



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection, Fatigue**

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

**The period from May 11–19 delivered a mix of spring weather to Yosemite. Cameron Brown (age 41) and I (Stephen Shostek, age 59) experienced sun, rain, snow, and cold weather during our Salathé Wall climb.** We sheltered for two days in the Alcove (pitch 20) during a storm. Our climb was slower and longer than we expected due to the storm and wet conditions, so we were stretching our food supply.

We spent our final night on Long Ledge after a long day—I finished cleaning the Headwall at 2:30 a.m. Next morning I started aiding the pitch above Long Ledge, mostly on small cams and offset cams, up to the flaring scar where a fixed pin shown on the topo formerly had resided. I pounded a cam hook into the flaring pin scar with the heel of my hand. As I weighted the cam hook, a few grains of granite fell from the crack, so I figured the hook wouldn't hold for long in the flare. As I assessed the 5.10 free moves required to move leftward to easier ground, the cam hook pulled, the Metolius offset placed in the flaring crack below pulled, and my fall was arrested by a Metolius 00 Master Cam in a parallel section of the thin crack. My 25-foot fall was clean and caused no problems.

I aided back up to the Metolius 00, seated it deeper into the crack, replaced the offset cam that had pulled from the flare and aided up on it, and again pounded in the cam hook with the heel of my hand. I saw another, smaller pin scar in the seam two feet higher and placed another cam hook in this flaring scar, hoping it might hold my weight more securely. However, the higher cam hook failed while I was testing it, as did the lower cam hook and the offset cam, and this time the 00 Master Cam also pulled out of the crack. I had back-cleaned some offset cams in the flaring crack above a 0.3 Camalot much farther down the crack, since they appeared to be useless to arrest a fall. My fall was finally stopped by the 0.3 Camalot.

I fell about 50 feet, and near the bottom my left foot snagged on a protruding fin of granite. I suffered an avulsion fracture of my left fibula at the talofibular ligament attachment, soft-tissue damage to my left ankle and foot, and an avulsion of the distal attachment of the extensor tendon on my left pinkie finger.

Cameron lowered me back to Long Ledge, and we assessed our options. I was unable to reascend the pitch with my injured left ankle, but reasoned that I was able to jug a rope with one good foot. Luckily, Alex Honnold and James Lucas were passing above us on Freerider, and they offered to fix our rope and help us haul our gear up the final two pitches. I jugged to the top and assessed that my injured ankle was able to bear some weight tolerably if I carefully weighted only the heel area, so I resolved to get down the East Ledges descent without calling for rescue assistance. I limped, crab crawled, and butt slid down to the rappels and out the trail to the road.

### **ANALYSIS**

There are a few things I could have done differently to prevent my accident and injury. The thin crack where I placed the Metolius 00 is parallel sided, unlike the flaring crack below. I should have added another cam and equalized them in the relatively secure parallel portion of the crack. Likewise, the flaring placement for the offset cam might have been able to hold a fall if I'd equalized additional cams. I also might have tried placing offset nuts in the flaring crack below the Metolius 00.

Fatigue played a role in my accident. I was aware of feeling dull-minded when I started the pitch due to inadequate sleep, reduced food rations, and burning additional calories in the cold weather. With sharper cognition, it's likely that I would have backed up the micro-cam. It's also possible that I would have launched more quickly into the 5.10 free climbing above the missing fixed pin and thus avoided the fall. [Editor's note: This pitch is rated 5.8 C1+ in some guidebooks, but is generally considered to be significantly harder—many say it is the crux of the Salathé when done as an aid climb.] Additionally, I had climbed this pitch once before, in 2000, and in retrospect I can see that I was overconfident about climbing it this time.

Months after the accident, I was back to climbing, although with some pain and reduced flexibility in my left ankle. My left pinkie is useful again but won't regain its full range of motion. I'm climbing with a more informed and careful approach. (Source: Stephen Shostek.)

**Images**

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