

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fifty-First Annual Report of the Safety Committees of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

Canada: Before moving to an overall view of the past year's Canadian accidents, there are two items of business I would like to mention. The first is the departure of Orvel Miskiw as Canadian editor. Orvel served as ANAM's Canadian correspondent for eight years, and the Alpine Club of Canada would like to thank him for the considerable effort he put into the position in that time. The second concerns the absence of the Canadian section in last year's publication due to production schedule difficulties. We are very happy to be back in this year's report, and apologize to any of last year's contributors who may have been concerned that their material was not included in the general publication. Statistics on last year's accidents are listed in the final sections of this year's report.

The frequency and severity of accidents reported in Canada over the past year have been consistent with a ten-year average, though there seem to be a few developments of note in terms of pattern of cause. Most striking is the increase in the number of people injured or killed in ice climbing accidents, but this is perhaps no surprise to anyone who climbs regularly in the Canadian Rockies (where most of these accidents have occurred). In the past few years there has been an obvious swell in the number of climbers on local waterfalls, and the increase in numbers may be the most direct and simple reason for the increase in accidents.

The second observation is that there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of climbers reported as "stranded." Whether this number reflects a decrease in the self-care capacities of climbers or an increase in climbers' ability to call in aid (through the carrying of cell phones, for example) is unclear, but the trend will be an interesting one to follow.

We thank the following people who contributed in various ways to this year's reporting: Tim Auger, Terry Barter, Will Devlin, George Field, Harry Fischer, Sylvia Forest, Gord Irwin, Martin Johansen, J.P. Kors, Marc Bedard, Marc Ledwidge, David Koonreeliusie, Sean Gesten, Darryl Paquette, Brad Sills, George Wallerstein, and Orvel Miskiw.

United States: This year seemed to be the year of many climbers being unable to self-arrest, either while on a "voluntary glissade" or after they slipped while climbing/descending. In most instances, a good belay would have been the best solution, as either the individuals were very new to glissading/climbing snow, or the conditions warranted it. Also in most cases, the runout was not very forgiving. These incidents accounted for over ten percent of the injuries.

The total number of accidents reported for the year is consistent with previous years, last year being an exception because only a few reports came forward for Washington. It has been pointed out before that not all the reports collected make it into the narratives.

There are a few reasons for this. First, the primary goal is to present descriptions and analyses that can be instructive to the readers. Second, there may be some human interest value—and even occasionally humor—that may suggest a lesson. Finally, the size of the report is designed to remain at a reasonable level. The hope is that such a policy will not discourage those who have a mishap from sending forward the particulars. While there are some contributors who indeed want to appear on these pages, there are others who clearly do not. Generally, I am impressed with the number of climbers who want to tell their stories so that others might not share the same fate. In this regard, the good news is that the report seems to be well received as an educational vehicle, even though there are no pictures or illustrations. A third printing of last year's edition suggests that interest in the subject matter is not waning.

There are many reports submitted that do not qualify as climbing accidents but may have interesting lessons to provide. A few of these are usually included. An example of one that was not included involved three 17-year-olds who decided to "go rappelling" on a 150-foot electrical tower. They were about ready to head home after one last rappel when the wind, at an estimated 30 mph, blew one of them into a coil. The 220,000 volt shock instantly burned off his shirt and harness, but he was able to sit on a cross beam over 100 feet off the deck for 45 minutes until rescued. He was successfully evacuated, but the second and third degree burns over 80 percent of his body resulted in his death two weeks later.

The concern here is that the inspiration for attempting this kind of feat may be generated from the media's recent fascination with climbing. Various venues—from desert towers to indoor walls—are being used for advertising, scenes for weekly television programs, and as whole segments for movies.

A couple of disturbing reports that one can only hope will not become a trend came from Seneca Rocks and Boulder Canyon. In the former, six climbers refused to help carry a litter down an easy part of the tourist trail, the technical part of the rescue having been completed. Their responses included: "I don't do that any more." "We're pretty tired." "I have to drive home." "We're in a hurry." In the latter location, a climber became angry when another climber was on "his" route and creating a hazard to his party. An altercation took place at the top. One climber was hospitalized with several lacerations caused by being struck with an ice ax. The attacker ended up in the Boulder County Jail.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals—with apologies for any omissions—for collecting data and helping with the report: Hank Alicandri, Aram Attarian, Micki Canfield, Hal Clifford, Greg Dillman, Ron Cloud, Jim Detterline, Renny Jackson, Tom McCrumm, Daryl Miller, Russell Peterson, Jim Schlinkmann, Steven Schmelzer, Jim Underwood, J. W. Wilder, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

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