



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock - Rigging Error**

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, Salathe Wall

On July 28, Ginnie (32) and Carl (23) were practicing aid climbing on the 165-foot first pitch of the Salathé Wall. They had recently climbed some of the Valley's long 5.11 classics, including Free Blast, the Rostrum, the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome (in a day), and Astroman, and had decided to spend a few days learning the aid skills needed for big walls. Carl had a little aid experience, but it was completely new to Ginnie. She led the pitch on aid and rigged a hanging belay. While Carl juggled and cleaned the pitch on the fixed lead line, she set up her haul system for the first time, but the haul line somehow became jammed in the pulley before she'd even hauled the bag. They both looked at the mess and the time—it would be dark in an hour—and decided that was enough for the day. They could practice again tomorrow.

Ginnie started breaking down the rigging at her anchor and setting up a rappel while Carl rappelled the lead line. He was cleaning up gear at the base with his back turned to the wall when he heard Ginnie shriek, then a thud. He spun around and saw her lying on the ground next to the haul bag. The bag was covered in blood and she was bleeding from her mouth, but she was conscious and stood up, tearing gear off her harness. Carl, a WFR, tried to stabilize her neck and calm her down. Then he checked her spine and told her to stay still while he called 911. She remained fairly alert, even normal at times, but repeated the same questions over and over, a strong sign of concussion. Her major injuries turned out to be two fractures of the jaw and one of the cheekbone, with nothing life-threatening. She's fully recovered and climbing again.

#### **Analysis**

After the fall her ATC was found clipped to her belay loop but not rigged to the ropes. Both ropes were on the ground and tied together as if for a double-rope rappel. A figure-eight loop in the lead line, near where it joined the haul line, was clipped to a reinforced gear loop on her seat harness.

Ginnie remembers securing herself to the anchor bolts with one adjustable daisy and a double-loop figure eight in the lead line, and temporarily securing the lead line to that reinforced gear loop. She remembers untying the leader's end of the rope from her harness as she began to re-rig her system for the rappel to the ground. And she remembers the haul system still holding the haul line. All subsequent events at the anchor are blank, conflicting, or unreliably hazy.

While several scenarios are consistent with the few facts we have, we cannot answer the question that Ginnie asked repeatedly after the fall: "What happened?" One conclusion is clear, however: A very experienced and skilled climber somehow unintentionally disconnected herself completely from her safety system. Ginnie explained later that she was dealing with a new situation and trying to clean up the confusing mess of gear. "There was no failure other than my own mental mistake. I didn't pay attention," she said.

But how did she survive a 160-foot fall to the ground—the equivalent of falling off a 16-story building? Given her proximity to the bloody haul bag, it's possible the bag broke her fall. But her orientation would have to be just right for it to cushion all of her body, and a haul bag is not certified as a 160-foot crash pad. Second, it's possible that the ropes were rigged in a way, or twisted together enough, that unintentional friction slowed her fall and her bodyweight was partly held by that reinforced gear loop. It's even possible that she was partway down a controlled descent when the incident occurred,

so that the fall was shorter and her survival less of a miracle. We just don't know.

The take-home points are well-known: New situation or not, expert or not, back up your safeties and keep a constant eye and even a finger at times on the critical elements of your rigging. (Source: Ginnie, Carl, and John Dill, NPS Ranger.)

## Images

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