



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock – Crowded Climb**

California, Yosemite National Park, Tuolumne Meadows, Cathedral Peak

**John and Chris (30-year-old males) were on their first climbing trip to Yosemite, and Cathedral was their first objective. They had climbed together frequently in the past, and had completed a three-day course in multi-pitch trad climbing in 2017. They were comfortable leading 5.8 with traditional gear.**

On October 6, they arrived at the base of Cathedral around noon. They could see four or five other parties on the popular southeast buttress: two parties down low and one higher up with three people. At this point, they decided to seek variations that would allow them to avoid other parties. They simul-climbed the first couple of pitches, with John leading the first block and Chris leading the second block, which took them to the level of the chimney about three pitches up.

At this point, one party was in the chimney with another party waiting at its base. Because of the crowds, Chris chose to set up his anchor on the ledge about 30 feet to the left of the chimney and bring John up to there. They planned to pitch out the climbing from this point, since they were entering harder terrain. According to the Supertopo topo they had with them, the climbing to the left of the chimney went at 5.7.

Chris had built his anchor in a left-facing corner, but John opted to climb further left on the face in order to avoid climbing directly through the anchor. As John climbed off the ledge, he got himself into an awkward position that didn't feel like 5.7 climbing, and with his feet approximately six to eight feet off the ledge, he barndoored off. At this point he hadn't placed any gear, and as he began to fall he made the split-second decision to try and land on the ledge rather than push off the wall and risk a factor 2 fall on the anchor.

John landed awkwardly on his feet and stumbled into a sitting position. He immediately knew that he had injured his legs. Continuing up wasn't an option, and though Supertopo showed a bail option off the right side of Cathedral, that would still involve hiking down through unfamiliar terrain. John and Chris decided their best strategy would be to self-rescue to the base and receive further help there.

Chris and John began rappelling the route, leaving gear and slinging horns for anchors every 30 meters, since they only had one rope. John used one hand as his brake hand and the other to push himself away from the wall. At 3:23 p.m., he called 911. Ten minutes later, two responders were dispatched on foot from Tuolumne Meadows and a helicopter was ordered.

As Chris was setting up their fourth rappel anchor (approximately 150 feet off the ground), they saw two soloists arrive at the base. The soloists happened to be ex-YOSAR members and medical professionals, and they climbed over to help the pair with patient care and anchor building, and then lowered John down the final pitches with one of the responders, who at that point had arrived on scene.

At the base, John was assessed and splinted, and at 6:13 p.m. he was flown away from the scene by helicopter. He was diagnosed with fractures in both ankles.

### **ANALYSIS**

Right above the ledge where John fell was a finger size crack, which he used for hand holds but not for protection. Placing good gear early when climbing off the ground or above a ledge can often prevent injury in the event of a fall.

The crowding on this very popular route not only adds objective hazards such as rockfall but also changes the entire mindset of parties who are feeling the pressure of crowds. Rather than focusing on climbing the best line, John and Chris opted for less desirable variations and were operating in a hastier mindset, which can affect decision-making and risk analysis. This is not the first accident on this climb where crowds were likely a contributing factor. The rock is not going anywhere—if there are too many people, another route or a different day might be a safer choice.

John and Chris' ability to safely build anchors and rappel most of the route helped immensely to expedite the rescue. However, some skills were rusty, such as how a rescuer can rappel with a patient (tandem rappel), which would have sped their descent and provided better patient care. Learn these skills and then practice them often, before they are needed. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

**Images**

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