Vinzens insisted that when he first rappelled down to help, Bertsch's jumars were still clipped into a rope—thus ruling out the common mistake of unclipping both jumars from the rope at once while passing a tensioned placement. However, Vinzens could not recall which rope the jumars were clipped into.
- We also know that Bertsch was only tied into the end of the lead rope—he had not tied himself in with backup knots while ascending.
- An additional clue is the fact that Bertsch was found tangled in one end of the haul line, which before the fall had been hanging in a loop with both ends clipped into the anchor at the ledge.

Head rescuer John Dill has analyzed the situation and suggests the following scenario: Bertsch was faced with an awkward cleaning maneuver at the final piton—the lead rope stretched diagonally up and right from the piton to the anchor. He decided to clean the placement while attached to the nearby haul line, which had the advantage of running straight up to the anchor.

However, unbeknownst to Bertsch, the haul line was not properly anchored. It was clipped into a shoulder-style gear sling attached to the anchor. And the gear sling consisted of two pieces of webbing joined by two rivets—it was not designed to bear bodyweight.

It seems likely that the gear sling held Bertsch's weight just long enough for him to transfer both jumars onto the haul line. The sling then failed, causing Bertsch to fall almost the full length of the lead line.

Two major errors contributed to this accident. First—and this is what made the fall fatal—Bertsch failed to tie any backup knots in the lead line that he was jumaring. Even one knot tied halfway up the pitch would probably have prevented his death. Second, Bertsch should have communicated with Vinzens regarding his plan to switch his jumars to the haul line. Vinzens then could have warned him that the rope was not set up to hold bodyweight.

As a matter of routine, climbers should back themselves up while jumaring, communicate frequently and be sure to secure all rope ends safely. Any one of these safety practices could have saved Bertsch's life.

The Shield follows the last five pitches of Magic Mushroom, including the pitch on which the described accident occurred.