

Operation Mt. McKinley: Mountain

—A step-by-step account of the part Seattle-area men played in the recent Alaskan episode

By H. N. BELANGER

WEDNESDAY, May 18, members of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council went about their daily tasks with no inkling of events brewing in Alaska that, for many of them, would make the next few days one of the most strenuous periods of their lives.

One of the founding members, Ome Daiber, a contractor, was at work in the North End when he received a telephone call.

Paul Williams, chairman of the Seattle M. R. C., told Daiber he had heard that a climbing party on Mount McKinley, including three men from the Seattle area, had suffered an accident.

A meeting of the M. R. C. was scheduled for that evening. Daiber and Williams decided to call a special session for operational leaders to plan possible Seattle participation in the rescue effort.

Thus, the most complicated rescue operation undertaken by the M. R. C. was under way.

FIRST thing to do, Williams and Daiber agreed, was to assess the situation at McKinley. They held a



CAMPSITE ARRANGEMENTS high on the flank of Mount McKinley were made by Mountain Rescue Council mem-

bers a short time after they were transported to the peak by light plane and helicopter.—Photo by Paul Williams.

ing and Hal Sherman, members of the 3-week-old mountain-rescue unit in Anchorage, 170 miles from Mount McKinley.

The Anchorage men said there appeared to be four litter cases on the mountain at an elevation of 17,500 feet. This information had come by radio from an Anchorage climbing party aiding the injured.

Daiber and Williams offered the services of Seattle's M. R. C., if needed.

The Seattle council's meeting was at State Patrol district headquarters on Dexter Avenue, where much of its equipment is stored. The meeting just had begun when word came from Anchorage—"You're needed."

It was fortunate that the council meeting was at State Patrol headquarters. There the M. R. C. could put into service four telephones besides the two at Daiber's home, the council's communications center, in rounding up personnel able to go to Alaska.



PAUL
WILLIAMS

OME
DAIBER

"We had to get our men fast and have lots of them," Daiber said. The council succeeded, on both counts.

THE earliest commercial plane flight leaving Seattle-Tacoma International Airport for Anchorage was at 1 o'clock the next morning. At that time, six hours after the M. R. C. received the call for help, 16 men trained for mountain rescues were placed aboard the plane.

Making sure the men would be equipped to stand the rigors of the high elevations and extreme temperatures of North America's tallest mountain was a major accomplishment for so short a time.

"One man was named to gather equipment," Daiber said. "We didn't care where he got it, as long as he did. Another man was sent to arrange for radios. The State Patrol and the Forest Service picked up litters for us at White and Stevens Passes.

"In addition," Daiber said, "for McKinley, the special-equipment requirements included insulated boots for temperatures that dropped to 30 or more below zero.

"We had to have snowshoes for every man climbing. They were used up to and above 12,000 feet, and our first evacuation team at 14,000 feet had to have snowshoes dropped to them after a storm had left enough new snow for them to be needed.

"Other equipment needs were face masks to be used in below-zero weather for preheating the air breathed, heavy mittens, tents and insulating material for use under sleeping bags."

WILLIAMS was in charge of the first group of men to leave Seattle. In all, the M. R. C. put 53 men on Mount McKinley. They were from Portland, Ore., Ellensburg, Brem-

erton, Tacoma and the Seattle-Everett area.

While preparations were under way to send off the first group, arrangements were being conducted to have subsequent groups leave on Military Air Transport Service flights from McChord Air Force Base in Tacoma.

Capt. Raymond E. Costello at McChord, with whom the M. R. C. has worked closely on other rescue missions, called the Fourth Air Force Search and Rescue Center at Hamilton Air Force Base in California and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C., to clear the way for Air Force participation.

AT 1:30 p. m. Thursday, May 19, Daiber and 15 more M. R. C. men took off from McChord on a military cargo plane of the 1705th M. A. T. S. group. In all, Costello said, the Air Force flew 37 rescue personnel and their equipment to Anchorage in three flights.

On arrival at Anchorage, Daiber learned that the injured men were at about 17,200 feet on the mountain. At least two would need maximum aid in getting off the mountain.

A woman member of the Anchorage climbing party, Mrs. Helga Bading, wife of Peter Bading, was in camp at about 16,000 feet, suffering from extreme mountain sickness.

"A base camp for the rescue teams was being established at 10,200 feet by Anchorage climbers" Daiber said, "and the shuttling of men from Anchorage to Talkeetna and from there to a gravel bar on a river, near the base of the mountain, was being made."

Bush pilots, civilian helicopter pilots and Army and Air Force personnel and aircraft were being used in the shuttling service, with the weather remaining stable.

"From an aerial survey of the

mountain and consideration of the problems involved, it was determined to drop equipment and supplies at the most logical campsites at 12,000, 14,000 and possibly 16,000 feet," Daiber said.

Williams was placed in charge of the operation on the mountain, with Daiber overseeing the distribution of personnel, equipment and supplies to the mountain and co-ordinating the entire operation.

SHUTTTLING of men and supplies took up most of Friday. At the 10,200-foot base camp on the mountain, rescue teams were chosen to begin the grueling trip upward.

"At least one or more of the men on each rescue team had been on McKinley, or bigger mountains, before," Daiber said.

The lead team sent from the 10,200-foot camp had Dee Molenaar, veteran of Karakoram climbs, as leader, and included George Senner, Gene Prater, Gary Rose, Walt Gonnason and Dick Wahlstrom.

As follow-up to this team, a second group was ready to move out with Williams in charge.

"Of great assistance in moving up from base camp were steps cut in the ice and snow up to about the 13,500-foot elevation by a party of Japanese," Daiber said. This party earlier had climbed the mountain and had been on its way out.

FRIDAY, May 20, was a day of major achievement. As the first team of M. R. C. personnel struggled upward, from 10,200 feet, two members of the Anchorage party moved cautiously downward from 16,200 feet with a litter bearing Mrs. Bading.

The M. R. C. party was about an hour's travel below the 14,000-foot elevation when the Anchorage men,

Rescue Council's Biggest Project

Paul Crews and Charles Metzger, reached a point a short distance above them, where Don Shelton, Talkeetna pilot, could land his light plane and fly Mrs. Bading to safety.

Friday also saw the successful evacuation of John Day, Oregon rancher, from the emergency camp at the scene of the accident by Link Luckett, helicopter pilot.

These events did not signify the end of the M. R. C. effort, however. An approaching storm made it un-

(See today's Rotogravure Pictures for photos of training operations by Mountain Rescue Council members at a recent two-day conference on Mount Rainier.)

likely that favorable weather for air evacuations would continue for long.

As ground-rescue teams continued to push their way up the mountain-side, it was determined that all non-essential personnel at the 10,200-foot camp should be withdrawn to make room there for the climbing teams when they returned.

SATURDAY, May 21, was another productive day, as Luckett again pushed his 'copter to 17,500 feet and rescued Peter K. Schoening of Seattle, who had been injured with Day when their four-man party took a 400-foot fall.

As the weather deteriorated seri-

ously, the two remaining members of the party, Louis and James Whittaker of Redmond, began to move down from the high camp, assisted by members of the Anchorage group who had stayed with them since the accident.

The first team of Mountain Rescue personnel met the descending climbers at about 16,500 feet at 1:30 p. m. Saturday.

"The retreat down the mountain for M. R. C. men began at that point," Daiber said. The mountaineers reached the 13,500-foot elevation before the approaching storm caught them and forced them to camp.

The storm lasted through most of Monday, May 23, and it was late Monday when the party could be flown from base camp to Talkeetna.

Except for retrieving equipment and participating in numerous reprises of the operation, the Mountain Rescue Council's participation in the Mount McKinley undertaking was at an end.

ONE of the questions that has been asked is why there was the tremendous expenditure of time and energy in a ground-rescue operation, when planes and helicopters succeeded in snatching the seriously injured from the mountain.

The answer is that the rescue project had to proceed under the assumption that planes and helicopters



THREE FOCAL POINTS in the high-altitude drama of the Mount McKinley rescue were, 1. at 17,500 feet, where a party of four took a 400-foot fall; 2., where Mrs. Helga Bading lay critically ill with mountain sickness at about 16,000 feet, and 3., the Kahiltna Glacier, where rescuers based their ground approach to the accident site.

would have extreme difficulty in operating at the elevations involved, and, also, the weather would not continue favorable for flying.

Two climbers of Mont Blanc in France lost their lives in 1957 under

similar circumstances, when too much reliance was placed on aircraft to effect a rescue.

Officials of M. R. C. were determined that no such tragedy would occur on Mount McKinley.