



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Poor Position

Canada, Alberta, Bow Valley, Grotto Mountain

Jughaul Wall is a three-pitch Bow Valley trad classic. I'd climbed it without incident three times over the past 18 years. This time, as I neared the top of the first pitch (5.5), I saw two shiny new bolts above a small ledge. I assumed this was where the pitch ended and set up the belay for the second pitch there. When my partner, Tibor, was about four meters up on the second pitch (5.7), I suddenly remembered that when I'd climbed this route before, we had ended the first pitch in an alcove higher up.

When Tibor was approximately 40 meters up, he stepped on a ledge that failed, resulting in significant rockfall. Several pieces the size of bread loaves bounded down the face and directly onto my exposed belay stance. Fortunately, I was hit only by five smaller rocks, which resulted in various flesh wounds. We rappelled off, patched a bleeding leg wound with a gauze pad and duct tape, and walked back to the car under our own steam. In retrospect, I was just plain lucky. Although I was wearing a helmet, a direct head hit by one of the big rocks likely would have been fatal.

ANALYSIS

We got into trouble because we did not consider my belay stance's exposure to potential rockfall. If we had relocated the belay for the second pitch to the well-protected alcove I had used before, I would not have been injured by the rockfall.

The new bolts that I mistakenly took to be the belay station for the second pitch may have been placed for rappelling the route. The walk-off from this route is tedious, so rappelling to descend has definite appeal. But this new station is exposed to rockfall for anyone who rappels the route or chooses to belay from this spot.

Ice climbers are very careful about where they set up belays, because falling ice is a given. From now on, I'll give a lot more thought to where I belay when rock climbing. (Source: Everett Fee.)

Images



The pitch on Jughaul Wall where a rockfall accident occurred. The red circle shows an alternate belay stance that might have been more protected from rockfall.

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