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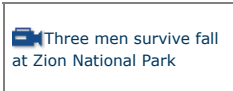
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ZION NATIONAL PARK: 'I thought I was going to die'

Three men survive flash flood in slot canyon

By KRISTI JOURDAN

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL



David Frankhouser, left, Jason Fico and Joe Cain talk about surviving a flash flood in Zion National Park. More than an inch of rain fell within 30 minutes, and rising water in a slot canyon trapped the three Las Vegas hikers.
jerry henkel/las vegas review-journal

The three Las Vegas hikers faced a life-or-death dilemma:

Let the gritty brown water fill up to where they were desperately clinging to a single rope anchored into the rock wall and be swept away through the canyon.

Or let go of the rope and fall into the rising water and rocks below and hope backpacks cushion the fall.

Either choice could result in crippling injury or drowning.

"I thought I was going to die," Joe Cain said. "There was actually enough time to think about that, and I was thinking about my kids and them not having a dad. It was very terrifying.

"It was such a feeling of helplessness."

Exhausted, they finally let go of the rope one at a time, and the churning water swept them away.

They came away with their lives.

Cain, David Frankhouser and Jason Fico were rappelling down the side of Spry Canyon in Zion National Park on July 24 when they were trapped by a flash flood.

The experienced rock climbers had researched the canyon and brought sufficient equipment to rappel safely down the canyon wall. They checked the forecast before they left and double-checked it before their descent. There was a 30 percent chance of rain.

Cain, Frankhouser and Fico were nearly through the canyon by midafternoon, but it was too late.

They heard thunder, not knowing that the National Weather Service had issued a flash flood warning.

More than an inch of rain fell within 30 minutes, and water quickly filled up that part of the canyon, park officials said.

A swirling river quickly rose from the canyon floor, and there was nowhere left for the hikers to go. They couldn't climb up. They couldn't rappel down. Rocks, leaves and sand pelted them as the heavy rains drenched them from above.

They considered chimney climbing up the rock face, a move that climbers

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use to shimmy up or down between two walls.

"There was no way we could have done it," Cain said. "What could we do? We were grasping for straws. We had to hang on for dear life until we couldn't hang on anymore and we got lucky."

Finally, too tired to hang on any longer, they dropped into the water. They were tossed through the canyon until they tumbled over a 40-foot cliff.

Cain, vice president and general counsel of Fine Properties, survived the fall with a busted tailbone, torn muscle tissue in his back and a 1-inch-deep puncture wound in his knee. He landed in an eddy and swam over to some rocks.

"The way I came out and landed, I popped out," Cain said. "The way the current was flowing it was enough. The water was shoulder deep. I got myself up on a rock, and I saw blood running down my leg and my back hurt. But I wasn't paralyzed."

After he climbed a little, a group of hikers ahead saw or heard him, Cain said, and helped him climb to safety.

"I kept asking if they saw my friends," he said.

They waited for 10 or 12 minutes until they finally spotted them -- one walking, one injured.

"This was a miracle because, for those moments, I thought I was the sole survivor," Cain said.

Frankhouser and Fico had been swept over another cliff, falling 60 feet while water pressure forced their heads underwater. At times, Fico said, he lost consciousness from the violent surge.

"I guess I could have crawled and possibly gotten out, but David grabbed me and got me out of there," Fico said. "I could barely move. I felt myself blacking out, and I grabbed onto the first thing I saw. I realized my leg wasn't working."

Fico, a dean at Findlay Middle School, suffered a broken hip. Six screws now hold the bone together, and he's using crutches to get around.

Frankhouser, corporate director of gaming operations at Station Casinos, survived the drops of 100 feet almost unscathed except for a few bumps and bruises on his leg.

"There was probably 18 inches of this dirty, gritty foam that was on top of the water," he said. "It was coming up and going over my head, and I couldn't breathe."

"I remember landing. My shoes were blown off, and I had those neoprene socks on and they were gone, too. I was barefoot. I remember feeling sand, and I couldn't believe I didn't have shoes on. It was all very surreal."

The trio waited for help at the mouth of Spry Canyon with two other groups of hikers. They set a lamp on strobe mode to signal for help. They were rescued two hours later. Cain and Fico were airlifted to a hospital in St. George, Utah.

Park ranger Ray O'Neil was off duty at the time but decided to check the canyon because of all the rain.

"I looked across and saw at the mouth of Spry Canyon this huge waterfall coming out," O'Neil said.

He radioed two on-duty rangers. All three saw the flashing lamp.

O'Neil said the canyon where the three men were rappelling was about 4 feet wide.

"In all slot canyons it doesn't take that much rain to cause a flash flood. Canyons are so special because there is slick rock, there is nothing to slow the water down," the ranger said. "They were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"This is just an extraordinary story because these guys got hit by a wall of water, washed over a 40-foot cliff and a 60-foot cliff and lived. I have never seen anything like this."

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