

Trail and Timberline
The Colorado Mountain Club
No. 660 December 1973

Accident Report: Denver Juniors San Juan Outing, Summer 1973

Truman P. Young III

On the morning of Thursday, August 23, 1973, the last climbing day of the Denver Juniors CMC summer outing to the San Juans, I was preparing to lead a small party up Knifepoint from our base camp in the Noname Creek meadow. Just before 10 a.m., I was approached by Mark Stanton concerning a climb of the "Slingshot" pinnacle one half mile directly above camp. It was standard procedure to clear all climbs through me or Frank Jones before signing out.

Mark's plan was for a four man party consisting of himself, Joe Chwirka, Tom Ohmart, and David Johns to climb the pinnacle by means of two 2-man ropes, following similar routes. However, it was my opinion that Tom and David were not experienced enough for such a climb (both had completed the CMC's basic school), so they didn't go. Both Mark and Joe had been through Intermediate School and were frequent climbers. Earlier in the summer, I had climbed the First Flatiron with Joe, doing a 5.6 route. Although I did not know Mark before the outing, he had proved himself to my satisfaction on several outing climbs. Just before I left, I admonished them to be careful because of our remoteness. I advised them that, if anything did happen and they were not back by nightfall, we would assume they had bivouacked and would not send out a search party until around 10 a.m. the next day, unless we heard from them. I then took my party up Knifepoint while Frank led a larger group up toward Heisspitz and Peak 4.

By 3:30 p.m., all climbers were back in camp with the exceptions of a three man party which left Frank's group (with permission) to climb Heisspitz, two people practice climbing across the creek, and Mark and Joe.

A little before 6 p.m. several sets of

three calls for help came from the area of the pinnacle. After figuring their location and realizing that they must be Mark and Joe, we replied with a double cooey and shouted that help was coming. We soon formed a rescue party, gathered equipment and headed across the river. The party from Heisspitz had just arrived and one of them joined us. The two people practice climbing had also heard the calls for help and also joined our party. Because they had been climbing in the area, they knew the best route up a central gully to the base of the pinnacle. There were now nine people in the rescue party.

When we reached the base of the pinnacle, we could see both Joe (standing) and Mark (sitting) on a ledge approximately 500 feet above us. We could communicate with them and Joe shouted down that Mark had taken a fall and was injured. From Joe we learned the following things about Mark's condition:

1. He had pain in the neck and back area.
2. He was conscious and stable.
3. He was mobile but not ambulatory.
4. He was in good spirits.

The time was 7:30 p.m. and evacuation on this date was impossible because it got dark around 8:30 p.m. The plan I formulated at this time was as follows:

1. A two man party would ascend to the scene immediately with bivouac gear and first aid equipment and spend the night.
2. Because an injury of the back and neck was involved, a helicopter would be needed for the evacuation. The length and ruggedness of the trail made carrying him out impractical and unsafe. Therefore, two people

would hike out that night and send a helicopter as soon as possible.

3. As early as possible the next morning, another roped party of two would climb up with a litter and more supplies. They would help the others lower Mark down to the base of the pinnacle. At this time, it was not known if the helicopter would be able to land directly beneath the pinnacle or if we would have to carry him all the way down to camp. Therefore, a few more people would be at the base of the pinnacle to help carry the litter. All of these people were to bivouac at the base of the pinnacle so that the rescue could be carried out before the helicopter arrived. Three people were sent down to bring back supplies, including sleeping bags, food, clothing and ice axes.

Following this plan, Jeff Cobb and I started up the pinnacle while Frank Johns and three others descended to camp. When they arrived at base camp, the three people went about gathering equipment while Frank and Steve Jurich prepared to pack out to a radio. Frank, Steve, Tina Jonas, and Rick Noll went down to the cabin at the lower end of the Noname meadow. Here they talked to Mike Elliot, in charge of a Colorado Wilderness Experience group. He had had a similar situation a month earlier and knew exactly where to go and whom to contact. After this was learned, Frank and Steve started down the trail and Tina and Rick returned to camp with the necessary information. The time was 8:30 p.m.

Both Frank and Steve had hiked the trail earlier in the week, so it was familiar to them. They arrived at the Animas river around 10:30 p.m. and began looking for the bridge that had been built earlier by some Outward Bound people and myself. After looking for half an hour unsuccessfully, they



*the finest in tour
ski equipment and
information . . .*

Boulder - 1975 30th

**Denver - Belcaro
Shopping Center**



**Colorado
Springs
131 So. Tejon**

MOUNTAINEERING, LTD.

decided to wait until morning, figuring that even if they did find it, it would be unsafe to cross the wet log bridge in the dark. Therefore, they both got a much needed rest.

They awoke around 7 a.m. Friday, found the bridge, and started down the narrow gauge railroad tracks. They walked the 11 miles to Tall Timbers in about three hours. There Judy Beggrow, the owner's wife, showed them the radio and how to operate it. Frank was then able to get in touch with Sky Choppers, Inc. The dispatcher said that the helicopter was out but would be back in an hour. She said it should get to Tall Timbers in about half an hour.

The helicopter arrived a little before noon and Frank was picked up to show the pilot the way. Steve continued to Durango. Because of an approaching rainstorm, the pilot took the helicopter out of the Animas canyon and along the Million Dollar highway. From there, Frank was able to spot Arrow and Vestal Peaks and could direct the pilot. They flew up Noname Creek and landed in an area near camp marked by orange objects (according to Frank's earlier instructions).

Here, they learned that Mark was being lowered at that time (those in camp had been observing the rescue operations through binoculars). Frank told the pilot that there was a good place to land below the pinnacle. Because of the weight, the pilot decided to go up alone, and pick Frank up after getting Mark. The helicopter took off, circled to gain altitude, and landed at the base of the pinnacle.

Meanwhile, this is what transpired on the mountain with Jeff and me, and Joe and Mark, on the evening of the 23rd and morning of the 24th. Carrying as much down, water, food, and other equipment as we could climb with, Jeff Cobb and I began climbing the pinnacle around 7:30 p.m. The climb was done in about a dozen short roped leads, the first and last being the only difficult ones. These two were 5.5-5.6,

and hindered by heavy packs and oncoming darkness. Joe gave me a much welcomed upper belay on the last lead, and we were all to the accident scene by 8:45 p.m. It was dark.

I immediately began an examination of Mark. He could answer all questions put to him, and was clear and coherent. His pupils were even and reacted to changes in light. He suffered sharp pains in his neck and upper back whenever he moved his head, but was comfortable when he held it still. He had also cut up his hands, bruised his left knee, and bloodied his nose; however, none of these injuries was serious.

I tried to determine the extent of his neck and back injuries. Mark had no numbness or tingling in his extremities, and no loss of coordination. From this, I surmised that his spinal cord was uninjured. An examination of the vertebrae, both by sight and touch, revealed no distortion and little or no tenderness except when the head was moved. Because of this, I guessed that the vertebrae too, were uninjured, and that he had only injured the muscles supporting his neck. However, as with all neck injuries, I had to assume a cervical fracture until proven otherwise. We made Mark as comfortable as possible and prepared to spend the night. My examination and diagnosis were greatly aided by **Medicine for Mountaineering**, which I had with me.

From my conversations with Joe and Mark, both at this time and later, I recreated the accident this way: They left camp around 10:30 a.m. and made their way up to the base of the pinnacle in about an hour. They encountered numerous route finding problems, had lunch in the early afternoon, and ascended a difficult wall at about 5:30, which appeared to be the crux of the climb. The summit ridge looked only one lead away. With ropes high, Mark began climbing on belay from Joe. The climbing was easy; about 40 feet up, Mark put in a nut to protect his passage over a small wall. The route

slacked off and he scrambled another 15 feet to a position beneath a ledge. A short mantle and he would be over. He tested his handhold; it moved, so he shifted to another. As he began to haul himself over, the boulder which formed part of his handhold came out and Mark with it. He tumbled backwards about twenty feet and came to rest when the rope wedged in a crack a few feet above the nut. During the fall, Mark lost his hardhat. Hardhats were required on all outing climbs, but Mark later explained that the chinstrap was bothersome, so he had loosened it. My guess is that the same jolt which injured his neck also whipped his hardhat off.

Joe, who was belaying both out of sight and out of the line of rockfall, heard the call of "falling" and saw Mark, his hardhat and a basketball-sized rock come into sight. When Mark stopped, he was hanging unconscious about 20 feet away. Joe hurried to his aid and lowered him to a comfortable position. Mark regained consciousness during this operation and assisted Joe in getting himself situated. After determining that Mark could not get down without assistance, Joe called down to camp for help.

Now, back to the bivouac. The night brought miserable weather, raining and lightning. All managed some sleep, aided by the extra clothing and rainwear we had brought up. Mark was put in a sleeping bag. Everyone spent the night "on dogleash" or tied in to the mountain.

We arose the next morning to hot Wyler's, which I prepared to ready ourselves for the work ahead. We then learned that Carney Chrisler, our sponsor, had spent the night at the base of the pinnacle with others, according to my original plan, but had in the morning sent everyone down to camp to await professional help.

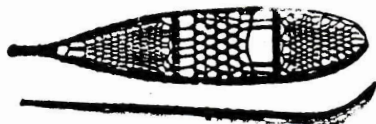
I knew that Frank would not ask for such assistance, because it would not arrive until, at the earliest, the 25th. Also, he trusted our ability to

carry out the rescue. I tried to communicate to Carney Cristler, but no headway was made. I finally came to realize that no one from camp would be coming up to help us. (I had decided the night before, after climbing up, that there were only one or two people who could lead the route anyway.) We would have to do it ourselves.

In order to minimize movement in Mark's neck and back, I devised two braces. The first was a pair of light wool pants tied firmly around the neck, immobilizing it without discomfort to Mark. Next, I tied a climbing sling across his upper back in the manner of a collarbone brace, making figure eights from shoulder to shoulder. In this setup Mark was able to stand and even walk with little or no pain, and without moving any part of his upper spine.

After consulting with the others, we decided to lower Mark down as soon

**Genuine Government
SURPLUS
Still Your Best Buy!**



SNOWSHOES

Including Children's Model,
prices starting at \$15.75

RENTAL SNOWSHOES AVAILABLE

- JACKET—Dacron fiber-fill 2, nylon
rip-stop shell\$24.95
- ROCK BOOTS—Italian made
(reg. \$55.)\$36.95
- GOB-STYLE SWEATER— navy-blue,
turtle neck, heavy-weight
knit\$4.95
- G.I. ICECREEPERS\$1.29 pr.



CORNER 18th and STOUT

**FREE PARKING 19th & STOUT
Open Weekdays 'til 9 p.m.**

as possible so that he could be down when the helicopter arrived. I discussed the situation with Mark. While moving him now could be dangerous if indeed his neck was broken, we agreed that two to three more days on the mountain would be much more serious. With uniform consensus, we prepared for the evacuation.

The method was this: while Mark was being lowered by Joe, I would assist him while being belayed by Jeff. After the first lead, it became obvious that this would work. Joe and Jeff rappelled down. From here until the last lowering, I knew that the belayers would be able to down climb, spotting each other. Therefore, I switched with Jeff so that Joe and I (the better rock-climbers) would do the downclimbing. In all, there were five lowerings, each around 100 feet long. The helicopter landed down at camp during the third and came up to the pinnacle during the fourth. The last lowering was vertical, and I lowered Mark down to Carney

without assistance. While Mark was being helped to the helicopter, Jeff, Joe and I rappelled down. By the time I got to the helicopter, it was just taking off. We gathered our things and descended toward camp. The time was about 1:30 p.m.

When the helicopter landed below, Frank left some messages for me with Tina and took off with the pilot and Mark. They flew to Durango Community Hospital. There Mark was washed up and X-rayed. From these, it was learned that Mark was not seriously hurt and it was probably a sprained neck. The doctors told Frank that more X-rays would be taken when the swelling went down. The hospital notified Mark's parents and they later called him. Frank reported the accident to the County Sheriff, then called Dave Bucknam, State Outings Chairman, and told him the situation. At this time, the rescue was officially over.

Steve got to the hospital that evening and he and Frank spent the night in

Winter Equipment

Specialty Shop

DISCOUNT TO CMC MEMBERS

- SKI TOURING
- TENTS
- BACKPACKING
- TOPO MAPS
- CAMPING
- DRY FOODS
- CLIMBING
- DOWN CLOTHING



AUREL MOUNTAINEERING

1074 S. Ironton, Aurora

364-5116

Just North of Buckingham Square

Durango. I brought the outing out Saturday afternoon and was met at the station by Steve and Frank. All cars but Frank's left for Denver Sunday, and he left Monday after making transportation arrangements for Mark. He flew to Denver on Tuesday.

I called Mark in the second week of September to find out his condition. He was completely recovered and playing soccer for Thomas Jefferson High School. The final diagnosis, as Mark told me, was pulled ligaments in the neck which forced one vertebra slightly out of line.

ANALYSIS

1. Mark should have been climbing more carefully, especially in the loose rock conditions.
2. The hardhat strap should have been tightened.
3. The late hour of the accident greatly hindered the evacuation. The party perhaps should have left earlier or abandoned the climb when it became too time consuming.

4. I should not have had people spend the night at the base of the pinnacle. The hour it could have saved would have been greatly overshadowed by the lack of a good night's sleep and a hot breakfast.
5. Carney should have consulted me before sending the people down. He did not fully understand the situation.
6. Communication should have been better.
7. The rescue was not perfect, but it was successful.

At this time, let me congratulate all those involved in the rescue. I would like to single out Frank Johns, my co-leader, who handled all the outside arrangements and helped to prepare this report, Joe Chwirka, who spent 30 hours on the mountain in the rain and then assisted in the rescue, Mark Stanton, who never complained and did everything in his power to help us, and Jeff Cobb, whose selfless assistance made the difference.



WILDERNESS OUTINGS Adventure in Distant Places

East Africa, Turkey,
Patagonia, Ecuador,
Galapagos, Kashmir,
Hunza, Bhutan, Nepal, Peru

Send for 1973 Brochure

MOUNTAIN TRAVEL

1398 Solano Avenue
Albany CA 94706