

# Book Reviews

EDITED BY JOHN THACKRAY

*K-2, The 1939 Tragedy.* Andrew J. Kauffman and William L. Putnam. The Mountaineers. Seattle, 1992. 224 pages, 15 pages of black-and-white photographs. \$19.95.

The story of the 1939 American K-2 expedition aroused such controversy for years that many urged that it not be revisited. But one hopes that the lessons of the past, if they are understood, may illuminate the future and prevent similar tragedies. In their search for truth, the authors decided to lay out all the material they could obtain and let readers judge the responsibility for four lost lives.

The two authors originally planned a definitive biography of their close friend, Fritz Wiessner, arguably the leading American climber for thirty years. As their research expanded, however, their attention focussed on this tragic episode in Wiessner's career. As previously unavailable documents were obtained, their unabashed praise of him changed to harsh criticism. Finally, after many revisions, Kauffman (the principal author) achieved a fine balance between conflicting interpretations.

Much of this story is known. The expedition began well: several expert climbers signed on, and ample funds were assured by recruiting wealthy participants. Photos and records from the earlier 1938 U.S. expedition—but none of its members—were available. Insofar as any great mountain can be counted a sure thing, Wiessner's expedition seemed destined to summit the second highest mountain in the world.

It did not work out. The strongest climbers dropped out, another was injured, leaving a weak group with little expedition experience. A brilliant young climber (Durrance) was added at the last moment, to Wiessner's dismay.

The first four weeks were happy and harmonious as they marched to Base Camp and came to know one another. Then one member (Cranmer) became hypothermic in a deep crevasse and during the next week was near death. Durrance (a pre-medical student) was exhausted by five desperate days and nights caring for him, but Cranmer was out of the game. Next Sheldon was grounded with frozen toes. The attack party, weak to begin with, was down to four: a dedicated and able climber (Durrance) who did not acclimatize well, a powerful, determined but inept amateur (Wolfe), the strong leader, and Cromwell, his older deputy, who soon lost heart.

Wiessner was an arrogant and dogmatic leader, the only one with Himalayan experience and obsessed with reaching the top. "If we make this, we're set for life" he had told a friend before leaving. For the entire assault, Wiessner was out

in front, leading every foot of the climb, making all the decisions, trying to pull others behind him by example, despite their growing reluctance. Communications broke down completely and confrontations began.

Wiessner drove hard and those without his extraordinary strength and endurance began to wear out. Lacking a radio and with their leader always up ahead, the team, except for Durrance, became inactive, waiting for orders. Most of the Sherpas performed very well but with little direction.

After four weeks Wiessner and his least able companion (Wolfe), and Pasang Lama were near the summit, with adequate supplies and astonishingly good weather. The first attempt turned back when Lama refused to climb through the night. They sunbathed for a day, made a second attempt, but failed because a pair of crampons had been lost the previous day. Wiessner decided to split the party, and, leaving Wolfe alone, went with Lama down to the next lower camp for reinforcements.

Thus the trouble began. Wolfe had been unable to make the first two attempts and chose to stay in the next-to-highest camp awaiting Wiessner's return. (Whether he was sick or well is disputed.) There had been no communication with those below for ten days, and all the camps had been stripped for reasons that are also disputed. Wiessner continued down, dismayed and furious.

At Base Camp he was too exhausted to return for Wolfe. Durrance made a brave effort, reaching 21,500 feet, but he had not acclimatized well, and weeks of ferrying loads had dangerously weakened him. He may have been further impaired by some high altitude cerebral edema. The only ones fit were four Sherpas who volunteered to go to Wolfe.

Pasang Kikuli and Sherpa Phinsoo incredibly climbed from 16,500 to 23,400 feet in one day, joining Pasang Kitar and Tsering Norbu at one of the higher camps. Four days later, Tsering returned reporting that the others had reached Wolfe who refused to come down. After a day of storm, said Tsering, they had tried again. These three brave men and Wolfe were never seen again. The expedition had already fallen apart and straggled homeward.

As the story unfolds, Wiessner emerges as a strong, obsessed dictator. Durrance, who respected Wiessner's climbing ability, though not his personality, had labored desperately to supply the siege camps and carried medical responsibilities far beyond his ability. With no word from Wiessner far up ahead, Cromwell, his deputy, was indecisive. Just why the camps were emptied while three men were high on the mountain would long be bitterly argued. With alleged messages absent, Wiessner laid the blame on Durrance and Cromwell savaged Wiessner.

The story became uglier. After many weeks the divided party reached New York and interviews by their colleagues and the press. Despite Cromwell's furious denunciation, Wiessner's story was accepted: he became the tragic hero and Durrance the culprit in the disaster. But details were missing, contradictions appeared. An *ad hoc* American Alpine Club committee held an inquiry and issued a report—which today seems fair but incomplete. Some called it a whitewash. Charges that Wiessner was wrongly blamed because America was

then at war with his native Germany were met by countercharges that his reputation led the committee to suppress his mistakes. Important papers were lost. The party disputed among itself and gave no support to Wiessner. Durrance refused to talk for fifty years. Cromwell was largely ignored. Wiessner resigned from the American Alpine Club, published a defense in a German publication, and resumed a brilliant climbing career in the United States. The dispute simmered down.

To the accepted record the authors have added important new material from Durrance and Sheldon, and from an edited Wiessner diary. Both Durrance and Sheldon talked freely. Extensive quotes, including copies of pages from Durrance's diary add reality to the past.

What's unfortunately lacking is any material from Cromwell. He and Wiessner are now dead. Wiessner's family refused the authors access to photos, original diaries and letters. The final AAC report and a diagram explaining who was where and when are included. The chapters recapitulate hard facts and speculation. A medical section discusses acclimatization and deterioration, but uses the unfortunate and misleading term "Death Zone" too often.

This is a gripping and moving story. It is unlikely that a more complete or accurate account will be written. In the final analysis, Wiessner might be admired for his obsessive perseverance, but he must be faulted for bad judgment and leadership. Despite Wiessner's later denial, he was, like others at extreme altitude, "a sick man walking in a dream," incapable of making decisions which conflicted with his desire—a failing repeated during many subsequent tragedies on this beautiful and terrible mountain.

Excellent photos from Durrance and a map and drawings by Molenaar, plus references, make this book a major contribution to mountaineering history.

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*My Vertical World.* Jerzy Kukuczka. The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1992. 192 pages. \$29.95.

On a sunny afternoon in the fall of 1989, I was coming off a modest expedition in the Khumbu when I heard that the extraordinary Polish mountaineer Jerzy Kukuczka had just died in a fall on the south face of Lhotse. Later in Lukla, I boarded the STOL jet to Kathmandu. In my company were that ill-fated Polish team's remaining members who had gotten and remained good and drunk while waiting to continue their long journey home. They mourned the death of their friend, a quiet, robust working man. He was the second climber, after media star Reinhold Messner, to climb all 14 mountains in the Himalayan rosary of 8000-meter peaks. Unlike Messner's great accomplishment, the routes Kukuczka chose on the Himalayan giants were usually original, many of them first ascents and often done in the grip of winter wind and cold. In *My Vertical World*, Jerzy Kukuczka reveals that he was indeed a very lucky climber, but also that he made his own luck through hard work, dogged determination, and inspired optimism. He was at once a singular, innovative, and unique adventurer.