



## AAC Publications

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### **Rockfall – Poor Position, Inexperience**

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch

**On the morning of January 1, three climbers (one male and two female, all in their early 20s) were ascending Avalanche Gulch. At 11,500 feet they suffered varying injuries from a natural rockfall event.** They called 911 around 9:30 a.m. With head and leg injuries, the climbers requested an urgent rescue. Climbing ranger Nick Meyers called the reporting party's cell phone and spoke with the male climber, who said there were "head and leg injuries and major bleeding...we need help now!" The man's tone was frantic and urgent. Meyers immediately made a plan to launch a helicopter rescue.

Meyers flew to ca 11,000 feet and off-loaded with only his personal gear and medical equipment to climb up to the injured party, where the helicopter would lower the necessary equipment for evacuation. Given the hazardous location, with rockfall and an icy slope, and the critical condition of the injured climbers, the goal was simple: package and transport each patient quickly, then get out of there. At approximately 12:30 p.m. the first critical climber was hoisted from the location and flown to Mercy Redding. The male climber was hoisted soon after and brought to Mercy Mt. Shasta. The third climber was assisted by foot to Lake Helen and was airlifted to Mercy Mt. Shasta. (Source: Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report, prepared by Nick Meyers.)

### **ANALYSIS**

Mt. Shasta has notoriously loose rock, and this group chose a poor time to climb the peak. Typically in January there can be good snow climbing conditions, but this year the mountain did not receive measurable snow until mid-February. The mountain looked as bare as it might in late summer, and Avalanche Gulch was completely devoid of snow except for a thin strip leading up and to the right of the Heart (the standard route up Avalanche Gulch). A climbing advisory was posted online, at the ranger station, and at the trailhead. Despite all this, the group chose to head out anyway. There was nobody else on the route that day, for good reason.

Climbing directly up the gut of Avalanche Gulch put them in a poor position. Climbers should know that on Shasta any rocks that come off the Red Banks or upper parts of the mountain all funnel into the gut of Avalanche Gulch. As this rescue took place, the party's location was directly in line with all rockfall, and during the rescue the helicopter triggered more rockfall onto the rescuers.

For any mountain with common rockfall, not just Shasta, some things can be done to avoid incident: (1) Don't climb when rock slopes are exposed. (2) Wear a helmet! (3) Limit your time in exposed areas and have a plan should rock or ice come down on you—that is, where is your safety zone should rockfall occur? (4) Climb early in the day, when it's generally colder, rather than later (generally warmer). (5) In a gully or terrain funnel you're asking for trouble. (Avalanche Gulch near the Heart is a perfect example.) Move laterally right and left up the slope to limit time in the "bowling alley." (6) Be extremely careful when walking on low-angle terrain above high-angle terrain— or when moving through any rocky area, for that matter—where a loose rock could be kicked onto climbers below. (Source: Nick Meyers, Mt. Shasta Climbing Ranger.)

**Images**

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