1980 MOUNTAINEERING SUMMARY

MOUNT McKINLEY NATIONAL PARK

For much of the past summer, as climbers approached the summit area of Mount McKinley, they were tragically reminded of the difficulties and dangers of the climb by the sight of two frozen bodies lying in the snow. The two, a German couple, had climbed to the summit earlier in the summer. They appeared exhausted and in trouble at that time, but they refused the assistance offered by another party on the summit, and it was the last time they were seen alive. On their descent, they apparently reached a point where they could no longer continue moving, and they sat down to die. We can only surmise that they died as a result of exhaustion, dehydration, exposure to altitude, and hypothermia. Perhaps it is simpler to say that they died because they had over-estimated their abilities to cope with the altitude, the cold, and the weather of Mount McKinley.

It was another year of too much death and too many accidents on Mount McKinley. A party of three Canadians and one American climber disappeared on an ascent of the Cassin Ridge route. After it became apparent that they were overdue, an extensive search was conducted but no sign was ever found of them. Clues indicate that they may have been buried in a large avalanche as they travelled up the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier before they ever got to the Cassin Ridge. Other climbing parties have had narrow escapes from avalanches on the Northeast Fork, and many have realized its dangers. It has been called the "Valley of Death" by climbers who have seen large avalanches fill the entire width of the glacier. Many climbers have travelled the Northeast Fork in recent years to approach the popular West Rib and Cassin Ridge routes. Those who do so in the future must be aware of the risks involved.

Two other climbers were killed in separate incidents on Mount McKinley. A German climber slipped and fell to his death while descending on the steep slope below Denali Pass. He and his three companions were not roped together at the time of the fall.

Later in the summer, a group of four Czechoslovakian climbers attempted the Muldrow Glacier route. They travelled very fast and established a high camp at 16,000 feet (4,900 meters) only ten days after leaving Wonder Lake. One of the four was not feeling well and stayed in the camp while the other three started out for the summit. Only one of them made it to the top. The other two became separated and quickly succumbed to the altitude.

They were found suffering from severe cerebral edema, by other climbers. They were assisted to a lower elevation where a helicopter was able to land. Their partner, descending from the

summit, did not realize that the two had been rescued. He returned alone to their high camp to await the return of the two who he thought were still above him. He found the fourth member in worsening condition and unwilling or unable to eat or drink. After several days, the climber died. The remaining member of the team, who had achieved the summit but at a terrible cost, was finally evacuated by helicopter. Only then did he learn that his two partners were not somewhere above him on the mountain, but were recovering in a hospital in Anchorage.

Some other fine climbs were made on adjacent peaks. An Irish climber and a Swedish climber made the fist ascent of the North Buttress of Mount Hunter. This difficult route had been attempted at least 15 times in recent years. An American group made the first winter ascent of Mount Hunter in the difficult Lowe/Kennedy route. Two British climbers completed a first ascent on the Southeast Face of Mount Huntington, and two Germans put in a new route on the North Face of West Kahiltna Peak.

As in past years, climbers from many countries travelled to Alaska to climb on Mount McKinley and other peaks in the Alaska Range. This year, climbers came from Australia, Austria, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, and West Germany.

The year of 1980 was also a year of controversy and change for mountaineers and mountaineering in Mount McKinley National Park. For much of the year, the regulation of mountaineering within the park was a popular and often bitter subject of debate in climbing magazines and between climbers. The object of the debate was a proposal from the park to modify the existing regulations in order to eliminate the requirements that all climbers on Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker submit signed physician's statements and that parties climbing both peaks no longer be required to carry two-way radios. The original proposal was modified in a small --but very significant-- way after discussions with local climbing groups and with climbers from all over the world. Finally, on November 25, a new regulation was adopted. It states that "Registration is required in advance on a form provided by the Superintendent for climbing Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker." This regulation refers only to those two peaks. It means that registration is not mandatory on other peaks within the park, although on certain peaks, a backcountry permit will be needed. The regulation refers only to Mount McKinley National Park. At no time did the proposals refer to other mountain ranges in the state of Alaska, as some climbers were led to believe. Even some of our bitterest critics said that they would support a registration system that was voluntary. It is voluntary for all but two peaks in the park which is as it always has been. The only change was in the deletions of the radio and physician's statement requirements.

Comments during the debate came not only from climbers who wanted all regulations abolished. Due to an unfortunate circumstance of timing, a public comment period was scheduled this summer just after several of the more serious climbing accidents occurred on Mount McKinley. The majority of the comments received suggested that not only were the existing regulations needed, but that more should be adopted to prevent such accidents.

We do not feel that a two-way radio is any less necessary for climbers than in the past. However, with the easier availability of Citizen's Band radios, and the greater number of climbers on most of the routes, the need for regulation is not as great. We expect that most parties will continue to carry a radio with them, as it may be their only link with assistance in case of an emergency.

Two other deaths occurred on nearby Mount Dan Beard when a cornice apparently broke beneath two young American climbers. Their bodies were found two thousand feet below where they had fallen.

Many other climbers were involved in less tragic incidents. In all, there were sixteen search and rescue operations, which cost the National Park Service (and thus the American taxpayer) nearly $48,000. Altitude problems (pulmonary and cerebral edema), severe frostbite, and falls continue to be the most common incidents resulting in rescues. In addition, other accidents often occur which may not require a rescue. We know of at least 41 cases of frostbite, 27 of which were serious enough to warrant hospitalization or the attention of a physician. We assume that there were more cases of which we did not hear. This year, there was more than the normal climbing activity in April. Nearly one in five climbers on Mount McKinley in that month suffered from frostbite. April may have more clear weather than in the summer, but it is also much colder and the winds can be much stronger.

Although record numbers of climbers came to Mount McKinley this year, poor weather and lower success rates seemed to predominate.

Three years ago, in 1977, 80% of all climbers on the West Buttress made it to the summit. This year, fewer than half were successful. Of the 659 climbers who attempted Mount McKinley by all routes, only 283 made it to the top. Of the 30 climbers on Mount Foraker, 13 were successful.

In spite of the bad weather and the accidents, some important new climbs were completed, but even one of these ascents was marred by a problem. An American and a British climber teamed up to complete a new route on the Southwest Face of Mount McKinley near a route attempted by a Japanese party in 1979. The two climbed very fast but ran out of food on the way up the route. They continued to 19,000 feet (5,800 meters) where they joined the

Cassin Ridge route. They were unable to proceed from there until another party of two Americans arrived to assist them. Two of the four climbers (one from each party) continued up to the Kahiltna Horn and descended immediately from there down to the West Buttress route since the climber from the Southwest Face was suffering from frostbitten feet.

The two climbers remaining on the Cassin Ridge finally realized that they could not go up any further and that they could not be rescued from that location. Thus they began a difficult, epic descent of the Cassin Ridge. The climber from the Southwest Face was suffering badly from the altitude and from a lack of food. But with the help of an airdrop of food at one point and the help of some other climbers on the Ridge, they were finally able to make the descent to the Northeast Fork Glacier. On the glacier, the same climber, who was still suffering from the effects of cerebral edema and from a severe case of immersion foot, received a broken wrist and a possible concussion in a serious fall. He finally reached the Kahiltna Base Camp, carried in a rescue litter.

One other new route on Mount McKinley was climbed without any noteworthy difficulties. A large Czechoslovakian party completed a new line on the South Face between the American Direct and the South Buttress routes.

Another change occurred late in the year when, on December 2, President Carter signed into law, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. One immediate change in the Act is that Mount McKinley National Park and Denali National Monument have been merged together and renamed Denali National Park and Preserve. Other than the name change, there should be little, if any, effect on mountaineers in the park. Aircraft landings will continue to be allowed on the Kahiltna Base Camp and at other traditional landing areas.

The mountain itself retains the name of Mount McKinley, even though it has been proposed for many years that its name be changed to Denali. At a December 11 meeting of the Board of Geographic Names in Washington, D.C., the board deferred on a decision to rename the peak Denali. Apparently there will be no more action on the proposed name change at least until June. However, the name Denali National Park is official at this time.

For further information, please contact:

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MOUNTAINEERING SUMMARY 1980

	Expeditions	Climbers	Successful
Climbers			
Mount McKinley			
West Buttress	99	492	210
Muldrow Glacier	8	45	28
Cassin Ridge	11	34	5
South Face	4	10	5
West Rib	10	37	24
South Buttress	6	20	8
Pioneer Ridge	1	3	3
East Buttress	1	2	0
Wickersham Wall	1	3	0
Southwest Face	1	2	0
Traleika Spur	1	11	0
(Total Mount McKinley)	143	659	283
Mount Foraker	8	30	13
Mount Russell	1	2	0
Mount Crosson	3	16	0
Mount Silverthrone	2	9	9
Mount Mather	1	4	0
Mount Brooks	3	7	2
Kahiltna Peaks	1	2	2
Mount Hunter	11	34	5
Mount Huntington	9	26	4
Moose's Tooth	5	11	0
Rooster's Comb	2	4	4
Mount Dan Beard	4	12	10
Peak 12,380'	1	3	3
Ruth Gorge Peaks	6	23	4
Other peaks	7	19	13
GRAND TOTAL	207	861	352