



AAC Publications

Falling Rock

Yosemite National Park, El Capitan

On June 16, Matthew “Mash” Alexander (50) was struck by rockfall in the face and head as he slept. He and his climbing partner, Sean McGinness (48), were bivying in hammocks midway up El Cap, near the Nose route.

The team had spent seven nights on the wall while climbing Triple Direct (VI 5.9 C2). This route joins the upper third of The Nose (a very popular route in June), and they had chosen to retreat to avoid crowding with other teams. Alexander had climbed El Cap 43 times before. McGinness was on his first Yosemite big wall.

While retreating, the team got off the standard rappel route and found themselves on an aid route called Grape Race (5.9 A3). On their eighth night on the wall, the pair set up their hammocks bunk-bed-style and bivied. According to Climbing magazine Alexander said, “I had a night of tossing and turning. I also had the feeling we were in the flight pattern of stuff that could get dropped from above.”

In the early morning, rockfall struck. Alexander was hit by a fist-size rock in the head and face, rupturing his eye and exposing his brain. McGinness, who was sleeping on the lower level, heard the rock strike Alexander. He moved to respond and his hammock, also damaged by the rockfall, collapsed, sending him on a body-length fall. His backup caught him, and he was able to help his friend and call SAR via cell phone.

In around three hours, Yosemite Search and Rescue arrived and Alexander was flown off the wall, followed by McGinness. At UC Davis Medical Center, Alexander had the first of three surgeries to rebuild his skull and install a prosthetic eye.

ANALYSIS

Natural rockfall, human-generated rocks, and dropped gear are all too common on this and other Yosemite big walls. Climbing magazine reported that Alexander is uncertain whether another team accidentally dislodged the rocks or if it was a random act of nature. He says it doesn’t matter. “To me, getting hit, it was just something that happened.” While sleeping, McGinness was wearing a helmet, but Alexander was not. He says he would do so in the future. (Sources: Climbing.com and the Editors.)

Images

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