

The death of mountain guide Anton Wopereis has sent shockwaves through New Zealand's guiding community and underscored the Southern Alps' reputation for seriousness that belies their modest altitudes. JOHN HENZELL reports.

Danger ever-present in the Alps

Grey hair is a welcome sight on a mountain guide, suggesting the presence of experience and judgment to augment the technical skills needed to stay safe in the New Zealand high country.

Anton Wopereis had earned his grey with 35 years of mountaineering the world over. He had been on Everest. He had guided in the wilds of Antarctica, the high peaks of Alaska, the glacier-clad volcanoes of Peru, and had years of ascents in the Southern Alps.

He had nothing to prove and knew when to back off. That is why his death this week, while guiding on Aoraki-Mount Cook, a peak which he had ascended some 30 times, came as such a blow to New Zealand's close-knit guiding fraternity.

There is an unspoken inference that hiring a mountain guide ensures safety in the dangerous environment of New Zealand's highest peaks but the reality is that it just vastly improves your odds.

The dangers of the high country have already been demonstrated in recent years, with Wopereis being far from the first veteran guide to have died in the Southern Alps.

Almost four years to the day earlier, his employers, Aspiring Guides in Wanaka, lost two of their directors, vastly experienced and respected guides Paul Scaife and Dave Hiddleston, when they set off an avalanche high on Mount Tasman. Trainee guide Dave Gardner and client Andrew Platts also died in the slide on New Zealand's second highest peak, which left two other clients seriously injured.

Just a few months before that, mountain guide Will MacQueen — who co-wrote the definitive textbook on avalanche safety in New Zealand — died when a snowbridge collapsed under him while ski-touring with a client on the Fox Glacier.

The deaths of guides are felt so deeply in part because it calls into question the tenet, relied on by climbers both professional and amateur, that the judgment and experience gained from decades in the mountains is enough to keep the risks manageable and acceptable.

Hiddleston, after all, had guided clients to the summit of Mount Everest. Shortly before his death on Tasman, four Latvians had died in a fall on the summit icecap of Mount Cook, including Teodor Kirsis, who had climbed what known as the seven summits — the highest peaks on all seven continents.

Even the Scottish businesswoman who was being guided by Wopereis this week

had also climbed Everest as part of the seven summits, but she opted for a mountain guide to keep her safer on New Zealand's highest peak.

Aspiring Guides chief guide Marty Beare said for all the ascents the businesswoman had done, even the easiest route on Mount Cook was the most technical climb she had ever attempted.

"She made the comment that she'd climbed Everest and the seven summits but this was the first time in her life she'd had to use two ice tools," he said.

"Mount Cook is an iconic mountain and people travel around the world to climb that one mountain, which can be a little frustrating for us. "We have lots of other mountains and many times other mountains are more suitable."

Beare said his impression was the percentage of people using guides on New Zealand's highest peaks was increasing, possibly reflecting a drop in the skill level of amateur climbers.

Mount Cook's reputation is such that Aspiring Guides enforces a strict one-to-one guide to client ratio for ascents.

Even with the Scottish woman's mountaineering experience gained on the seven summits, and the way she impressed Wopereis in the days before their attempt on Aoraki, the woman's climbing companion had to have his own mountain guide, James Hamilton.

Hamilton's group was just above them on the summit rocks when Wopereis fell and the Scotswoman was able to alert them to the accident, initiating a prompt rescue effort involving all the guides on the mountain that day.

Wopereis appeared to have died instantly from head injuries.

The deaths of guides Scaife, Hiddleston and Gardner were the subject of an intense investigation by the New Zealand Mountain Guides Association (NZMGA), along with a separate coronial inquiry, which led to a reassessment of the way snow anchors are used in the mountains.

A subsequent report by Department of Conservation technical support manager Don Bogie did not specifically address the Tasman accident but showed that snow anchors which were being used were not strong enough and not used in ways to maximise their ability to hold a fall.

Beare promised that an equally thorough investigation would be made by the NZMGA into the death of Wopereis.



Calm before: guide Anton Wopereis hours before he died on Mount Cook on New Year's Day.



Cold comfort: New Zealand climbers Adam Darragh and Marty Beare immediately after they were rescued on Changabang in the Indian Himalayas. Photo: Brian Alder

The Scotswoman had already given a full account of the accident to Guy Cotter, head of another Wanaka-based guiding company Adventure Consultants, on behalf of the guides' association.

Cotter, who had also guided Everest on several occasions, said the initial indications are that Wopereis' death is "just one of those things" — a true accident.

Beare described the fall as difficult to understand. By all accounts of those who had been on the mountain that day, conditions were excellent. From talking to the

Scotswoman, they had been able to rule out a slab of snow breaking away or the ice being in brittle condition, but they were determined to find the causes of the fall.

"It matters to us guides. We want to know what happened because we're the ones who'll be going back into the mountains," he said. "The investigation has to be thorough for our own safety. This is the thing we can't fathom and all we can conjecture is that other people who climbed up that day — there were four other guided parties — it's possible that where he planted his ice tools



On a high: Keiran Whitefield climbing Mount Cook in November near the place Anton Wopereis died. Photo: Marty Beare

ended up being an eroded piece of snow and ice and consequently they tore through. As an alternative, his crampons could have slipped off the rock."

The Scottish woman's survival when the rope came tight at the end of Wopereis' 60m fall was because he had anchored her to a steel cable put

in place by the mountain guides on the summit rocks to improve safety on the most difficult part of the climb. It was just one more factor

the guides use to tilt the odds in their favour but, as Beare explained: "It doesn't make it a risk-free environment by any stretch of the imagination."

COMING HOME

Crowe traces his Welsh connection

Russell Crowe's next starring role will not be a Hollywood blockbuster, but a British TV documentary about tracing his family tree back to Wales.

The BBC has confirmed the New Zealand-born, Australia-based actor has agreed to film an episode for the popular series.

While production dates are yet to be set, Crowe is expected to visit the town of Wrexham, where his grandfather, John, owned a fresh fruit and vegetable store about 80 years ago.

"We can confirm that we have commissioned a special Coming Home documentary about Russell Crowe retracing his family roots to Wales," a BBC spokeswoman said.

"Plans for filming are already under way and everyone involved is very excited about working with yet another international star for Coming Home."

Crowe follows in the footsteps of Australian star Rolf Harris and Hollywood actress Susan Sarandon, who both have Welsh ancestors and filmed episodes for the TV series.

Wrexham local Hilary Betts uncovered what she believed were Crowe's links with Wales six years ago while researching her own family history and found they could be related.

The Gladiator star's Welsh heritage is believed to stretch back to his great-grandparents, Fred and Kezia.



Russell Crowe

The couple packed up their home in Wrexham and moved with 12 of their 13 children to Calgary, Canada, in June 1925.

But their 18-year-old son John, a keen sportsman, stayed behind and set up his own fruit and vegetable business called Crofruit.

Researchers have discovered that John's older brother, Frank, moved back to Wrexham from Canada in 1927 and took over the business, got married and had four children.

John ended up moving to New Zealand where he also married and had two sons, David and Alex, Russell's father. Alex's wife, Jocelyn, gave birth to Russell in Wellington in April 1964.

The family later moved to Australia. —AAP

Paddler makes sedate pace

Giles Brown

Kayaker Barbro Lindman may only be a sixth of the way around her circumnavigation of the South Island but she is in no hurry to finish.

"I am not measuring it so much because I don't want to put a big pressure on myself," the 39-year-old Swede said.

"I want to take it very easily. I want to be out in the sea and be able to compare that environment to other environments I have been in."

Lindman, a writer and photographer, as well as a

I think I will make it but I can't be sure because it is a very hard coastline.

Barbro Lindman
kayaker

kayak instructor, has already completed a 78-day journey along the Norwegian coastline.

However, she said the South Island coast presented particular

challenges. "I think it is a rough coastline."

"I think I will make it but I can't be sure because it is a very hard coastline."

"The weather is changing all the time and when it is bad it is very bad."

Lindman had a rest day in Christchurch before heading off on the next leg of her 2500km journey yesterday morning.

The first woman kayaker to circumnavigate the South Island, Freya Hoffmeister of Germany, completed her 70-day journey on Wednesday.



Easy does it: Barbro Lindman leaves Sumner on her South Island round trip. Photo: John Kirk-Anderson

Teen admits counts of rioting, burglaries

A teenager facing a charge of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm has admitted four counts of burglary committed soon after his release from jail.

In the Christchurch District Court, Michael Lawrence Best, 18, denied the wounding charge but admitted four charges of burglary, two counts of rioting and breaching conditions of release.

Sergeant Mark Berryman said Best committed the four burglaries in November at Christchurch houses, in one case taking jewellery and goods worth about \$17,000. The total taken in the burglaries was

about \$19,500. Best told police he wanted to clear up the burglaries because his partner was pregnant, Berryman said.

No summary of facts was available yet on the rioting charges, he said.

The court was told Best was released from jail on August 20 but failed to report to a probation officer as directed, one of his conditions of release.

Best was remanded in custody by Judge Brian Callaghan to March 7 for sentence. On the charge of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, he was remanded to a pre-depositions conference on February 7.

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