

Lesson #2: Always be prepared for rockfall! Avalanche Gulch has the highest exposure to rockfall on Mount Shasta but we had tried to minimize the risk by climbing earlier in the season and early in the day. Sometimes that is not enough. I should have been a little more observant through the Helen Lake to Red Banks section as well as that is where rockfall is most likely.

In conclusion, my fellow climbers and Mount Shasta rangers were great! Mike and Steve were a great help and comfort in getting me safely to the trailhead, as was the ranger intern whose name escapes me. The rangers even retrieved a couple of day-packs that we left at 11,300 feet when the accident happened and got them back to us. (Source: Tim Derouin)

(Editor's Note: There were several other incidents on Mount Shasta, most of them similar to those reported over the past few years. Only one or two narratives from this area will be reported each year.)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On the morning of May 26 Thaddeus Josephson (20) and I, (Ben Mathews—26) were starting our fourth day on Sunkist (VI 5.9 A4) on El Cap. Thaddeus polished off pitch 14, the spectacular A3-4 pitch shown on the cover of Don Reid's *Big Walls Guidebook*. As I cleaned it I was glad to see that good pro could be found every ten to 15 feet. I would get my first ever A4 lead on the next pitch and could deal with it if I got the same protection. But when I reached Thaddeus's hanging belay, the 15th looked very thin and scary, and we both realized that it would be a serious lead.

I started up at about noon. Thaddeus sat facing the wall, belaying me with a Grigri clipped to his harness and with my end of the rope running through his left hand. The first piece was a bolt five feet left of the belay and just right of the crack. The seam was the thinnest I had ever seen, so I clipped a Screamer to the bolt to reduce the impact on the system if I zippered the pitch.

My first few moves were on RURPs (Realized Ultimate Reality Pitons) and beaks, then a tied-off and sawed-off angle, barely body weight. Then more RURPs and beaks and a cam hook. Then the seam dissipated to nothing and I was forced to make my first-ever head placement except in practice, knowing that if it failed so would everything else.

After almost two hours I was 35-40 feet above the belay, on another beak. A rivet ladder beckoned, only two moves away, but those were beak moves and I had only one left. I was really gripped. I placed my last beak, the most marginal piece yet, and weighted it. I realized I needed the beak below me and gave it a slight upward tug. Even that was too much for the top piece. I heard a "pop" and was in the air. "Ting, ting, ting," went the iron as I zippered the entire 40 feet. I hit the wall a few times, tumbling—and glad, in retrospect, that I was wearing a helmet. Thaddeus went by as a blur, then I was dangling upside down, grabbed the rope and righted myself.

Thaddeus yelled down and I replied, mostly on adrenaline, that I was fine, but by the time I'd jugged to the belay, I could tell that something was not right in my abdomen. My stomach felt bloated and painful and that scared me a lot, wondering what I'd done to my insides.

Thaddeus was trembling. He'd been yanked sideways two or three feet toward the bolt despite being tied in snugly, but more significantly, rope had shot through his ungloved left hand. It was badly burned and essentially useless.

We set up the portaledge and yelled for help, and in about 30 minutes the rangers contacted us by loudspeaker. We were only able to understand half of their yes/no questions due to the wind and Valley noise, but eventually we communicated and by 4:30 p.m. a helicopter began flying the rescue team to the top. It seemed as though hours went by. I was getting extremely cold and losing feeling in my left leg, in addition to the pressure in my abdomen and sharp pain in my lower left ribs.

With the sun getting low, we realized we might be spending the night on the wall, but then a rescuer with a litter came over the edge a few hundred feet above us. That's when it hit me that the risk I had accepted for myself on the route now involved many others. It took a bit of work to get me from the portaledge to the litter but we made it. The hardest part for the team may have been carrying me all the way up the slabs from the rim to the summit. We made it by a little after midnight. I was cold, wrecked both mentally and physically, and frightened by what my injuries might be.

We bivvied on the summit. In the morning my lower abdomen was numb and hard. I was loaded on a helicopter at first light, flown to the park helibase, then to Modesto. After all sorts of tests, it turned out that I had fractured three lower ribs on my left side. My abdomen had suffered "only" massive muscle and connective tissue damage and my internal organs had escaped injury. (Source: Ben Mathews)

Analysis

Despite belaying with a Grigri, enough rope ran through Thaddeus's hand to burn it severely. The Screamer may have made things worse, because as it extended downward, it lowered the angle of the rope exiting from his hand, increasing the downward pressure on his skin. But don't skip the Screamer next time, and (don't forget to) add the gloves!

Flipping upside down isn't the best way to stop: it doesn't allow the stopping force to be distributed properly by the harness and there's a greater likelihood of hitting something. Ben was wearing a chest harness, but only as a gear sling. There are ways to rig the chest and seat harness together that allow the falling climber to stop upright and stay that way. There are also dangerous ways to rig them, so seek competent instruction!

But even a chest/seat harness rig won't keep you from tumbling during the fall, and a lethal head injury is possible even on a wall as steep as Sunkist. Follow Ben's example—wear a helmet. (Source: John Dill—NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park.)