

ACCIDENTS 1968 CANADA

Alberta, Mt. Robson. On 28 July about 12 noon, two members (David Brown (38) and Donald Liska (37) of a party of four (other members George Bell and Michael Williams) were hit by a wet snow avalanche while descending the Northeast or Kain Face of Mt. Robson and carried about 700 feet down the face. Brown suffered a fractured leg and other injuries, while Liska was badly bruised. Both men were evacuated from the accident site the next day by a Canadian Air Force helicopter.

The weather during much of July was bad in the Canadian Rockies so that when we reached the vicinity of Mt. Robson on July 21, there was much fresh snow on the mountain. However, during the six days before the accident there was no appreciable snowfall. We made a high camp on the Resplendent-Robson col and on July 25 made a first attempt on the summit. The morning of the 25th was cold and snow conditions were good. We crossed the bergschrund at the base of the Kain face below the ice cliffs (at right of main face), ascended diagonally to the left to pass the ice cliffs and then directly to the ridge, reaching it around 9:30 a.m. At that point the weather threatened and we descended, using a 500 foot, $\frac{3}{4}$ inch sisal rope as a handline on the upper face and belaying the lower portion. During this ascent and descent, there was no avalanche activity on the face, though much debris lay at the foot of the face. There was much snow on the lower half (500 feet) of the face and it was fairly well consolidated. There was very little snow overlying ice on the upper half, or at least on that part we climbed—more was near the ice cliffs. We were most concerned about unstable portions of the ice cliffs which threatened the lower route.

The next three nights were warm, above freezing at our camp and we deferred another attempt, hoping for colder weather to firm up the snow. On the 28th, the last day on which we could make the climb and the day of the accident, we took a more direct route, as nearly up the fall line as possible (it was only necessary to deviate a few feet from the fall line to pass a rock band). Again the snow on the lower face was firm and consolidated and now there was almost no snow on the upper face. However there was new avalanche debris at the base of the face. With the fixed line we made rapid time up the face, reached the summit about 9:00 a.m.

We were back at the top of the Kain face around 11:00 a.m. The weather was good, temperature around freezing. Of course, the face had received a good deal of sunlight so we thought some surface slides might take place. Brown and Liska were roped together and descended first. Upon reaching the bottom of the fixed line, they had (1) tied themselves to the end of the line, (2) anchored themselves to a steel rappel picket driven in the snow, and (3) driven in their ice axes. At this moment a large wet snow avalanche started on moderate slopes above the ice cliffs (probably more than 100 feet from our route at the top), but was deflected near the lip of the ice cliff to splash across our route below. Liska and Brown caught the full force of the slide; the fixed line broke

where they were tied to it, the picket bent and pulled out and the axes pulled out.

Their injuries were probably sustained in crossing the rock band (where Liska's Kelty pack was smashed into a dozen pieces) and in clearing the schrund where they had a free fall of perhaps 50 feet. Both men were wearing hard hats which came off toward the end of the fall. Probably they were delayed enough by the fixed line and picket so that they ended up behind and on top of most of the avalanche debris.

Brown had a fractured leg, bruised or cracked ribs, other injuries and was in much pain. Liska was badly bruised and shaken. Bell and Williams descended to the injured men and gave first aid. They splinted Brown's leg with a broken ice axe and rappel picket (rather ineffective) and started to move him from the debris, fearing another avalanche. However Brown complained of severe back pains, so they dug a platform and gently placed him on it with a bivouac sack and down jackets. Brown and Liska were completely lucid. Leaving Liska with Brown, Bell and Williams descended to high camp (about 1 hour) where Liska's wife was staying. Bell continued down to Berg Lake (8 mi.) via the Robson Glacier for help, while Williams and Mrs. Liska packed up much of the camp to the accident scene. Upon arrival, they moved (with Liska) Brown from the debris since it now appeared that the back injuries were primarily to his ribs and not spine, and the threat of further slides had been demonstrated by a close one. They pitched the tent, placed Brown and Liska inside while Williams and Mrs. Liska were outside with bivouac sacks.

Meanwhile at the Berg Lake Chalet, Bell found an enthusiastic girl runner who carried the news to the nearest road (14 miles in two hours and 20 minutes) and then to the Robson Provincial Park Warden. Thus when Bell reached the road around 7:00 p.m., the search was already underway for the nearest helicopter.

Around 5:00 a.m. a Canadian Air Force helicopter arrived at the base of Robson, having flown from Vancouver Island. Some delay was experienced due to cloud cover on Robson, but at 7:00 a.m., a paramedic and Bell were flown in and discharged on the Snow Dome, about a quarter mile from the accident, with a litter. The helicopter was not able to land and remain on the Dome so that Brown was carried down to the Dome, but it was not until 2:00 p.m. that the weather cleared enough for the helicopter to return and evacuate the party. Brown was taken to the Jasper Hospital while Liska did not require medical treatment.

Source: George Bell.

Analysis: (Bell) The accident could have been prevented in two ways: (1) By not making the ascent, i.e. not being on the Kain Face with conditions as they were or (2) by triggering the avalanche from above before starting the descent.

With regard to (1), we had recognized some danger from a warm night and indeed when we left camp that morning, we had been uncertain whether the face would be climbable. However we found the snow along our fall line ascent route to be in good shape. During the descent, the surface snow on the lower face was soft but even the avalanche did not remove a lot of it. It did not occur to us that an avalanche, starting

above the ice cliffs, would reach our route, though in retrospect we can see in our photographs a gully above the cliffs which acted as a funnel to shoot the snow across our route. The Kain Face is seldom free from objective danger; certainly it was not during our visit.

(2) Upon starting down the face we made some brief and not successful efforts to induce the surface snow to slide. Possibly we could have triggered the fateful slope, but this would probably have involved kicking down a cornice more than a hundred feet from our route. We do not know just where the slide started and thus cannot judge whether it could have been triggered with reasonable effort.

Once the accident took place it is likely that the climbers' hard hats and the delay caused by their anchors were important in saving their lives. The avalanche was far from superficial; it probably involved an acre-foot of wet snow which had fallen a hundred feet just before striking the climbers. It carried them a thousand feet before stopping on gentle slopes.

With regard to first aid, we wished we had Demerol for the relief of Brown's pain and an inflatable splint. In retrospect, Brown should have been moved off the debris at once, but at the time his pain made that far from clear. It was not noticed that Brown had an elastic top on his knee sock on his injured leg and the constricting effect may have complicated his injury.

The rescue effort was well carried out and with due regard to the complication caused by the weather, we are unable to suggest improvements.

British Columbia, Mt. Waddington. In August, about 4 p.m., a party of four from British Columbia Mountaineering Club was preparing final rappel in descent of main tower of Mt. Waddington. Gary Kozel (28) strung a rope through rappel sling left by a Japanese expedition, and tested sling by putting weight on it. Sling broke and Gary lost balance, falling 50 feet down rock, 50 feet down snow, and over bergschrund. He was not seriously injured, mainly due to good run out in soft snow. One end of rappel rope snagged 30 feet below fall point and rest of party were able to reach it by tying waist slings together.

Source: Dick Culbert.

Analysis: The interesting lesson here is that the sling which broke was only about three weeks old and showed no obvious damage. Later examination revealed burn marks, probably caused by earlier party when they pulled their rope down.

Yukon, St. Elias Range, Border Peak of Mt. Vancouver. The 10-man Japanese party was flown to the Seward Glacier 28 May to attempt a new route, the SW Ridge, on the Border Peak of Mt. Vancouver, 15,700. A steep snow slope was utilized to reach a col on this ridge at 10,000 where their highcamp was placed and from which camp Kimura and Shibata reached the summit 10 June. On that day Kawata, Mizuta, Shimizu, and Ueda remained in the highcamp while Nubuo Kuwahara (36), Toshiaki Miyamoto (25), Yoshikazu Nishikawa (27), and Yasuhiro