

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

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

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

Canada: Several of the accidents in 1990 involved solo climbers, though not all of those can fairly be attributed to the soloing; some victims would likely have been in the same situation even with partners along. However, the usual loose understanding that “soloing” means “without partners” is often not the point at all, as an unroped climber who falls off a ledge or 30 meters down a crevasse to bedrock is hardly better off with a partner nearby than if he had been “soloing” (by that definition). On the other hand, soloists sometimes belay themselves, and if this is done correctly, it is vastly safer than being in an unroped party in the same terrain. In the accident sense, solo-type climbing includes most solo climbers plus all those in groups who are unprotected while exposed, and that is a dominant factor in climbing accidents. Of the five deaths reported this year, four were unroped, and the fifth was roped but not belayed. Of the remaining accidents, one involved rockfall, four were a result of inadequate protection or anchoring, four came from being roped but not belayed, and the rest were a result of not being roped up. Most of the accidents could have been averted or lessened by better protection.

We thank Tim Auger, George Field, Clair Israelson, Ian Kay, B. Kozachenko, Marc Ledwidge, Rick Ralf, Fred Stanley, and Lee Tibbert for submitting reports, and all the others who fortunately either had nothing to report, or whose reports did not fit our mountaineering criteria.

United States: “Two are better than one; because they have good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.” (Ecclesiastes, 4: 9 & 10) Now if some reference to the use of “adequate protection” could be found in this same—or an equivalent—source, the great percentage of preventive measures for this year’s contributory causes to climbing injuries and fatalities would be neatly summarized. Placing proper protection seems to be a continuing problem, and may have something to do with the proliferation of different kinds of devices for that purpose—as well as the increase in levels of route difficulty being attempted. But the rise in the injury and fatality rate which was the direct result of not wearing a helmet is somewhat bewildering. There are climbing areas where the use of head gear is recognized as an extremely good idea because of the geology, the routes, and the numbers of climbers in the

same vicinity. Yet these are the very places where the increase happened. Woe to him who hath no roof over his head when projectiles rain down, or when he flieth down a rock face unexpectedly...

There were some other interesting mountain related accidents which did not make the data or the narratives this year. Ken Phillips, the SAR Specialist in Grand Canyon National Park, sent four reports of accidents requiring rescue on technical rock terrain. Two cases involved stranded scramblers, with no injuries. The other two, which resulted in fatalities, were solo "climbers" (one in sandals) who had not indicated to anyone that they were going to engage in that activity. One was a member of a river trip, and it was reported that he was "fascinated by the sport." He had done many other short, free-solo climbs along the way before his twelve meter fall from a chimney. Again, these are the kinds of accidents which make the media with headlines accusing or at least implicating our sport as being the culprit.

One of the more interesting set of headlines this year included these: "Suspect tells his version of fatal fall. Wife excited about rappel try, he says;" and, "Wife's policies bought jointly, says man accused in fatal fall." This was a case where a man was accused of putting his wife in harm's way when he took her rappelling one evening and the anchor system he'd set up failed. He was eventually convicted of criminally negligent homicide. For more details, consult *The News Tribune*, Tacoma, WA, 2, 19-23, 1991.

The method of injured and deceased climber recovery shown on the front cover this year is becoming more prominent in certain geographic locations now. At a recent International Congress on Mountain Medicine held in Switzerland, I learned that out of Zermatt alone, there are 800 helicopter recoveries per year, and a doctor is in attendance every time. The rescue station there garages four helicopters, and the average time for delivery of a victim to a medical facility is twenty minutes from the time of call in. Every citizen pays an annual obligatory fee of twenty Swiss francs for this service, which has come to be a "standard" in the Alps. While the "insurance" is cheap, the fact is that people have come to count on—and expect—this kind of fast squad. There is certainly a great difference between rescue attitudes and services here and there. The question of climbers—and all backcountry users—taking responsibility for their own safety, care, and rescue was debated at the Congress, and must continue to be a topic of consideration for us all.

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 Sheuer, and Reed Thorne. George Sainsbury tried to retire, but couldn't resist being of help, as usual.

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