

VARIOUS NOTES

ACCIDENTS IN 1947

ON 4 October 1947 the Council voted to form a committee to be called the Safety Committee of the American Alpine Club. Its purpose is to investigate climbing accidents and to formulate a program of prevention for the future. It has been the initial concern of this Committee to gather as many data as possible concerning last summer's unprecedented number of accidents, with no intent to criticize the persons involved, but rather to learn why these accidents occurred and to emphasize the lessons to be learned from them. The fact that mountaineering accidents led to eleven deaths in the five-month period from May through October 1947 is evidence enough that something must be done. Four near-fatal accidents could easily have brought the number to 15—many fewer than the 60-odd deaths reported from the Alps in 1947, but certainly enough to constitute a harsh warning.

The Committee's first report was presented on 6 December 1947. A section devoted to summaries and brief analyses of 13 accidents in 1947 is reprinted below. The introduction to this section concludes thus: "The aim has been to stress only those accidents which were fatal or so nearly fatal as to be worthy of special note. The Committee feels that emphasis on the causes of these accidents will call attention to the full significance of all accidents. If the effort put forth now can save but one life or limb next summer, that effort will, most assuredly, have been well spent."—*Ed.*

Coast Range, British Columbia. On 22 July 1947, in the Mt. Waddington-Tiedemann district of western British Columbia, Charles Shiverick, of the Harvard Mountaineering Club, lost his life in a snow avalanche on the highest peak of Mt. Serra, at about 11,000 ft. A high camp party of four men had made an extended reconnaissance of this peak two days before. They had kicked steps to the top of a long 45-degree snow slope leading to a rock saddle on a ridge of the highest Serra peak. After the reconnaissance, they had descended the same slope to a steep névé basin. The last snow had fallen a week earlier. Snow on the descent was somewhat mushy. The 21st was a brilliant day. On the 22nd the party again

left camp, at 7.00 A.M., for an attempt on Mt. Serra, the plan being to continue the route established on the 20th. While they were ascending the old steps in the basin, they emerged into the sunlight. Three unusually heavy ice (?) avalanches echoed across the valley, probably from Mt. Munday or Mt. Waddington. At about 9.45 A.M., on two ropes, the climbers moved diagonally up and to the right, leaving the old steps to reach the descending track of two days before, still some 250 ft. away. Though by now each man was beginning to sink in six or eight inches, the névé was judged to be fundamentally safe. Fred Beckey was leading, tied to Winchester; King, leading the second rope with Shiverick, was close behind. All were climbing in unison. When they were but a few feet below the rocks supporting the ridge, the whole slope began to slide to a depth of one and a half to two ft., leaving a marked line of cleavage, probably 700 ft. across. The avalanche occurred half an hour after the sun had hit the upper reaches of the slope. The force of the slide was irresistible, tumbling Beckey and Winchester down some 1500 ft. before their rope caught on a pinnacle of ice. King and Shiverick were carried down some 700 ft. to an outcrop of rock which caught their rope. During the slide Shiverick received a blow in the back which injured him internally. He was the only member of the party who wore no pack. Striking the rock island, or the sudden tightening of the rope, may have crushed his ribs or complicated injuries already suffered. He was tied with a single bowline (somewhat loose), unlike the bowline-on-a-coil which the others had used. Beckey suffered several broken ribs, and King a dislocated shoulder; Winchester had lacerated hands and had lost his axe and rucksack.

Immediately after the accident, King dug a snow shelf, placed Shiverick on it, and did as much as possible to make him comfortable. Shiverick was apparently unconscious. King then descended as quickly as possible to meet and help the others. When they were able to climb back to the injured man, they discovered that Shiverick had in some manner dislodged himself from the ledge and had fallen several hundred ft. farther, despite the fact that King had carefully braced him on the ledge with an ice-axe. Several hours were required to transport Shiverick across the slope to a safe ledge, during which time he died.

Source of information: members of the expedition.

Analysis. A careful study of this accident has been made by members of the Harvard Mountaineering Club and American Alpine Club. While it cannot be stated that an error in judgment was not made—the accident was avoidable—the decision to repeat an ascent already accomplished without misadventure was one which, in all probability, would have been made by a majority of more experienced parties. If a lesson is to be learned from this accident it must be that judgment of snow conditions is perhaps the most difficult phase of a mountaineer's training. It is not to be learned in one season and may not be acquired even after many seasons. Few mountaineers attain a working mastery of the subject of snow slope analysis. No better shortcut to an appreciation of the manifold facts of snowcraft is to be found than in the pages of *Snow Structure and Ski Fields* by Gerald Seligman (Macmillan, 1936), and this work should be considered a "must" by all who undertake ascents in terrain characterized by ice and snow.

Northern Cascades: (1) Monte Cristo District. On the morning of 13 September 1947, a party of four young members of the Mountaineers Inc., of Seattle, left Monte Cristo by trail to climb the three Wilmon Spires. According to one of them, "This was a feat never yet done in one day." They climbed the two W. Spires and debated the advisability of going up the E. Spire as it was already between 5.00 and 6.00 P.M. Some of the party felt that it was unwise to go on, but one who had climbed there before assured them that it would go quickly. The climb took longer than they had expected. According to reports, they by-passed three pitons left by an earlier party in places where the stances were questionable. They reached the top after dark. Jim Wells rappelled off last, and at the bottom of the rappel, for undisclosed reasons, untied the belay rope. The end of his 100-ft. rappel was still 12 ft. above a spacy ledge. After pulling the rope down and dropping it to the others, Wells started to climb down the remaining 12 ft. unroped, while the other climbers were coiling the two ropes. Apparently he got into difficulties, and at 8.15 he slipped. The ledge failed to stop his fall. He landed on talus 175 ft. vertically below, and was killed.

Source of information: Seattle Mountaineers rescue personnel.

Analysis. This tragedy demonstrates that the leader, be he