

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Forty-Third Annual Report of the Safety Committees of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the forty-third issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the twelfth that has been done jointly by The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada.

Canada: First, an apology. In last year's report of a fatal accident on Mount Lougheed, the wrong climber's name appears in the Analysis. The correct names are given in the narrative of the accident.

This year's reports seem to be dominated by climbers falling through snow bridges or cornices. There were three falls into crevasses, a fall through a cornice, and a fall through a snow bridge on a headwall. Four of these accidents resulted in fatalities. One thing in common to these situations is that the danger is hidden. Climbers are not compelled to caution by seeing where they might fall.

The next most serious cause of accidents this year was falling rock, which resulted in three fatalities. Rockfall danger can be difficult to evaluate, but in one of these cases, it would have been best to stay away from a steep gully on a warm afternoon.

Here is an observation on another common mountain hazard. Fred Thiessen sent me a copy of an account (and analysis) in *Karabiner '88* of a slab avalanche that swept through about 40 climbers ascending Mont Blanc on skis. Among them was Fred and the author of the article. One conclusion drawn from the experience is that "swimming" and shedding equipment does work. In particular, it appears that all those who survived being swept down by the avalanche got rid of a ski during their struggle.

We are grateful to the following persons for collecting reports: Glen Campbell, George Field, Lloyd Freese, Peter Fuhrmann, Denis Gravel, Ian Kay, Sakiasie Sowdloopik, Fred Thiessen, and Lahav Wolach.

United States: This marks another year of less than the annual average of accidents and deaths reported. The total fatality in over four decades is less than 1000, with the average being thirty per year for the past twenty years. Yet we can read in an issue of *U.S. News and World Report* that there are 599 deaths per 100,000 mountain climbers. Armed with this erroneous statistic, major media use terms like "killer sport" to describe mountaineering and climbing. There are numerous examples of accidents being reported which happen in the mountains as though individuals were engaged in the sport. It's time to present some of those, as we have before.

"Man Dies in Fall from Cliff." While he was a climber, the accident resulted when he bent down to pick up a rock on a ledge near where he had just put some equipment down. "Boulder Man Dies Scaling Long's Peak." This was clearly a hiking accident, but media such as *The Rocky Mountain News* choose words like "scale," which are at best misleading. "Lamar University Student Focuses on Recovery from Mountain Climbing Injuries." It turns out that he and his friends were hiking to the top of Malibu Cliff in California, and when they got to the top, he recalled that, "We were trying to get a

better view, and I guess I just slipped." In Montana, four friends were hiking on an easy trail to the summit of Mount Tweedy, and when they were part way up, one of them went to the edge of the ridge to take a picture of the lake below. A slab of rock broke loose and carried the victim thirty meters or so down to a ledge, and a major rescue ensued. The newspapers picked it up as a mountaineering mishap. "Man Tells of Friend's Fall from 50-foot Cliff." This man was hiking on Falls Trail in Ricketts Glen State Park, Pennsylvania, and fell when the ice "creepers" he was using came loose. George Smith, a sports writer for *The Times Leader* in Wilkes-Barre, ran this headline shortly after: "Should we have the right to climb ice?" One idea put forward was to monitor everyone who goes into this park! There are many climbing areas like this, such as Joshua Tree National Monument and Devils Lake State Park, which hikers or spectators decide to attempt. When they get in trouble, the media and the public point to the sport as the culprit—or, just as bad, attribute some human characteristic to a peak or cliff, as in "killer mountain." We must do our best to dispel such myths, especially in areas where our sport is not well understood or accepted.

There are two fascinating accounts of self-rescue this year, and we appreciate the candidness of the individuals sharing their respective reports. There are also, as is not uncommon, some individuals who appear more than once in the narratives! We have an observation similar to Canada regarding the number of mishaps involving crevasses. We also saw a number of glissading problems this year. Finally, a comment on overdue climbers. There are numerous reports of overdue, and as we consider this common because of conditions or problems encountered, these do not go into the statistics unless damage occurs. We should remember that it is more common for accidents to occur as a result of trying to stick to a schedule than being late for the right reasons.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Peter Armington, Dennis Burge, Micki Canfield, David Essex, Erik Hansen, Bob Siebert, Thomas Scheuer, and Reed Thorne. The usual special thanks to George Sainsbury is made with even greater appreciation, as he has "retired" as our Northwest agent. Fred Stanley will take over, knowing as I do that George can never be "replaced." We also welcome Jim Yester to the committee, who is working on the Mid- and South Atlantic data.

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