

THE
AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL

VOLUME VII

APRIL 1948

NUMBER 1

An Appeal to Reason

WALTER A. WOOD

ELEVEN persons are known to have been killed in North American climbing accidents during 1947. As many more may have died in accidents not yet reported to the American Alpine Club. But for the intervention of Providence, accidents involving other climbers might have swelled the appalling number of fatalities. What are the causes of these tragedies, and what can be done to minimize their recurrence in 1948 and in future years?

Mountaineering accidents do not happen; they are caused. Those fatalities which result from acts of God—the death of the guide Emile Rey is an example—are so rare as to be negligible; and to account for the swelling tide of mountain tragedies we need look no farther than the horizon of our own human behavior. In what respect is our behavior at fault?

An analysis of the accidents in 1947 shows that every accident, whether fatal or non-fatal, can be ascribed to “climber error”; that in every accident, individual or collective, the margin of safety had been exceeded; that in eleven accidents sound mountaineering judgment had been disregarded; and that in eight accidents inexperience led directly to disaster. It is, of course, easy and fatuous to sit back and pass judgment on situations which no amount of judgment can recreate; but each accident provides a lesson—a legacy to the climbing fraternity—which, if it be learned and applied, can avert the consequences which inevitably accrue to those who violate respect for the high places.

We stand today on the threshold of an era which promises wide participation in the joys and benefits of our sport. It is our responsibility to see to it that those joys and benefits continue to be mountaineering assets. To do so we must clean house—sweep away the dust of ignorance and the cobwebs of inexperience, polish our family heirlooms of tradition so that they may be seen and admired, not forgotten. This done, we can relegate to a closet the horseshoe of luck which has been over the front door too long, and invite one and all to enter and partake of the fare we have to offer. This fare is such that it should produce positive distaste for climbing beyond our margins of safety, climbing beyond our limits of time, climbing beyond our limits of endurance, attempting climbs beyond our experience, climbing for the sake of “peak-bagging,” attempting first ascents for the sake of the record, relying excessively on artificial aids. We can find the proper ingredients for this antidotal fare only by going to the individuals who constitute the American climbing fraternity, and who, composed into groups, clubs and national organizations, can exert such an appeal to reason as will make our meal not only tempting, digestible and beneficial to those of us who love the mountains, but attractive and inspiring to those who will compose the climbing generations of the future.

What is mountaineering? To each of us, I think, the word has a slightly different connotation, acquired as a result of an individual philosophic attitude toward mountains. Whatever it is that draws us individually to the hills, we must all agree that a true mountaineer should possess one basic attribute: the ability to live and travel where he chooses among mountains, secure in the knowledge that, whatever the circumstances, personal and collective security will be assured. There is no truer maxim for a mountaineer than the old English jingle:

He who climbs and comes away
Will live to climb another day,
But he who is in climbing slain
Will never live to climb again.

If we accept the stated definition of a mountaineer, how can a lover of mountains aspire to the title? As I see it, in precisely the same manner as an individual who aspires to operate an aircraft.

Surely the air cadet, on receiving his wings, restricts his newly acquired talents to conditions falling within the scope of his experience. As his flying hours mount, air-wisdom grows; and the pilot absorbs, through instruction and experience, knowledge of a variety of subjects which permit wider exploration of his chosen medium. More powerful planes are mastered, instrument flying learned, practical meteorology appreciated. Concurrently, longer flights are undertaken; and eventually the pilot becomes qualified to operate his craft under all conditions. He has attained in his own field a status equal to that of a mountaineer in the mountains. Many pilots, with the confidence born of inexperience, exceed their margins of safety; and all too often we read of a crash attributed to "pilot error." In the mountaineering obituary, it would read "climber error."

There are two essential differences between our pilot and our mountaineer. The one is restricted in what he may fly and, to a certain degree, in where he may fly it; the other is free to climb whatever peak he wishes whenever the opportunity affords. Nor would the climbing fraternity have it otherwise. Yet the mountaineers of the country have a moral responsibility to exert every effort toward guiding the climbing cadets into the ranks of true mountaineers.

We in this country take pride in accomplishment; we have achieved superlatives in most fields of national endeavor; we thrive on competition—all admirable qualities, but not without peril when they are injected into the sport of mountaineering. Here, all too often, our enthusiasm runs away with us: after a few uneventful sallies onto practice pitches or ski slopes, we consider ourselves ready for anything. The consequences of such an attitude are obvious. They are set forth all too tragically on other pages of this *Journal*.

How much we miss by forcing the pace, even though for a time we survive while doing so. How few of the true delights of climbing are appreciated if our ascents are crowded with emergencies or our minds distracted by the greed for notoriety. How many of the finest peaks are passed over, never to be appreciated, if we skim the cream of mountain ascents in our first few seasons.

Let us who have climbed to know the mountains infuse what we have learned, lived and enjoyed into those who would follow our footsteps. Let us seek out those who would climb and counsel

them along the path of prudence and balanced judgment. And let us temper our tendencies to make rash decisions with a recollection of Edward Whymper's closing words:

"Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end."