

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fortieth Annual Report of the Safety Committee of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

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

Canada: In 1986, there were ten fatal accidents involving fourteen fatalities, at least twice as many as in any of the previous three years. The summer of 1986 was also one of unusually bad weather in the western mountains. It is not clear whether these two facts are connected. One effect of the bad weather, however, was that much of the summer's climbing was crammed into the three sunny weeks of August; many of the accidents happened then too.

Four climbers were killed because of icefall on the North Face of Mount Temple, near Lake Louise, in two separate accidents. A Banff warden, Tim Auger, remarked that the North Face is not a good bet for climbing, that one person in 20 or 30 is going to get killed climbing that route.

There were two falls into crevasses reported; one of them eventually fatal, the other resulting in no injury, but requiring a rescue. In both cases, there were only two climbers in the party, and the remaining climber found it impossible to extricate his partner by himself.

It is tempting to imagine that climbers in trouble can always be picked up by helicopter. The account of an epic rescue on Mount Robson illustrates a much more demanding reality.

We are grateful to the following persons for collecting reports: Helen Butling, Lloyd Freese, Peter Fuhrmann, Ian Kay, David Myles, Ron Quilter, Martin Taylor, and Fred Thiessen.

United States: Continuing with the theme from the first paragraph from last year's report, the first thing the readers will see this year is the dramatic increase in the number of fatalities. But notice that there was a ten-percent increase in the number of accidents reported, and that nearly a quarter of the fatalities were the result of one outing. Furthermore, foreign climbers accounted for all the fatalities on Denali. The reporting network from Colorado resulted in a more realistic accident figure, considering the level of climbing activity there. Wyoming's fatality rate dropped, but it is worth mentioning that the Skillet Glacier on Mount Moran, where one of them occurred, seems to hold the record for serious accidents over the years. California's accident rate seems to be high, but that is more a reflection of the thorough efforts of Hubert Allen and John Dill in tracking down victims who do not report their mishaps. So we are thankful for their tenacity.

The causes of accidents remain somewhat consistent, though "Falling Rock or Object" showed an increase in frequency and in fatalities this year. Three out of the six "Falling Rock" accidents reported from Washington were fatal, for example. The categories of "Climbing Unroped" and "Placed No/Inadequate Protection" nearly

tripled and doubled respectively. The contributory factor "No Hard Hat" figure is back to the level it was in 1984. The category "Rappel Failure" may soon disappear, and be replaced by "Fall on Rappel." It is probably apparent that when rappels go wrong, the causes include: a) the anchor coming loose because of improper placement and no backup; b) no belay (either by a person or by using a Prusik/device backup); and c) generally improper technique.

The guide services and climbing areas sending in reports have increased. This year, readers will notice narratives from Joshua Tree National Monument, Oak Creek in Arizona, and Table Rock in North Carolina. But as yet, we have no word from areas such as Hueco Tanks, The Needles, Pok-O-Moonshine, or Suck Creek Canyon. New styles and techniques in such areas will probably generate some new categories of causes: "Lycra Tights Hooked on Nubbin" and "Arthritic Knuckle Caught in Crack" are possibilities.

Pursuing the sources which report the risks of mountaineering in relation to other sports, I came across this interesting comparison in the October 1985 issue of *Science Magazine*. Experts and lay people were asked to rank the risks of dying in any year from various activities and technologies. (The experts' ranking closely matches known fatality statistics.) The public ranked mountain climbing as 15th, whereas the experts called it 29th. The experts ranked operating a power mower as more hazardous (28th), along with school football, contraceptives, police work, and surgery, to name but a few.

Certainly the sport has its risks, and as many would argue, that is one of its appeals. But because the sport is still not culturally accepted or understood, it has gained the reputation of being the ultimate in riskiness and even unworthiness among the general public. Most newspaper reporters perpetrate this view. Consider these examples. "Climber dies, other survives two-hour ordeal." The story had to do with a man who fell about 60 meters to his death on "Suicide Direct" cliff. But at the end of the article, we read that he and his partner... "had no climbing equipment and wore only tennis shoes, shorts and T-shirts in their attempt to climb the difficult face." Or this headline: "Accidents Kill Climber, Driver; Five Others Injured." Two days later, the follow-up story indicated that the "climber" was a man who had lost his balance and fell from a steep slope as he was trying to keep his son's friend from slipping while they were gathering firewood.

About twenty reports of this type, which also included overdue hikers, people trying to imitate climbers whom they can see from their campsites in places like Tuolumne Meadows and Joshua Tree, and the father and son from North Carolina you will read about here, were sent in this year. These only serve to perpetrate the notions expressed by one reporter, who describes climbing as a "...bizarre urge," and further, "...a strange duel with fate, a flirt with death, a game played with a loaded gun." Having good data, then, is important. It's the only way we can come to know that such things as home appliances, vaccinations, and food preservatives are more hazardous than climbing.

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, Steve Everett, Erik Hansen, Ruth Mendenhall, Bob Seibert, Tom Scheuer, and Mike Wilkinson. A special thanks to committee member George Sainsbury for outstanding reporting from the Northwest.

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