

# ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

INCLUDING CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

TWENTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SAFETY COMMITTEE  
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been predicted for later in the day. The two climbers wore cotton jeans and cotton flannel shirts. The East Face of the "Third" is an easy and popular route — 800 feet of fourth class climbing protected by large belay bolts set at 120-foot intervals. Franks and Jenks may have reached the top and been unaware of the easy and short rappel off the back side. Or they may have been turned back by weather or darkness before reaching the summit. In gathering storm they began rappelling down the East Face, which is difficult with a single rope because of the distance between belay bolts and the lack of other anchors. About 400 feet above the start of the climb, they set a rappel anchor with a web sling over a flake. Jenks, a complete beginner, either rappelled off the end of the rope or lost his footing while attempting to downclimb after the rappel. He tumbled to his death. At about 10 p.m. the climbers were reported overdue, and simultaneously shouts were heard from the Flatiron. A Rocky Mountain Rescue team made vocal contact with Franks, who said that his friend had fallen and that his feet were numb. It was impossible to hear more in conditions of storm and heavy snowfall. It took the rescuers about two hours to reach Franks, climbing with crampons on "easy" rock whose difficulty was increased to 5.7 and 5.8 and which was largely unprotected. They found Franks dead. He, too, had fallen, though the distance is not known, and sustained injuries to his abdomen. (Sources: J. R. Herrington, W. G. May.)

*Analysis:* Franks had some climbing experience, Jenks was a beginner. Their level of experience and their equipment were not unusual for persons attempting the Third Flatiron in good conditions. But what suffices to ascend the Third becomes completely inadequate to descend it on rappel. Both climbers knew of the approaching storm which forced them to try to get off the face.

**Colorado, San Juan Mountains.** Personnel: participants in the summer outing of the Denver Junior group of the Colorado Mountain Club. August 23rd was the last full day of the outing. Mark Stanton and three friends approached me (Truman P. Young, III) about climbing the "Slingshot" pinnacle directly above our camp in Noname Creek meadow. I turned down two of the party as not experienced enough, but gave permission to Mark and Joe Chwirka, who had both completed the C.M.C. Intermediate School. Around 6 p.m., when most people were back in camp, several sets of three calls for help were heard from the pinnacle. A rescue party of nine reached the base at 7:30 and saw Joe (standing) and Mark (sitting) about 500 feet above. We learned that Mark had fallen, had pain in the neck and back area, was conscious and stable, was mobile but not ambulatory, and felt in good spirits. Only one hour of daylight remained, so an evacuation was not possible that day. I decided that a two-man team should ascend immediately with first aid equipment and bivouac gear. Another twosome would hike out that night to summon a helicopter, which seemed indicated by the neck and back injury and by the long and rugged trail over which we would otherwise have to carry Mark. Finally, at first light in the morning, another twosome should ascend the pinnacle with a litter and other evacuation equipment. Following this plan, Jeff Cobb and I started up the pinnacle. Frank Johns and Steve Jurich started the hike out. They crossed the Animas River the next morning and hiked eleven miles in three hours to a radio.

Hindered by heavy packs and oncoming darkness, Jeff and I climbed to the accident scene. The first and last leads were the hardest — 5.5 or 5.6 — and at the top we were grateful for an upper belay from Joe. I found Mark clear and coherent, able to answer all questions I put to him. His pupils were even and reacted to light. He suffered sharp pains in his neck and upper back when he moved, but was

comfortable when he held still. Mark had no numbness in his extremities, and no loss of coordination, from which I surmised that his spinal column was uninjured. His vertebrae were undistorted and not tender except when the head moved. From this I guessed that he had injured only the muscles in his neck. As with all neck injuries, however, we had to assume a cervical fracture until proven wrong. We made Mark comfortable and settled down for the night. My examination and diagnosis were greatly aided by a copy of *Medicine for Mountaineering*. During the night we had miserable weather — rain and lightning, Mark was in a sleeping bag, and everyone was tied "on dogleash" to the mountain.

In the morning we learned that, contrary to plan, our sponsor had sent everyone down to camp to await professional assistance. Attempts at communication failed. Finally we realized that no one would be coming to help us (in any case there were only one or two who could have led the route), so we would have to do it ourselves. I devised two braces for Mark's neck. The first was a pair of wool pants tied firmly around, 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 brace Mark was able to stand and even walk a little without moving his upper spine. While lowering Mark would be dangerous if his neck were indeed broken, he agreed that two or three more days on the mountain would be more serious. The method was this: one person assisted Mark down, and both were belayed separately from above. On the easier pitches Joe and I, the better rock climbers, belayed and downclimbed. There were five lowerings, each of about one hundred feet. The helicopter landed at the base of the pinnacle during the fourth. The helicopter took off with Mark at 1:30 and flew him to Durango, where X-rays showed a sprained neck. After the swelling went down the final diagnosis was pulled ligaments in the neck which had forced one vertebra out of line. (Source: Young.)

*Analysis:* Later conversations reconstructed the accident. On what appeared to be the final lead Mark went up about forty feet on easy rock and put in a nut to protect his passage over a small wall. Then he scrambled fifteen feet to a ledge which he could mantle over. His first handhold moved under pressure, so he shifted to another. As he was hauling himself up, the boulder that formed part of his handhold came out. He fell backward about twenty feet and stopped when the rope wedged in a crack a few feet above the nut. During the fall he lost his hardhat, whose chinstrap he had loosened because it was bothersome. Mark was hanging unconscious about twenty feet away from Joe. Joe lowered him to a comfortable position, Mark regained consciousness, and after determining that Mark could not get down alone Joe called for help.

Mark should have been climbing more carefully on loose rock, and his hardhat strap should have been tightened. The late hour of the accident prevented a prompt evacuation. The party might have left earlier or abandoned the climb when it became too time-consuming. I should not have asked people to spend the night at the base of the pinnacle; the hour's hiking time saved would have been overshadowed by the lack of good sleep and a hot breakfast. Our sponsor should have consulted me before sending people down to camp; he did not fully understand the situation. The rescue was not perfect, but it was successful. Joe Chwirka spent thirty hours on the mountain in rain and then assisted in the rescue. Mark Stanton never complained and did everything in his power to help. (Source: Young.)