



AAC Publications

Leader Fall – Inadequate Protection

Utah, Wasatch Range, Little Cottonwood Canyon

On Monday, June 11, my wife and I (male, age 31) went out for a casual day of climbing in Little Cottonwood Canyon. We headed up for a lap on Stifler's Mom (multi-pitch 5.11 a), which we have climbed several times. Finding the route empty, we cruised on up, linking pitches and having a good time. My wife and I noted that the route seemed a bit dirtier than usual, probably from spring runoff.

I climbed through the sixth-pitch crux overhang feeling good. I clipped the bolt over the roof and worked my way up the thin but relatively easy corner above, admittedly not paying very close attention to the climbing in front of me. I noticed that a pin that used to be about halfway up the corner was no longer there. In its place, I plugged a red C3 Camalot, gave it a tug, and visually verified good contact on all the lobes. After climbing a little higher, with the C3 just below my feet, I fell.

I still don't know exactly why I slipped. I tried to run backwards down the slab but tripped over something—maybe the roof or the rope. I flew over the roof and landed on the slab below, about 10 feet below my wife at the belay ledge, facing downward, on my right shoulder. My head whiplashed against the rock and I slid another few feet before the rope caught me. In total the fall was roughly 30 to 35 feet. The C3 had popped, and the bolt that caught me was about eight feet below that placement.

I knew immediately that I'd been badly hurt. I could not command my diaphragm to move for nearly 10 seconds. Suddenly I was able to take shallow breaths, and I screamed up to my wife that I was alive but needed help. She tried to lower me to a ledge about 20 feet lower, but stopped when I realized that I could not control my body at all and I had probably injured my spine. At that point she tied me off and focused on keeping me still while coordinating a way to get me off the wall.

Bryce and Tyler, climbing below us, witnessed the event; they quickly climbed to our position. Tyler called emergency services. Andy also saw the fall from a route just up-canyon and rappelled to the base of pitch five and then ascended a fixed line to reach me. The next hour or so was a bit of a blur for me. Bryce later recounted what happened:

"While the position [the climber] was in was incredibly painful, Tyler and I initially made the difficult decision not to move him, given the possible neck or spinal injury he had sustained.... [However], he and his wife both eventually decided that his position was unendurable, given the projected rescue ETA, and requested that we attempt some sort of stabilization....

"I attached several slings with a prusik to the climber's line and adjusted them to support his legs once horizontal. Using a double-length sling, we were able to secure a makeshift chest harness around the climber and attach it to my line..... Once in position, we instructed his wife to begin slowly lowering her husband to align his hips and shoulders, resting him horizontally across our knees. We slowly brought his lower half down and rolled him facing upright, Andy supporting his neck while I worked to keep his back straight. While we did this, a helicopter appeared, hovered close, then retreated. Tyler soon confirmed over the phone that a long-line hoist attempt would be made, and we were to keep the patient stable while a rescue crewman secured him in a body sling.

"About 15 minutes passed before the helicopter came into position over us and began lowering the

crewman. We worked as carefully as possible to get the sling around the patient while minimizing the amount of neck and spine movement. Eventually, we were able to secure the patient in the sling and, after cutting him loose of our tethers, the crewman signaled the heli to move up and away from the wall. From fall to extraction, Tyler and I estimate about an hour and thirty minutes passed.”

At the hospital they determined that I had a slightly displaced C2 fracture and a non-displaced C3 fracture with no direct damage to the spinal cord. I did not need surgery, but I would be wearing a neck brace for up to three months. I had central cord syndrome, probably from hyperextension of the spinal cord during impact, and this led to poor control and weakness in my arms and hands, especially on my left side, but it was expected that I would make a recovery. Considering the location of the fractures, I am lucky not to be paralyzed or dead.

ANALYSIS

Ultimately, the accident was caused by three factors coming together:

- (1) I fell in a dangerous spot. With a large roof below me, the chances of becoming inverted in a fall were high. Additionally, the low-angle slab below the roof was a hazard that I underestimated.
- (2) The rock quality in the corner was poor and I failed to protect it adequately. Knowing that the piece I placed was unreliable, I should have doubled up on gear.
- (3) Having just climbed through a difficult crux, I let my guard down on easier terrain, even though it was arguably a more dangerous spot and should have demanded more focus.

My helmet has a huge dent on the front right side where I impacted. If I had not been wearing it, I might be a vegetable right now. I also am now keenly aware of the fact that we were lucky to be climbing roadside in the Wasatch rather than in the backcountry. This was basically the best possible scenario for rescue five pitches up a route, and it still took about two hours. (Source: Mike Marmar.)

Images



Rescue helicopter prepares to haul off a badly injured climber who fell on the sixth pitch of a route in Little Cottonwood Canyon.



Diagram of the accident scene on the sixth pitch of Stifler's Mom.

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