

**ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING  
TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE  
SAFETY COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB**

This is the twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Safety Committee of the American Alpine Club. Again it can be reported that the total number of accidents recorded here are less, though not considerably less, than the total number which likely occurred. Among the foremost reasons for this are that: 1) most reports come from sources other than those directly concerned; 2) collecting data of this kind on a continental scale poses some difficulties; and 3) there seems to be a growing concern about legal implications. Perhaps it is time to reemphasize that the purpose of this Report is to present statistics and a cross section of narratives as a demonstration of classic categories of accident cause *in order that* climbers may increase their awareness of potential hazards, and, secondarily, that long range perspective can be maintained. The reduction of major accidents in comparison to the growth of climber use days in the National and State parks is a clear example of the potential for prevention, and such prevention has come *not* through imposed regulation as much as it has through education and *self* regulation. It is in the latter areas which this Report aims to be of service.

Of general note this year, there were some events which indicate the scope of mountain activities. These include cross country skiers who were killed by hazards associated with mountaineering—an avalanche and exceedingly high winds on a ridge; several persons (54) involved in avalanche situations while affiliated with sanctioned university courses; two experienced climbers who set off on solo mountain ventures and did not return; a proliferation of ice climbing during marginal (beyond winter) months (no accidents, but several near misses reported); and a report for the first time of accidents from a rock climbing area in Devil's Lake State Park in Wisconsin. It should also be noted that for the first time since 1970, there were no deaths resulting from climbing in the Tetons.

The editor wishes to thank the following for their continuing support in the form of data, narratives, and comments: George Sainsbury, Howard Stansbury, Bradley Snyder, Dennis Burge, Peter Thompson (Mt. Rainier National Park), Peter Hart (Grand Teton National Park), Charles Wendt (Yosemite National Park), T. C. Price Zimmermann, Alfred Braun, Robert Palais, Henry Ledyard, and Craig Karr (Devil's Lake State Park).

Anyone having data, suggestions, or information is encouraged to send such to the editor at the address below.

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**SAFETY COMMITTEE, THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB, 1975**

Dennis K. Burge, Benjamin G. Ferris Jr., Bradley J. Snyder, Howard Stansbury, Peter Thompson, and John E. Williamson.

**ALPINE CLUB OF CANADA**

Ted Whalley and Helmut F. Microys

## CANADA

*Editor's note:* At time of publication, data from Canada was not available but will be included next year.

The correction, while not germane to the essence of the incident, appears below at the request of Don Vockeroth, Chairman of the Standards Committee of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides. It should be noted that such requests would not be necessary if the parties directly concerned with accidents would report their data promptly.

“... With respect to the climbing accidents published in the 1975 *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, I should like to report some factual errors in the report of *CHOCK FAILURE AND POOR QUALITY HELMET*, *British Columbia, Mount Victoria*, Mr. Blair Mitten.

“The mentioned accident took place in Alberta on the Perron route to Mt. Faye, which in this case was being used as an approach to the Graham Cooper bivouac hut in the Moraine Lake area. The climb is mixed as reported and does have a 50 to 70 foot band of rock below the glacier which provides a short 5th class pitch. Mr. Mitten's pack weight was approximately 25 pounds. He was wearing a Whillans sit harness. When roping up at a slightly lower elevation, Mr. Mitten was instructed to use the chest harness (it is compulsory with the A.C.M.G. that all personnel combine chest and sit harness), in conjunction with his sit harness. He voiced his opinion that it was not necessary, but under supervision from the instructor, tied into the climbing rope with a chest and seat combined arrangement. He chose at a later time, for reasons of his own, when not observed by the instructors, to eliminate the chest harness from his tie-in arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

“Mr. Mitten was leading the second rope up this pitch. There were two piton placements in place by the first rope, one at 10 feet and one at 20 feet above the stance. Blair was asked to use these but placed some of his own as well. He used the first piton placement, placed a nut runner for his second runner. At this point he was instructed to place or use the piton available before continuing. This he did not do.

“When he fell the nut did catch him momentarily and he was flipped upside down. The nut came out and he descended down in his upside down position about 3 feet from the rock. When the next runner and the belayer caught him his body swung into the rock where his temple struck the rock ledge. It was just below the rim of his helmet or in the case of Mr. Mitten, who was upside down, just above the rim of his helmet.

“Because of the suspected head injury, he was not given any medication whatsoever. Also because he was suffering from concussion, he was never able to indicate any paralysis on any side of the body, nor was there any sign of future paralysis. To be more precise, the body functions at the time and up until helicopter evacuation 2 hours later were nonparalytic. The paralysis came later as a result of the increased pressure from the concussion (there were no fractures). He was not turned over to any Army Unit. He was flown directly to the Banff

Hospital and then, by ambulance transferred to the Foothills Hospital in Calgary for treatment.

“The Assistants Guides Course personnel were informed by the hospital staff that Mr. Mitten’s immediate family were notified. All other procedures of mountain first aid and rescue were correctly observed. . . .”

Yours truly

[Signed]

Don Vockeroth, Chairman

Standards Committee

A. C. M. G.

<sup>1</sup>*Personal letter from Blair Mitten:*

“ . . . I was wearing my chest harness when I fell. I had no reason to purposely neglect to tie in to that harness. It is possible that I forgot to run the climbing rope through my chest-harness, and that this was unnoticed by the instructors present. It is also possible that, after my fall, when I was convulsing, the people who untied me and removed my harness, if they did remove the harness, maybe to help me breathe better, never noticed the rope running through the harness. . . .”