

ACCIDENTS 1970

CANADA

British Columbia, Border Peak. On 5 July Eryl Pardoe (24) and nine companions had just completed an ascent of the Northeast Face of American Border Peak and were descending below the col between the American and Canadian Border Peaks. The party consisted of six beginners and four experienced climbers. Eryl was acknowledged the best and most experienced member of the party, although he was not the official leader. The climb is third class, except for one fourth pitch. It has many roped pitches as it is nearly 2,000 feet long. Paul Starr and Eryl were descending in the rear of the party as they had just cleared four fixed ropes placed on the lower part of the main face. They traversed down below the col and caught up with the main party at the head of a steep hard slope. (Although the sky was clear and the day sunny, this slope was very consolidated and had been in the shade for a few hours—the slope was about 35°). They decided to descend unroped in order to set up more fixed ropes on lower sections of a third-class rock though a fixed line was being set up for the others. They plunge-stepped down the slope—their heels penetrating 1-2 inches into the hard snow. Crampons might have been warranted, although they did not have them on the climb and would not have put them on because rock was only about 200 feet below. Neither felt any fear of the slope and Starr felt that he could have arrested. Eryl slipped onto his back. Consequently, by the time he had turned over to do his arrest, he was traveling very rapidly. He tried to arrest three times; each time he was flung back onto his back due to the sun cups on the slope. He then disappeared over a rock cliff and fell into a moat at the base of this cliff.

In total he fell about 250-300 feet. The rock cliff was about 50 feet high and the snow slope was between 200-250 feet long. He fell about 20 feet inside the moat and was jammed headfirst between the snow and the rock and a waterfall of melt-water streamed over the body.

It took Starr about 5 minutes to reach the top of the moat. He was preceded by one of the members of the party, Virginia Moore. They could hear moaning, but Starr was dubious of Eryl's survival, since he was constantly bathed in ice-cold water. Starr was hesitant to descend immediately into the moat because of the possibility of becoming a casualty himself and there being no one to pull him out. They set up a rappel from two ice axes and investigated going up underneath the snowpatch (it being only 60 feet long), but this was out of the question. After about 5 minutes, the moaning ceased. Once three or four persons had assembled, Starr rappelled into the moat, located the body, and tied a rope around the feet. He was unable to pull the wedged-in body out, so he retreated—prussiking and stemming up the side. They then started to pull out the body, which eventually came out, but they neglected to provide a bearing surface for the rope. The rope dug into the lip and many minutes were spent digging it out and setting up another fulcrum point. By that time, Starr was shivering uncontrollably and took no further part in the retrieval of the body.

It took 45 minutes from the time of the accident to the time the body was safely on a ledge out of the moat. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was attempted, but the body was obviously lifeless. Discolored areas in the small of the back indicated internal injuries and the hard hat was completely cracked. One of the shoulders appeared broken.

The party took another 1½ hours to reach non-technical terrain (which occurred just at darkness). High camp was reached another hour after that and they were back at their cars by 3:00 a.m. The incident was reported immediately to the Chilliwack RCMP. The body was evacuated the following afternoon by Canadian Special Forces Air-Sea Rescue helicopter. They were accompanied by Starr to show them the location of the body.

Source: Paul Starr and Dick Culbert.

Analysis: Obviously a belay was in order, or crampons. However, this is one case where experience fails one—i.e., giving one too much confidence on marginal slopes. It was one of those situations where one has to balance speed and safety, and as we were trying to evacuate a large party before darkness fell, we chose speed.

Another important point to be emphasized here is the difficulty of doing an ice-ax arrest with a short or “north wall” ax. Much of the effectiveness of an arrest on hard snow comes from the pressure of one’s chest against the shaft of the ice ax. With a short ax there is less shaft and furthermore it slips out of range easily. Witnesses to this incident observed that whenever Eryl went into arrest position his ax (which was a Mac-Innes short one) went up so that his arms were stretched full length above his head. This position probably made it easier for him to be flipped over onto his back, and was totally useless for arrest in hard snow. With a longer-shafted ax, even if one’s hand on the head is pulled out full length, one still has part of the shaft under the chest and one arm bent down near the chest to make rolling over less easy. Furthermore, it is more difficult for a long-shafted ax to be drawn out from under the body to where one’s arm is stretched up full length.

British Columbia, Tantalus Mountains, Mt. Niobe. On 20 September Nigel Eggers (23) and the other 12 members of the party were practicing ice-ax arrests on hard snow. The immediate slope was steep, but the run out was ample; it was chosen specifically to practice arrest. Everyone was doing simple arrests, but Nigel was ambitious and eager and tried the arrest described on p. 252 of *Freedom of the Hills* (on the back, head downhill). While flipping over, he lost control and dropped his ax. The ax was momentarily vertical and at that moment he fell and pierced his side. Paul Starr went up to him and asked if he was o.k. He said “yes”, but when Starr raised his sweater he saw a great gaping hole in his right upper abdomen. They laid him down on an Ensolite because there was no way to move him. They covered him with all the jackets they could muster and took off his wet boots. They chopped a platform in the snow. He was in great pain due to the bile and the blood released into his abdominal cavity, so he was given a Darvon compound and ½ grain of codein (later he was given another ½ grain).