LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Accident on Mount McKinley

On May 17th, a party of four from Anchorage, Alaska, and another party of four from Washington state, reached the summit of Mount McKinley. On the descent one of the Washington climbers slipped, resulting in a sliding fall for the entire party. The ensuing rescue was given nationwide publicity, including a writeup by *Life Magazine*. Because of the erroneous impressions given by the press about the accident, *Summit* has received permission from the Mountaineering Club of Alaska to reprint from their monthly publication, *Scree*, the daily account of events by Paul B. Crews. The picture of Mount McKinley was obtained through the courtesy of Bradford Washburn, Director of Science Park, Boston, Massachusetts. Dee Molenaar furnished the details outlined on the picture.

By Paul B. Crews

MAY 7, 1960

Doctor Rod Wilson, Helga Bading, Andy Brauchli and I left Anchorage on the 8:30 a.m. Alaska Railroad northbound, arriving at Talkeetna at 12:15. We were met by Don Sheldon, our pilot. Chuck Metzger, fifth member of our party, had preceded us and checked through our climbing gear with Mr. Bohlin, the Chief Park Ranger. He had been flown to the 8200-foot level on Kahiltna Glacier the day before and set up camp. Sheldon had also taken in our airdrop to the 10,200-foot level, so all of the preliminaries were out of the way. Within fifteen minutes of arriving at Talkeetna, I was on my way via Sheldon's Supercub to our first camp on the Kahiltna where Chuck was waiting. By 7:15 all five of our party were assembled on the glacier "shaking down" equipment for use during the next few days.

MAY 8, 1960

The weather was calm and clear with the temperature at 10 degrees F. when we got up at 6 a.m. Because of adjustments to packs, snowshoes, etc., it was 9:40 before we got underway. Due to acclimatization problems, we did not arrive at our airdrop (10,200 feet) until 3:15 p.m.

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We spent the rest of the day sorting out airdrop items and packaging them for transport to higher camps.

Two Japanese parties from Meiji and Waseda Universities had established basecamp nearby, and while all members were at higher camps, they had left quite elaborate, well-stocked camps.

The weather closed in at 7 p.m. and it snowed all night.

MAY 9, 1960

At 7 a.m. the temperature was at 12 degrees. The weather cleared at 9 a.m. and almost immediately the glacier became unbearable from the heat (about 60 degrees), without a breath of wind. We put on snowshoes and our packs and trudged up the well-flagged (by the Japanese) trail toward Windy Corner. We were sweltering victims of "glacier lassitude." At about 11,500 feet we ran out of new snow and onto hard packed snow and ice. We cached our snowshoes, put on crampons and continued up the glacier to a sheltered spot overlooking part of Peters Glacier. We dumped our loads at 1 p.m. at an estimated 12,000 feet and worked until 4 p.m. leveling a spot for tomorrow's camp. We then headed back down the glacier to our 10,200-foot camp.

MAY 10, 1960

The wind picked up during the night and blew with gusts up to 40 mph., but morning dawned clear and cold. We packed camp up to the 12,000-foot site and put up the tent by 1:30 p.m. Helga was not feeling well, so the rest of us left her at camp and carried the extra loads up to 13,000 feet where we cached them next to a pile of Meiji University supplies. When we arrived back at our 12,000-foot camp, Helga had supper waiting for us. The temperature was minus 10 degrees when we went to bed at 7 p.m.

MAY 11, 1960

It warmed up during the night to 17 degrees, calm and snowing. Since Helga, Rod and I were all suffering from altitude (headaches and upset stomachs), we did not start packing up the slope until 10 a.m. Helga was especially bothered, but we managed to carry camp up to 13,200 feet where four members of the Waseda Uni-

versity group were camped. They reported avalanche dangers just ahead. Leaving Helga behind to make camp, the rest of our party returned to the 13,000-foot cache and lugged the supplies up to about 14,000 feet, beyond Windy Corner. Because of poor visibility and snow conditions, we made another cache, and returned to the 13,200-foot camp about 5:15 pm. After a tea party with the Japanese we had supper and went to bed by 9 p.m.

MAY 12, 1960

We left camp about 10 a.m. The sky was clear and the temperature plus 4 degrees. We encountered 25–30 mph. winds rounding Windy Corner, but were through it to relatively calm weather in the big bowl by 10:45. Helga had been having an upset stomach for a couple of days and I decided when we reached our 14,000-foot cache at 11:45 that she was in no shape to travel. We pitched the two-man tent, put Helga in it with her sleeping bag and carried the rest of the camp on up to 14,400 feet where we arrived at 2 p.m.

Chuck and Andy immediately went back to get part of the cache and to bring Helga back with them. Rod and I leveled a campsite and made camp below the icewall and out of range of avalanches. Chuck, Helga and Andy arrived at 4:45.

MAY 13, 1960

Rod and I went down to our 14,000-foot cache and brought up the rest of our supplies. Andy and Chuck left at 10 with light loads to go up the icewall. They reached the top of the West Buttress (16,200 feet) at 4:45. They used the thousand feet of fixed rope the Meiji University group had installed, and estimated a saving of two days in time for our party. The wall was about fifty percent clear of snow and the step cutting in the exposed blue ice would have been tremendous.

Andy and Chuck returned at 5:30, at the same time that we received three visitors from the Meiji University group. We had another tea party, then to bed at 8:30.

MAY 14, 1960

Rod, Andy, Chuck and I left for the 16,200-foot level on the West Buttress at 9:30 with the rest of the supplies. We stopped at 15,000 feet to visit with the Meiji's at their camp, then went on to the top of the ridge, reaching our cache at 2 p.m. We returned to camp by 4:30, had supper, then carried camp up to 15,500 feet just below the fixed rope. We carved out a site on the lower lip of a huge crevasse, had tea and were in bed by 10:30. After a day of rest, Helga seemed to be in fine spirits.

MAY 15, 1960

We woke up to a noisy tent. The wind was blowing in gusts up to 30 mph. Helga was bothered by altitude sickness, so after getting all packed, decided against climbing today because of weather and sickness.

Andy and I dropped down to the Meiji camp for a visit and learned that the entire high camp (Meiji) was being brought down today—another reason for not climbing; they would want exclusive use of their fixed rope.

Don Sheldon came over about noon and dropped a lot of items on the glacier below at 14,400 feet. Later in the day four climbers arrived from the direction of Windy Corner and started gathering up supplies. We knew it must be the John Day party.

Our present camp was the first where we felt we had line-of-sight with the radio relay station atop Mount Susitna. Prior to this we had been hidden from the station by Mount Hunter. Accordingly, we got out our small portable Motorola, warmed up the batteries and made contact almost immediately. I called up Betty (my wife) at our Anchorage residence via phone patch, and passed on all of the news of our trip to date.

MAY 16, 1960

We started up the icewall at 10 a.m. with camp, arriving at top by 1 p.m. Andy and Chuck started up the West Buttress ahead of Helga, Rod and me, as Helga did not feel like climbing very fast. They were soon back down again, however; they had had some unfortunate luck—our cook kit had somehow come loose on one of the packs and was now halfway down Peters Glacier! Fortunately, we carried a second stove, but the loss was still disheartening. By the time we had recovered from the loss we discovered that the Day party had overtaken us.

After a short rest they passed us and went on up the ridge, where they camped at about 16,600 feet. Because of Helga's altitude sickness we made camp at 16,400 feet, just below their camp. Weather: Clear, calm. Temperature minus 17 degrees.

MAY 17, 1960

We got off to a late summit start. Helga was still suffering from altitude sickness and definitely could not make the summit in her present condition. We other four decided to make the summit try while the weather was good, leaving Helga in camp. Perhaps in a day or two, if she were to properly acclimatize, we would try again. When the decision was reached to climb without her, it was 10:40. As we left she mournfully took pictures of our departure.

We passed the empty Day camp about two hundred feet above ours. As we reached 17,000 feet and looked across the snowfield, we saw the Day party about half-way up Denali Pass. We climbed behind them, perhaps by an hour. They were following the Meiji markers, and adding some of their own, so we had no trouble in following. At about 6 p.m., just below the final ridge, we reached and passed them, and took our turn kicking and chopping steps. We finally reached the South Summit at 7:15, with the Day group right on our heels. The weather on top was clear, calm, with the temperature minus 30 degrees F.

Susumo Takahashi of the Meiji University group and one member of his party had previously carried a two-man Meade tent to the Summit and had camped overnight. They had also erected a new plastic pole at the summit, and had flown from top to bottom flags in the following order: U.S., Japanese, Alaskan and Meiji University. It made quite a colorful display at the top of the continent.

After numerous pictures were taken, we started the descent at 7:45 p.m. The Day party stayed behind for more pictures. We were back to Denali Pass at 9:30 and were on the 17,000-foot snowfield at 11. We noticed that Day's party was perhaps forty minutes behind us, descending a steep, crevassed section of wall.

Shortly thereafter, Rod looked around and found that the entire Day party was heaped up in a pile at the foot of the slope. They had just taken a fall of about five hundred feet. We were about three-eighths of a mile from them, but by shouting were able to establish that they were in trouble and wanted a tent.

Our party (as apparently was Day's) had reached a point of almost complete exhaustion. Andy Brauchli and I were at the moment apparently the least exhausted, so we hurried down the ridge to the Day camp and took down their tent, packing it on a board. Then, while Andy went on down to our camp to warm up the radio batteries in case we needed communication, I started back up the ridge with the Logan tent. At about 16,900 feet I met the Day party (without Day) descending the ridge. They were roped, but were suffering from head injuries and frostbite. Lou Whittaker seemed to be in good shape, but Jim Whittaker and Pete Schoening were apparently not aware of much and were in a state of shock.

In view of the fact that they could travel and that I had their tent, I suggested to Lou that they pick up their sleeping bags at their camp and drop the two hundred feet to our camp. Lou said they would but it was too much for them. They finally crawled into their sleeping bags (without tent) at their own camp.

When I got the tent up to Day, I found him in a sleeping bag, dressed warmly in down clothing and prevented

from sliding down the hill by a packboard and two ice axes. I leveled a tentsite around Day, slit a hole in the tent bottom and set the tent up over him, returning to our camp at 3:30 a.m. Weather: clear, calm, minus 15 degrees.

MAY 18, 1960

I awoke at 4:30 to find Rod getting ready to go up and see his patients. He had been so exhausted the night before that it was physically impossible for him to do more than return to camp. Now, with about three hours sleep behind him, he was impatient to be off. We discussed the situation and, as he left for the upper ridge, Andy, Chuck and I started getting the radio ready for an emergency call to Anchorage. The call was made about 6 a.m. and read as follows:

"All members John Day party suffered fall 11:30 p.m. May 17. Day injured seriously, probable broken leg. Needs air evacuation. Present location at 17,000-foot level top of West Buttress 200 yards from flat area. Can pack to flat area. Bring fresh batteries for Motorola Model H23-1 Handy Talky. Will standby your message at 8 a.m. and every 2 hours. Repeat, send batteries. Paul Crews."

The first call was made to John Johnston, chairman of the newly formed (only one month old) Alaska Rescue Group. Subsequent calls were handled by Hal Sherman who coordinated with the Military Rescue Coordination Centers at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Helga did not feel well at all, and we did not feel that she should be left alone in the tent. Chuck and Andy, therefore, went above to help the Day party, while I kept radio schedules every two hours.

Rod and Chuck returned at 12. Rod's report of casualties:

John Day—fractured left leg.

Pete Schoening—severe head injuries, frozen left hand.

Jim Whittaker—head injuries and frostbite.

Lou Whittaker—possible frostbite.

In the meantime, I learned by radio that an Air Force or Army helicopter was to pick them up in the afternoon. Chuck and I immediately climbed up to the Day camp at 16,600 feet and were able to get the Whittakers and Schoening to climb (despite injuries) back to 17,000 feet to their tent, the only logical helicopter pickup site. It took them about two hours to make the climb. Andy, Chuck and I stood by waiting to load John Day when the helicopter arrived. We knew that we would have to carry him about two hundred yards from the tent to the level landing site, but were afraid to move him until the last minute because of his broken leg. About 4 p.m. we

heard the chopper, but it flew by with no attempt to land. Twenty minutes later, Sheldon flew over and dropped batteries and medical supplies. The chopper never returned and at 5 p.m. Andy and I started down the ridge. Andy stopped at the 16,600-foot camp, loaded up and returned with the Day party's sleeping bags, stove, fuel, etc. while I went down to radio Anchorage of the situation and see what was keeping the helicopter away.

At camp, Rod was quite perturbed over Helga's condition. He felt that not only the Day party should be evacuated but that Helga should be also taken to a lower altitude immediately. Apparently the shock of the news of the accident above had not helped Helga's condition. This information was duly radioed in, together with a request for another tent and stove at the upper camp.

In the meantime, Rod packed up his sleeping bag and started the climb up to the 17,000-foot camp to stay the night with the Day party. At the next radio schedule I was informed that a civilian "Allouette" helicopter would be over at 6 a.m. Sheldon would show him where to land, and then he would shuttle the injured to the base of the mountain where Sheldon would ferry them out. I was also told that the Air Force would make an airdrop yet tonight.

Rod knew nothing of the airdrop when he left our camp and Chuck and Andy left for the lower camp when he arrived instead of waiting, and missed it. Two tents, a stove, fuel, oxygen and other supplies were dropped at 17,000 feet that we were unable to utilize until morning when we returned to the upper site. Chuck and Andy got down to the lower site at 12, dead tired. When they had left the upper camp at 11:30 p.m., Rod and all the Day party were in the Logan tent cooking. The airdrop arrived about midnight.

MAY 19, 1960

We got up at 4 so that Andy and Chuck could be on the ridge by 6 a.m. for the scheduled landing for the first helicopter. Sheldon went overhead at 6:20 with 'copter in tow. Nothing further happened until 8 when I discovered (by radio schedule) the 'copter had a portable radio No. 320. The Army copter buzzed lower camp for about 45 minutes but would not land because of turbulent air. I tried to contact the chopper on No. 320, but it was ineffective. He buzzed our camp, then went to upper camp about 9:30, made a number of passes but never landed. Notified Hal Sherman of this. I also told him that if the Army helicopter would stand by on a 24 hour basis we would notify them of favorable landing conditions. I went to upper camp at 11 right after Chuck came down, too cold to stay longer.

Before Chuck came down, he and Andy pitched the

two-man tent received in the airdrop the previous night. Peter Schoening wanted to get out of the larger Day tent, so Andy and I helped him move over to the small two-man tent. Andy took Rod's sleeping bag from the big tent and stayed with him all night. Adjacent to the two-man tent and received in the previous night's airdrop was a completely equipped inhalator. I tied it to Rod's pack-board and started for the lower camp. Arrived about 4 p.m. and Rod applied the entire one thousand liters to Helga. She absolutely refused to wear a mask so we covered her head with her parka and dropped the oxygen inside her sleeping bag. Rod felt it was helpful, but was dubious of any great results. The wind came up strongly about 6 p.m. although it had been gusty all day. It blew all night, diminishing by morning. I didn't sleep all night, waiting for a lull to get a chopper in. The wind also broke our only thermometer. Helga had become progressively worse. She was now incoherent and could keep nothing in her stomach.

MAY 20, 1960

About 3:30 a.m. the wind died down so I walked to the edge of the ridge with the radio and called Hal Sherman. I asked him when he could send the chopper as Helga should be evacuated immediately. He stated that the small chopper (that had attempted an earlier landing) had flown back to Fort Greely but that they were converting an H-21 to skis and that it would be here in about five hours. I called back at 4 a.m. and was told to get ready for an airdrop in about thirty minutes. It arrived at lower camp at 5 and we received akja, batteries and medicine for Helga in free fall. We also received a para-dropped package that landed somewhere 1500 feet down on Peters Glacier. I was told it was plasma for Helga that Ome Daiber had brought for her from Seattle. A similar drop at 6 included two akjas, and radio batteries which Andy brought down just in time to help us evacuate Helga.

As soon as we received the airdrop at the lower camp I called Sherman on the radio and asked about the choppers. He told me that the 'copters had been cancelled and that plasma had been included in the drop. We were to administer it to Helga immediately. He also said that there were now fifty men on the glacier below, being supported to 14,500 feet by helicopters. Rod said it looked like the end of Helga unless we got her down the icewall immediately. It was probably 1500 feet down to the para-drop and would take three hours to recover. It was also about six hundred feet down to the akja. Rod said that in his opinion getting Helga down the icewall was the only answer to save her. The plasma would have to be thawed, and at best, conditions were bad. I radioed

Sherman that they had better get the choppers up to Day to save him and the frozen limbs of Schoening. I then informed him that I was going to bring Helga down in the akja in view of the fact that we had chopper cover to 14,500 feet, directly below us.

Chuck and I dropped down to Peters Glacier to the akja and dragged it to camp. We loaded Helga and our sleeping bags in it, and with Andy's help (he had just returned from a night above with the Days), Chuck and I started down the icewall to 14,400 feet with Helga at 10 a.m. We got off the wall into softer snow at 15,500 feet, and Andy started the tiring climb back up to camp alone. The wind was dead calm during the descent, and it was extremely hot on the glacier. Helga, in heavy Bauer sleeping bag was suffering from the heat. She started to show signs of consciousness at 15,500 feet and indicated that she was hot. Chuck and I tried to cool her off as best we could and then continued on down the mountain. At the fixed rope we lowered the akja, using an ice axe anchor wherever possible, or with a carabiner brake anchored to the fixed line at a piton, or with a prusik on the line itself. We moved down a rope length at a time, anchoring the akja between rappels with a prusik to the fixed rope. Below the rope was softer snow and we used ice axe belays entirely.

At 14,400 feet we were met by John Johnston of the Mountain Rescue Group and Don Sheldon who had just landed his Piper Supercub for a new high altitude landing record. We loaded Helga into Sheldon's plane and he immediately took off (3 p.m.) for lower altitudes and a hospital. (Helga subsequently made a complete recovery within a week.)

Chuck and I were flown to the 10,200-foot level for the night. About 9 p.m. Link Lockett, a contract chopper pilot, in his Hiller helicopter was able to land and evacuate John Day from 17,000 feet. We also learned that a Cessna 180 with two aboard had crashed and burned at 17,000 feet.*

MAY 21, 1960

Chuck and I were flown from 10,200 feet to 14,400 feet, arriving at 8:30 to find the ground party encamped and preparing to climb.

We tied into a rope with Dee Molenaar of Seattle and left 14,400 feet at 9:30. We were to bring down the Whittaker brothers and our camp. (Link Lockett had picked off Schoening in the meantime.) We reached

16,400 feet, our old camp, at noon to find that Rod and Andy had already brought the Whittakers down this far.

After tea, Molenaar and three other rescue members who had climbed behind us, escorted the Whittakers down and off the mountain. Rod, Andy, Chuck and I broke camp. Our packs, including salvageable items of the Day party, weighed around 75 pounds each. Andy's pack exceeded 90 pounds, in addition he was towing Peter Schoening's pack like a sled. It must have weighed at least 50 pounds. With the load, it was a slow descent. An expected storm hovered over us as we started down the fixed rope with blowing snow (visibility 100 feet). We arrived at the 14,400-foot rescue camp at 5:15 in the midst of a blizzard.

Molenaar, several of the rescue group and the Whittakers had gone on down to a lower camp, but there were a total of ten of us remaining in two Army tents, and we camped out the storm at 14,400 feet.

MAY 22, 1960

The storm blew all day with gusts to estimated 60 mph. and temperature about plus 20 degrees. No one left the tents.

MAY 23, 1960

The storm let up about 4 p.m. after dumping two new feet of snow. There was one pair of snowshoes in camp, so as a party we were trapped. I climbed back up to 15,500 feet with the radio in hopes that we might request an airdrop of snowshoes; also for a flight out for one of the Seattle climbers, Ron Priebe, who was also a victim of altitude sickness and too weak to walk. This time we could not make radio contact.

MAY 24, 1960

Snow was still too soft to travel on, although stiffening a bit. We hoped that by tomorrow the snow would bear our weight. Also the avalanche danger at Windy Corner would be minimized.

Don Sheldon flew over and after returning to 10,200 feet, landed with snowshoes for us and flew Priebe out. We packed up camp, leaving 14,400 feet at 10 and arriving at 10,200 feet at 2 p.m.

An Air force H-21 helicopter took Rod to Talkeetna at 7 p.m.

MAY 26, 1960

Three Army H-2k's evacuated the entire rescue camp at 10,200 feet, and the party arrived in Anchorage at 6 p.m.

The retreat from the mountain was not in the script, but at least everyone was off the mountain.

**The men flying this Cessna were not part of the rescue group and had been told to stay away from the area.*