

Mecklenburg County Council

COPE & Climbing

Free Rappel (MSR) SOP

Overview

This document sets the standards for rigging and facilitating the free rappel at the Mecklenburg Scout Reservation climbing tower. This document is in addition to the Releasable Rappel SOP that governs all rappelling activities in the MCC COPE & Climbing program.

Note that although the BSA *Guide to Safe Scouting* does not prohibit Webelos from the free rappel element it is not recommended. This element should be reserved for experienced scouts that have rappelled multiple times and are familiar with the commands and the necessary techniques.

Equipment

The following lists the equipment needed to rig the tethers and rappel as detailed below in this document.

- MSR
 - 1 Lobster claws including aluminum screw gate carabiners for personal attachment
 - 1 15' webbing
 - 1 aluminum screw gate or tri-action locking carabiner
 - 3 steel screw gate locking carabiners
 - 3 locking aluminum carabiners
 - 4 rescue 8 (belay friction device)
 - 1 static rope; minimum 30m (for rappel)
 - 3 pairs of rappel gloves

Free Rappel Platform

To access the free rappel platform at the MSR tower the gate on the top deck must be unlocked. Note that the gate swings out toward the top deck. Before the gate is opened, the instructor tether must be in place and the instructor must be attached to the tether.

Prior to facilitating the free rappel, the platform and surrounding railings should be inspected for loose nails and/or screws. The platform is known to have an issue with nails “popping” and coming loose. This presents a risk of a participant or instructor getting caught on a nail head or other danger associated with the loose nails. These must be addressed before running the free rappel.

Safety Tethers

The first items to be rigged must be the safety tethers at the top of the tower. Safety first. Rig the tethers to keep the instructor(s) safe while completing the rest of the rigging for the releasable rappel.

At the MSR tower the instructor tether must be rigged and the instructor clipped in before the wooden gate is unlocked and opened.

Instructor Tether

At the towers the lead instructor must be on lobster claws. The lobster claws should be attached to the middle of the cable with the gates on the double carabiners opposite and opposed to each other. For the free rappel is often easiest if the instructor tether is on the left most side of the cable. This will allow the instructor the greatest freedom of movement on the platform.

Participant Tethers

Next set up the participant tether. Note that a second instructor can also be on one of these tethers or an additional set of lobster claws. For the participant tether we use a 15' length of tubular webbing tied in a loop with a water knot. A steel carabiner must be used to attach the top of the tether to the tower cable, typically a steel screw gate oval carabiner. Clip the webbing into the steel carabiner on the cable sliding the webbing so that the water knot is near, but not against, the steel carabiner. Clip an aluminum locking carabiner to the other end of the webbing and tie an overhand knot near the aluminum carabiner leaving as small a loop as possible. Whenever possible a tri-action locking carabiner should be used to clip in the participant. (The scouts are less likely to "play" with the tri-action carabiner and open it without the instructor noticing.)

The participant tether should be clipped to the steel cable to the right of the instructor tether.

When not in use the tether can be left hanging. It is recommended that the tether not be clipped to the overhead cable. If an aluminum carabiner is on one end of the tether the instructor might inadvertently leave this clipped to the steel cable and attach the participant to the steel carabiner.

Releasable Rappel

The releasable rappel should be rigged in the same manner as any rappel in the MCC COPE & Climbing program.

The rappel line should be gathered up and thrown over the side of the tower. The release line should be neatly hand coiled using a small butterfly coil and placed inside the cable triangle on the far right of the cable where it will be off the platform and not get in the way or become a tripping hazard.

It is convenient to have multiple rappelling devices, carabiners and gloves for the participants. Since there is no top rope belay, there is no means to haul the gear back to the top platform. The participants will need to pass the gear to the next scout in line to carry up the tower stairs. This gear can be staged on the platform, behind the gates so that it is not a tripping hazard and is not kicked off the platform.

Facilitating a Free Rappel

While the basics of facilitating the free rappel are no different than any other rappel, there are a few items worth noting.

Instructor Safety & CHECK

When the instructor first ascends to the rappel platform he should immediately clip in to the appropriate tether. He should then perform a CHECK of the rigging before any participant is allowed onto the rappel platform.

Participant Safety

As each participant ascends the tower to the top platform he/she should remain at the top of the stairs behind the rope gate or behind the open wooden gate. Before the participant walks around the open gate he/she must be clipped in to the participant tether. There should be no untethered participants on the top platform of the tower.

On Belay

This element relies on a bottom or fireman's belay. Make sure that all rappelling belay commands are followed with the ground belay before the participant is removed from the tower tether. A second trained instructor should be present at the bottom to supervise the bottom belay.

Rappelling

The participant needs to keep his legs straight and his feet on the edge of the platform. Instruct him to lean back, butt first like he is going to sit down. It is important that the rappeller lower his waist below his feet before they step down. Although there is a wooden board beneath the platform, if the rappeller steps down too early, his feet will slip on the wooden board and he risks slamming his arms or chest into the edge of the platform.

Watch the participant all the way down. Sometimes they freeze, panic or encounter other difficulties. You must watch the entire process until the participant is safely on the ground.

As the instructor on the top of the tower, even though you have no direct role in this style of rappel once the rappeller has started his decent, you should still watch the entire rappel. You have a perspective that the ground belay team may not be able to see due to angles, sun angle, etc. You may need to alert them to a problem in time for them to arrest the fall of the rappeller.

With the bottom belay you will need the next rappeller to carry up the rappel device, carabiner and gloves or you will need another method to retrieve them (such as a haul line). You may want to have several rappel devices and carabiners available to keep the process going if you have a large number of participants and do not want to wait for the device to be returned to the top of the tower.