



AAC Publications

Leader Fall — Pilon Fracture

California, Courtright Reservoir, Power Dome, West Face

On June 14, I (Meghan Crowley, 40) and my partner Jim Smith (50) had an accident on Smegmathon (5 pitches, 5.10c). We came in from the top via three full rappels on a doubled 70m rope. Our plan was that Jim would lead all the pitches, and then we'd walk back to the car. The crux was at the start of pitch 3: 5.10c. The rest of the route was 5.9 or easier.

At 1:45 p.m. on the third pitch, I had eyes on Jim and gave a careful belay. He seemed a little tense—he pulled on the first draw and stepped on the bolt. At the third bolt, he slipped and hit the wall at an angle, and his left foot absorbed almost all the impact. I lowered him, noting that his foot was flopping around, held on only by intact skin. SOS on my iPhone wasn't going through. Jim's leg was no longer functional, and time was critical.

The anchors were bolted, so bailing was straightforward. Jim insisted on lowering himself down pitch two. Then he let me lower him down pitch one. It was my turn to go down. Jim had told me to do a single-strand rappel. I'd never done that independently and I wasn't confident, so I decided to do a doubled rappel. It was nerve-racking, because I didn't know if the rope strands were long enough. We couldn't hear or see each other.

The rope was short, but Jim had tied stopper knots. As I neared the end, I assessed the terrain. I found a place where I could downclimb, but I needed a bit of extra rope. I took myself off rappel, wrapped the rope ends around one hand, and downclimbed. When I let go, the rope bounced up, well beyond my reach. I don't know what happened to our draws and the rope. A friend put up a post about it on Mountain Project but we never got it back.

I had to leave Jim. I got his shoe off and gave him Tylenol; I then pulled his orange jacket out to increase visibility for rescuers. The SOS on my phone still wasn't working, but Google Maps gave me GPS coordinates; I took a screenshot and used the Mountain Project app to navigate. I also used a backup battery to recharge. The hike to the closest service road took almost two hours. There, I blew my emergency whistle and a car stopped. A couple drove me to a Pacific Gas & Electricity Company facility, where I used the landline to call 911 just before 3 p.m. A CHP helicopter reached Jim at 4:40 p.m. and he was flown to a Fresno Level 2 trauma center.

ANALYSIS

Jim slipped, took an unlucky lead fall, and shattered his ankle. I don't think much could have prevented that. He says he fell because he went ever so slightly off route. He fell above the third bolt, impacting the wall just above the second. He was just terribly unlucky in how he landed.

I did just about everything I could manage. In hindsight, maybe Jim should've had his phone with him as a backup, given that the SOS on my iPhone failed. I had the tools I needed to navigate out and get to an emergency phone, and I did just that. While Jim was in the hospital having emergency surgery, I went to REI and bought a Garmin inReach for future outings. (Source: Meghan Crowley.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Meghan Crowley
Publication	ANAM
Volume	14
Issue	1
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	Accident reports