



Accident report

Date: 02.10.2012
Author: Stein Tronstad
Contributors: Tromsø Alpine Rescue Team, Daniel Hallgren

Fatal accident in Ersfjord on September 13, 2012

On Thursday 13 September 2012 a 35 year old Czech climber fell to his death from an approach scramble in the climbing area of Ressekallan in Tromsø. The accident happened while the climber was preparing to clean a new route in the area, scrambling to the top of a crag to fix a rappel rope. The climber was alone at the time of the accident, and there were no eye witnesses. This report is based on findings during the body recovery operation and information from other climbers active in the area on the same day.

Public Report

A summary of events was published at <http://klatring.no> three days after the accident, see http://www.klatring.no/Klubb/Nyheter/tabid/4605/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/7092/Dd_sulykke-i-Troms.aspx (in Norwegian only).

Climbers and Route

Route:

Not a climbing route, but a ramp leading through the upper crags at Ressekallan, giving access to the top of the adjacent climbing crags.

Climber

Male, 34, a Czech national living temporarily in Tromsø.

Weather

Sunny, calm, warm

The Accident

The accident happened while the climber was working to prepare a new route on the upper climbing crags of Ressekallan in Ersfjord. It seems evident that the climber was intending to suspend a working rope from the top of the new climb, in order to abseil down and clean the route of dirt and loose rocks. To gain access to the top of the crag, the climber chose to scramble up a steep ramp and chimney cutting a passage of about 20 metres through the crag

itself. Partway up this ramp the climber lost his footing and fell some 50 metres down to a steep slope below the crag. The climber was killed in the fall.

Course of Events

The climber was very well acquainted with the climbing area, having spent several months in total in Tromsø during the summers before the accident. The day of the accident, Thursday September 13, was a relatively warm autumn day with sunny and calm weather. The climber was on his own in the area during the morning and early afternoon, and had agreed to meet and climb with other people coming out from town at 4 pm. His last known communication with others was a phone call to a friend just before 1 pm, where he stated his intention to work on the new route while waiting for the other climbers to arrive at the crag.

The climber did not show up for the appointment, but initially this was not taken as any reason for concern. Only after having climbed for a while, did the other climbers on the site begin a search for the missing person. After nightfall they alerted the police, and a search operation was initiated. Two helicopters with search lights and infrared cameras, the Alpine Rescue Team and the Red Cross were mobilised. The climber's backpack had been located earlier at the base of a different crag, and some left-behind equipment had been found below the upper crags. The search was focussed between and around those two locations. However, the helicopter search for the body was unsuccessful, and the ground operation was eventually suspended as darkness made further search of the boulder field very difficult. The search was resumed in the morning, starting from the finds of the previous day. The climber's body was found after about 30 minutes of ground search, and immediately recovered by helicopter.

There were no eyewitnesses to the accident. Nevertheless, a reasonably consistent picture of what happened emerges from the circumstances, available information and findings on the site. Sometime in the early afternoon, probably between 1 pm and 3 pm, the climber must have decided to head up to the top of the upper crags to fix a rope and start cleaning the new route with a crowbar and steel brush. The surrounding terrain is very difficult, consisting of steep slopes, scattered small crags and an extensive boulder field with very large blocks up to several tens of metres in size. Getting to the top of "Rainman" involves a wide detour around a 20-50 metre high rock band, or a steep scramble up one of several ramps or gullies that split the same rock band.

The day of the accident was warm enough for shirtless climbing. On his way up to the rock band the climber seems to have pulled off his sweater and T-shirt and left them behind at the base of the upper crags, at a point where the rock face is about 20 metres high. A small length of coiled extra rope was also left behind. From here, at the start of the route "Dr Fatalis", a steep ramp leaves the ground and connects with small ledges and a short chimney leading through the upper face to the top of the rock wall. This line appears to be comparatively easy to climb, but also steep, somewhat exposed, and partly covered in moss, heather and tiny juniper bushes.

It can be inferred that the climber approached the rock band from below, looked at ways to get above the crags as easily and quickly as possible, and then identified the ramp and chimney as his best option. At its base he left the sweater, T-shirt, and short rope behind, tied the coiled rappel rope to his back and headed for the ramp. At this point he was wearing approach shoes and a climbing harness, and in addition to the coiled rope he was carrying some pieces of protection, spare climbing shoes, a crowbar and other tools on his harness.

From the location of the body, it seems evident that the climber must have fallen from somewhere up on the ramp, or in the chimney. The body was found some 50 metres below the likely site of the fall, between several small birch trees on a steep slope.

Search and Recovery

The police in Tromsø and the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre were alerted after nightfall on the day of the accident, approximately 7 hours after the likely time of the accident and after an initial search by other climbers in the area. A search operation was initiated immediately by the police, involving rescue and ambulance helicopters, the Alpine Rescue Team, the Red Cross, and other voluntary rescuers. When the helicopters had exhausted their capacity, further ground search was called off due to darkness and a very difficult search area, and resumed the next morning. After some 30 minutes of daytime search the body was found by the ground search crew, and immediately recovered by a rescue helicopter.

Other Information

None.

Cause of Accident

The climber slipped and fell while scrambling over steep ground. The immediate cause of the slip remains unknown. The climber may have just slipped and lost his footing while moving past some obstacle, or put his weight on a loose rock and lost his balance, or slipped for other reasons. Although the weather was good at the time, it had been raining heavily the previous day and some of the vegetation and dirt patches may still have been slippery. The very experienced climber was known to be competent and confident on steep ground, but a momentary loss of concentration or a mental slip affecting his risk assessment may have been enough for some unforeseen element to catch him off guard. We shall never know.

Recommendations

No immediate measures are suggested. The accident occurred on an approach scramble in an unmanaged wilderness area, and can only be attributed to an accidental slip on steep ground.

Figures



Fig. 1: Map of Ersfjordbotn, with the climbing area of Ressekallan indicated.



Fig. 2: Ressekallan climbing area, with circle indicating the accident site.



Fig. 3: The accident site. The body was found in the birch thicket to the left of the blue rucksack. The position of the body indicated that the climber fell from somewhere above the orange bush on the crag, immediately left of the pale rock of the "Dr Fatalis" pillar.



Fig. 2: The ramp and chimney leading through the rock band, with arrows indicating the entry and exit points. See circled persons in the foreground for scale reference.