

# ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

## Thirty-ninth Annual Report of the Safety Committee of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the thirty-ninth issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the ninth that has been edited and published jointly by The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada.

**Canada:** In 1985, the number of reported mountaineering accidents remained low for the third year in a row, compared to the numbers reported for 1981 and 1982. In particular, there were no avalanche deaths reported in the western mountains, a fact attributable, perhaps, to a rising level of avalanche awareness. (There was one avalanche death in the east.)

Only accidents that happen to climbers are regularly reported in this publication, but people engaged in other activities in the mountains also come to grief. Last year, such accidents ranged from a shake cutter who fell down a water fall into a canyon near Pacific Rim National Park to a hiker who died of hypothermia in Baffin Island. In between, near Valemont, B.C., there was an incident in which two people rode a snowmobile up Canoe Mountain. One of them walked to the edge to admire the view and fell through a cornice to his death.

Walt Disney Productions have made a 20 minute 360 degree panoramic film of a simulated mountain rescue at Castle Mountain near Banff. It will be shown at Expo '86 in Vancouver.

We are grateful to the following persons for collection reports: Ray Breneman, Helen Butling, Lloyd Freese, Peter Fuhrmann, Denis Gravel, Ian Kay, David Myles, R. Quilter, and Martin Taylor.

**United States:** While there was an increase in the number of accidents reported this year, there was a significant decrease in the number of fatalities. Another project underway, along with attempting to put together a data base, is a long range analysis of the fatalities in North American mountaineering. One impetus for this is to help the custodians of public and private climbing areas, as well as the insurance companies and media, more clearly understand the facts and figures. The level of current understanding has resulted in a somewhat distorted picture of the risk levels in the sport. More than once, mountaineering has been ranked as being in the top five of the most dangerous sports. Inquiries as to how such an assignment was arrived at have yielded no solid basis for same, and therefore, the AAC Safety Committee hopes to be able to provide a clear understanding of actual risk levels.

During the past year, we once again saw a number of falls resulting in injuries because of no or inadequate protection, which really includes protection coming out and belays not working. Over half of the injuries incurred were due to these contributory factors. Many climbers are using Friends where a good stopper would be more appropriate, and many are also going far enough beyond the last piece of protection so that maximum stress is being exerted upon it. More training in this aspect of climbing seems warranted.

As the year ended, an insurance crisis loomed on the horizon, and by the time our publication comes out, many climbing guides (and other outdoor guide services) may be out of

business for the time being. One effort that is moving forward is that of gathering data from mountain guides and guide services on their number of accidents *and* user days over the past decade. Again, the custodians of climbing areas and all others who can prevent access need to have a solid factual basis from which to make decisions. As in past years, help is needed in getting these facts to us.

We still have a long way to go in the education process. The most illustrative example of need in 1985 was in a letter written to Denali National Park, in which, among other things, the prospective climber inquired, "One other very important question I have is are there firearms allowed in the park as for protection and does one need to technically climb—ropes and gromets (sic)—or can one hike to the summit of Mt. McKinley? My last question is, is Mt. McKinley usually covered with snow around the first of June?" The only fortunate aspect of this is that the young man, in his early twenties, did write and the park was able to respond before the inevitable occurred.

A final comment is warranted in reference to an accident we published in 1985 (see pp. 39-42) involving Howard Replogle and Donald Barnett. A letter from Mr. Replogle containing a corrected version of that report was received too late for publication in this issue. Readers should be aware that there are a number of errors and misstatements in the report as published. Mr. Replogle's personal account is available upon request from the AAC.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Hubert Allen, Peter Armington, Micki Canfield, John Dill, Ruth Mendenhall, Tom Scheuer, Dr. Richard Wallin, and Mike Wilkinson. A special thanks to committee member George Sainsbury for outstanding data from the Northwest.

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