

# THE KILLER WITH ICY FINGERS

by WENDY CROSS

Hypothermia. It's a long, rather clinical-sounding word. Do you know what it means? You should—it's something every skier should know about, because none of us know when we might have to face it, and unless we know exactly how to combat it, hypothermia is a swift, deadly killer. It strikes most frequently, and most effectively, above the snow-line.

Hypothermia is a word which you probably won't find in most dictionaries, but it has a common synonym—exposure. It is the word which medical men use to describe the condition in which the body temperature drops below normal. It is an insidious condition which often passes unnoticed by victim or observer until it is too late. In extreme conditions it can kill in little more than an hour.

How many times have you read the words, "He died from exposure?" All too often the Australian Alps with their open plateaux, swept by icy winds, claim victims of hypothermia. Some of the deaths have been terrifyingly sudden. All of them could probably have been avoided if the victims had been aware of their danger, and known what life-saving measures to take.

Victorian skiers remember September 4, 1965, as the day on which the state's langlauf champion, Charles Derrick, died only one mile from the end of a 50-mile cross-country trek. Charles, who was a fit 27, was attempting to break his own record for the trip from Mountain Creek near Mt. Bogong, to Hotham Heights. The weather turned bad soon after he began his trek, but Weather Bureau reports said it was not extremely cold in the area at that time. Yet searchers found Charles Derrick lying exhausted and unconscious on the windswept top of Mt. Luch hours after he should have reached the nearby Hotham Heights Hotel. He died—from hypothermia—soon afterwards.

Charles Derrick was a very experienced cross-country skier. He knew that fatigue and hunger (he took no emergency rations with him) were contributing factors to hypothermia and he knew that death was in the icy fingers of the wind which howled across the open ridges, yet like most exposure victims he was unable to recognise the symptoms in himself. And he died.

Three years later, in August 1968, skiers throughout Australia were appalled by the death at Thredbo of a 14-year-old boy and his 12-year-old sister. The youngsters, Kathy and Ian Baker, went out skiing in a near-blizzard with temperatures barely above freezing point. They lost their way near the top of Merritt's Spur, about a mile

from Thredbo Village and took off their skis to struggle through deep snow drifts before Ian collapsed in a frozen creek bed. Kathy struggled on alone for another forty feet before she, too, succumbed to hypothermia. Death for both children came swiftly and there was no hope of reviving them by the time searchers found the bodies about seven hours later. A doctor said they died from "extreme exposure".

At Mt. Buller during 1970, there were three full-scale searches for missing skiers, all within the space of a few weeks. All three survived. Two of them knew what they were doing. The third was just lucky . . . very lucky.

Honeymooner Thomas Wisinger, 25, lost his way in heavy fog near Mt. Buller's Summit. Rather than risk exhaustion, he dug a hole in the snow and slept for a few hours before making his way downhill in the direction of the Mt. Buller Road, where he was picked up by searchers. Thomas Wisinger had spent 18 hours in temperatures as low as 34 degrees, but he used his common sense—and survived.

A few weeks earlier, a doctor with many years of skiing experience to stand him in good stead, had lost his way below Shaky Knocks run—again in heavy fog. He was considerably closer to the Mt. Buller Road than Wisinger had been, and he knew he was lost, so he applied the same principle as Wisinger, and instead of wasting his strength in a vain attempt to find his way back to the village, he headed straight downhill, and a few hours later, walked out on to the road unhurt.

Kerry Outerbridge, whose disappearance on July 25 sparked off a massive ground and air search, is extremely lucky to have survived his ordeal. Indeed, when a rescue party reached him two days later, the young medical student was dangerously close to death. Kerry was skiing alone (always a risky undertaking) when he crashed on one of the icy trails which plunge off Buller's Summit. Unnoticed by anyone, he tumbled about half a mile down the mountain, suffering head, leg, chest and shoulder injuries. It was hours later that Kerry regained consciousness in the darkness and bitter cold. He was in pain and dazed from his head injury, but more by instinct than conscious thought, he knew it was important to keep warm. He straightened his feet and began moving downhill, away from the snow. Eventually, he took shelter beneath a log—just as Mick Hill and Cleve Cole had done in 1936 following their disastrous climb up Bogong and subsequent descent 180 degrees off-course. Cleve Cole was in fact beyond saving,

delirious with pain, hunger and exhaustion, and he died soon after being rescued by a search party. Mick Hull though, did survive, albeit minus a few of his toes through frostbite.

But to return to Kerry Outerbridge. After his night under the log, he got on the move again, and though in pain, and still half-delirious, he managed to get below the snow-line and down into the gullies away from the bitter wind. He probably owes his survival more to this manoeuvre than any other factor although he was certainly lucky to be found when he was, because in his delirium he later scaled a 300 ft. ridge in an effort to attract the attention of one of the search planes, and when rescuers arrived, they found him lying on top of a ledge only inches from a 50 foot drop on to jagged rocks. Had Kerry fallen asleep or lapsed once more into unconsciousness, he would almost certainly have fallen to his death.

Kerry Outerbridge survived, but he came perilously close to a lonely and painful death. Wandering about above the snow-line, he would almost certainly have been claimed by the wind, and so it was for the best in the long run, that his stupefied wanderings carried him downhill. Not suffering a head injury, and clinging himself in on the spot where he crashed, he would have been located

by the initial search party which swept the area at first light on the morning after his disappearance.

Yes, Kerry Outerbridge was lucky. He was fit and healthy to begin with, and no doubt that helped him through his ordeal. But even if you are fit and healthy too, don't be fooled into thinking that hypothermia cannot claim you. You are just as susceptible as anyone else, under certain conditions. The frightening thing about hypothermia is that the victim is unable to recognise his own plight. The signs and symptoms are sometimes — tragically — mistaken for simple fatigue and people have been known to die of exposure without once complaining of the cold.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales is deeply concerned for the safety of skiers and others who venture out on to the Main Ranges and other isolated parts of the Australian Alps, and last year it published a pamphlet explaining the danger of hypothermia and steps which can be taken to save its victims. Any experienced skier will tell you that it's the wind, more than anything else, that's the killer in Australian snow country and probably anywhere else for that matter. The National Parks pamphlet goes further and says that at a temperature of 50 degrees F., a wind of 30 m.p.h. produces the same heat loss from unpro-

ected skin as would occur in windless conditions at 28 degrees F. Wet skin loses heat 20 times faster than dry skin. Thus damp, windy conditions with the temperature at about 40 degrees are probably the most dangerous of all. A temperature of forty degrees doesn't sound all that cold, but it was in just such conditions in September, 1965, that Charles Derrick died.

The National Parks pamphlet makes the point that hypothermia is NOT easy to recognise. The victim is exhausted, lags behind his companions, stumbles, is reluctant to carry on, and "not with it" mentally. He may be difficult to reason with. He simply has no idea that he may be close to death. It is vital that his companions recognise the danger in mind that they, too, may be suffering to a greater or lesser degree, from the same complaint and give him immediate treatment, even if he objects. If he collapses, it's all too probable that he'll never recover.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service suggests the following treatment:

1. Remove the victim from the wind immediately. Drop off a ridge to the lee side and look for shelter in tussock, scrub, bush or behind rocks. Put on extra clothing, have something to eat and drink and assess the situation carefully. Recovery from mild hypothermia can be swift, but if it has not occurred within 15 minutes, or if the victim has collapsed, he will be past warming himself — you must treat him on the spot — he may die if you attempt to assist him to shelter in a hut. If practicable, change him into dry clothing. Put him in a sleeping bag and have a strong member of the party get in with him, or else have two fit people, both in their sleeping bags, lie close alongside him. This is the only safe method. Excessive external heat, such as a fire, can kill him.

2. Do not give any food or drink (especially by his own efforts) until fully recovered or until you get medical advice. Meanwhile, watch the rest of the party. Make camp immediately where you can get the most shelter.

3. The victim must follow these simple rules which could save your life if you are going touring:

1. Whatever the length of the trip, prepare for it carefully. Do listen to, and take heed of the weather forecasts. Take a parka on every trip into the hills — EVEN FOR A DAY OR HALF DAY WALK.

2. For excursions on the open tops, add long trousers, gloves and a balaclava to your MUST PACK list.

3. Have a good meal before setting out, and frequent snacks during the day.

4. Plan your day so as to reach your destination with time to spare before nightfall. If the weather deteriorates, turn back, or take a safe alternate route which will provide an important shelter.

5. Remember there is always a chance of having to spend the night in the open and then a sleeping bag cover, a survival sheet or plastic tube can save your life. (Victoria's Ski Rescue Service, by the way, recommends the "Space" Rescue Blankets, which it uses in its Akja sledges. The blankets, manufactured by Norton Australia Pty. Ltd., retail for only a few dollars. They are made of an insulating material developed for use in America's space-craft, and reflect more than 90 per cent of body heat, while keeping out external cold. The blankets measure 56 in. by 84 in. yet fold into a plastic pack no bigger than a cigarette packet and weighing less than two ounces).

6. For safety, four is the minimum number for a party. Remember, one man cannot recognise hypothermia in himself. A two man party is too weak to help itself in a dangerous situation. If four are in the party, one can stay with a sick man while two go for help. NEVER TRAVEL ALONE.

The Victorian Ski Rescue Service has further advice for intending tourers. S.R.S. veterans say it is important to have someone in your party who knows the area thoroughly, and even more vital is the need to inform some reliable person such as the Area Manager, Lodge Captain or S.R.S. Patrol Leader, of your intended route, and probable time of arrival. And for heaven's sake, do inform this person when you reach your destination, otherwise you'll be guilty of instigating a pointless search. The same rule applies if you DO get lost, but find your own way back. Tell someone in authority that you're O.K.

So much for touring parties which run into trouble. But what of the lone skier who, like Kerry Outerbridge falls and hurts himself unnoticed by other skiers, or who misses the trail home in fog, darkness or blizzard? Bearing in mind that the victim of hypothermia cannot recognise his own symptoms, do YOU know how to save your own life?

Obviously, the sensible attitude is to assume that you are likely to suffer from this swift and deadly killer, and take steps to prevent its onset long before it happens.

The Victorian Ski Association's Vice-President, Doctor Rodney Moss, has some good advice to offer lost skiers. He says it's mainly a matter of common sense, and your chief objective is to minimise the loss of body heat. Seal yourself off from the outside air as much as possible.

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by putting on and tightly securing every available item of clothing.

Remember that it's vital to get out of the wind. If you are able to drop down into a sheltered gully, do so, or if you see close to some natural windbreak such as a rocky outcrop or a thick clump of snow-guns, make use of it. Don't, however, do what 24-year-old Peter Turton did at Falls Creek in 1963, when he lost his way in a blizzard above the village T-bar. Peter, a relative newcomer to skiing, crawled into the sketchy shelter of some snow-guns, but took all his equipment with him. His skis or stocks left standing upright outside the trees might have saved his life, because when the weather cleared the following morning, and searchers spotted his frozen body, tracks in the snow showed that during the night, a search party had passed within forty feet of where he lay. Peter Turton might still have been alive at the time, but with visibility near to zero, the searchers had no hope of seeing the exhausted and doubtless unconscious figure huddled in the deep shadow of the snow-guns. If only Peter Turton had marked the spot!

Failing the availability of a natural or man-made shelter, Dr. Moss advocates digging a hole in the snow. Anyone new to the sport, who doubts the value of this advice, should remember that the Eskimos live snugly in igloos made entirely of huge blocks of frozen snow.

"Dig a good deep hole," says Dr. Moss. "The exercise won't hurt you—in fact it will help to keep you warm—but don't drive yourself to the point of exhaustion."

...ing systematically, with ... rest periods. Dig the hole deep, with straight sides. A curved ditch creates its own wind tunnel effect and will kill you very quickly. The hole should be deep enough for you to sit comfortably in it, and be able to hear the wind whistling over the top.

"If you have any tree branches or similar material, lay them on the bottom of the hole so you can sit on them. Leave your skis upright in the snow alongside the hole—preferably crossed as this makes them more obvious—to act as a signpost to search parties, and then get down in the hole. This way, I'd say you would have a good chance of surviving for quite a long period."

Dr. Moss says that if you have any food with you, you should eat it, because the energy produced by the food within your body will help to keep you warm. But don't eat everything you have all at once. Take a little at a time.

Says Dr. Moss: "Human digestive processes slow down under stress or shock, so your body is better able to metabolise small amounts of food at a time."

"The old warning about alcohol being dangerous for people exposed to cold is quite

true. Alcohol is a vaso-dilator, and helps to speed up loss of body heat when you most need it."

Alcohol almost certainly played a major and sinister role in the second tragedy on Mt. Bogong, in which three people, all of them experienced skiers, lost their lives. It happened in 1945. John Macrae, Edward Welch and Georgina Gadsden were climbing Bogong with five other, less experienced skiers. A large enough party to ward off disaster, you might think, but when the weather closed in soon after the ascent began, the three experienced skiers made their first mistake in deciding to push on ahead of the main party. Bogong was wreathed in its usual mist and a blizzard raged. It was three days later that the second party resumed their climb and came upon the huddled, frozen bodies of Macrae, Welch and Miss Gadsden. Nearby were two half-empty bottles of rum and brandy.

The three skiers obviously died suddenly, and they did so within easy reach of the Bogong Summit Hut. Later investigation showed that this hut was completely snowed under at the time, and it would have been impossible to get inside. It was clear that no attempt had been made to construct any kind of shelter. Macrae and Welch, in fact, were still wearing their rucksacks when they died. One can only theorise on events on that tragic August day in 1945, but it seems that Macrae, Welch and Miss Gadsden, faced with the prospect of a night in the open, paused to take stock of their situation and decided to have a nip of rum or brandy to keep their spirits up, or possibly in the horribly mistaken belief that it would help to warm them. In the almost Polar conditions in which they consumed the alcohol, death—from hypothermia hastened by the vasodilative effect of the rum and brandy—struck them down almost immediately.

Rodney Moss suggests that while he's inside his hole in the snow, the lost skier should undertake some mild form of exercise, as this would help to keep him warm. If he's able to make a small fire, so much the better. It's true that the heat of a fire can kill someone suffering from hypothermia to a severe degree, but if you've been clear-headed enough to dig yourself a good hole, it's unlikely you have hypothermia. The victim of hypothermia is far more likely to wander about in circles until he collapses, or else sit down to rest in the open—where the wind can get at him. He is incapable of organised thought.

Veteran skiers have varying opinions on whether a skier who is lost, should allow himself to fall asleep. Some say it's more important to keep moving. Dr. Moss says that provided the skier is down in his hole out of the wind, it doesn't really make much difference whether he goes to sleep or not.

"The reason people die when they go to sleep in the snow is because they do it in an exposed area," says Dr. Moss.

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