

RESCUE: Preparedness was key to successful outcome

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This area in Death Valley is an arid, desert environment with extreme temperature changes ranging from highs in the upper 80s this time of year to lows in the 40s and winds gusting up to 50 mph. In preparation for this trip, the group spent time reviewing and practicing rappel, rope and anchor techniques, studied topographical maps and journals of previous group trips on this descent, which included pictorials of the types of anchors you might expect to see. Typical anchors in Hades Canyon are created using streambed boulders.

Having been to the area last year, the group had some experience in planning and had more than enough rope to rappel, retrieval rope plus extra, enough food and water and appropriate clothing to spend a night in the canyon if needed. The group had also left a note on the dashboard of the truck at their end-point noting that their intent was to be out of the canyon on Thursday night or Friday morning as well as informing friends and family when they should expect phone contact

indicating they were out of the canyon.

The hike starts at approximately 5,475 feet in elevation at the parking lot, includes 14 rappels and ends near Bad Water at around 200 feet below sea level. The group started their day in the parking lot around 7:15 a.m. on Thursday, April 13. They had covered approximately 3,500 feet in elevation and four miles of linear distance when around 3:30 p.m. during the fourth rappel, Captain Thornton Brown lost control of a rappel and suffered an approximate 40-foot fall. He was the first of the three to rappel down. Fire Medic Millar and Captain Liming were able to communicate with Captain Brown, asking him what he thought his injuries were, and the other two began their descent down to help him.

After Fire Medic Millar and Captain Liming reached Captain Brown, they did a complete assessment and found that the injuries he sustained would prevent him from hiking out on his own. The group spent time working together to make a decision on whether or not Fire Medic Millar would go out alone to get help or for both Captain Liming and Fire Medic Millar to go out together. Because Captain Brown’s injuries did

not appear life-threatening and the group had sufficient water, food and clothing, they determined it wasn’t critical for Captain Brown to get out that night.

They decided the biggest potential for something more to go wrong would be for Fire Medic Millar to go out alone in case something happened to him. The group spent time stabilizing Captain Brown’s injuries and repositioning him below an overhang to protect him from rock-fall. Captain Brown was left with a down jacket, more than a gallon of water and food, and the other two members of his team proceeded out of the canyon to get help around 5 p.m.

After another four rappels, at approximately 8:30 p.m., Fire Medic Millar and Captain Liming set up a bivy and spent the night in the canyon for safety reasons. The duo proceeded out of the canyon at first light on Friday, April 14 and contact was made with local emergency services at approximately 11:30 a.m. The Inyo County Search and Rescue and National Park Service emergency services personnel contacted California Highway Patrol Inland Division Air Operations (H-80) for a hoist rescue immediately after speaking with Fire Medic Millar. Fire Medic Millar said



PHOTO PROVIDED

The circled area marks the location from where Captain Thornton Brown was rescued in an airlift.

“a traditional high-angle rope rescue with a ground crew would have been an extraordinarily difficult extrication involving a great deal of trained personnel and multiple days.”

CHP H-80 located Captain Brown in what they said was “some of the most inhospitable terrain” their area has to offer. H-80 worked their way up the canyon to where Captain Brown was positioned, and lowered a rescuer from 100 feet to evaluate and package him for a hoist. The crew of H-80 had Captain Brown on the ground in Furnace Creek in just over four hours of being notified.

Captain Brown was assessed by an ambulance crew and evaluated at the local hospital in Pahrump, Nevada,

and was able to fly home commercially the next day.

Fire Medic Millar said that during the trip, “many lessons were reaffirmed including: hope for the best, but prepare for the worst; be prepared to stay out at night; carry extra water, food and have appropriate clothing; and think through and take your time in making critical decisions.”

Fire Medic Millar said as an emergency response professional, he “understands how incredibly efficient the response was and has the utmost appreciation for assumed risk that rescue personnel take on with such work.”

The group offered their sincerest thanks and respect to all of the responders for a job well done.

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