

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fifty-Ninth Annual Report of the Safety Committees
of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the sixtieth issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*. At the time of publication, narratives and data from Canada were not available.

United States: Once again there were too many reports of rappel errors (ten) and lowering errors (five). The tragedy of the year was the loss of Todd Skinner, who fell to his death after his harness loop parted while he was rappelling in Yosemite Valley. It is hard to understand how such an experienced climber could find himself in this situation.

The reader will find a lengthy analysis of the Sue Nott/Karen McNeill disappearance from their route on the Infinite Spur on Mount Foraker. It illustrates the level of care and thoroughness that our park rangers who are involved in rescue operations will go to try to find causes and alert future climbers.

We try not to lay blame and name-call in this annual report. That is why we appreciate it when climbers submit their personal accounts of mishaps and include such comments as, “I simply wasn’t being careful enough,” and, “That was dumb!” in their analyses. There are a few good self-reports in this edition.

Another disturbing kind of accident that seems to be making an annual appearance is the tumbling fall that is the result of glissading with crampons attached (seven). One case in particular was what appeared to be a deliberate glissade—rather than a down-climb—on a very icy surface. The predictable result was several fractured bones. Four of the seven incidents reported happened on Mount Washington (NH)—three in Tuckerman Ravine, and one in Huntington Ravine.

While we are still not getting reports from some key areas, there are some web-based resources that often provide good information and accident stories. One of the primary ones is www.supertopo.com. A good one for Mount Washington is www.tuckerman.org. As always, we seek help from the climbing corners of the country.

Mount Hood made headlines again, including a lot of media coverage. I was the chief investigator of the tragic 1986 Oregon Episcopal School accident in which seven students and two teachers perished during a storm because they failed to turn back. State legislators raised the issue then as to whether locator beacons should be required for every climber. (Cellphones weren’t in as yet.) This year, in the aftermath of the stranded climbers who

were not found in time, legislators again introduced a bill mandating that climbers going above 10,000 feet carry locator devices and GPS receivers with cellphones. In an op-ed piece, Jim Whitaker brought forward the key issues:

“The accidents on Mount Hood remind us that nobody can move in a severe mountain storm, not even a rescuer. Sending a distress call could result in rescuers being sent out into a life-threatening situation for no good reason, which is why most rescue workers oppose the law. And waiting for rescuers summoned by beacons can be more deadly than moving on...

“Most important, though, we need to meet the wilderness on its own terms. Laws and locators cannot replace careful attention, knowledge, and personal responsibility.”

From October 24–26, the Wilderness Risk Management Conference will be held at The Banff Centre. (Go to www.NOLS.edu/wrmc/ for information on the program and registration.)

In addition to the dedicated individuals on the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following—with apologies for any omissions—for collecting data and for helping with the report: Hank Alacandri, Dave Brown, Chris Harder, Tom Moyer, Erik Nelson, Leo Paik, Justin Preisendorfer, Robert Speik, Eric White, all individuals who sent in personal stories, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

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