

ORAL HISTORY 76-54-16 SIDE A

Don Sheldon

1970s

James Greiner, interviewer

Talkeetna, Alaska

Series: Don Sheldon tapes

Don Sheldon talked about Link Luckett and the rescue of the injured Day party members from high elevation after a fall. Sheldon picked up three of the four members of the John Day expedition. John Day was the most seriously injured. Link Luckett went on record by being able to fly to and take off from 17,000 feet in a Hughes helicopter. They also got Helga Bading off the mountain (who was suffering from cerebral edema). The helicopters had landed people at the 10,200 foot level. Sheldon took 18 people from the 14,200 foot level in about a day. The mountaineers and rescue groups had to be removed from the mountain. It was about a 34 hour period. It was a tremendous effort of the military and rescuers. A 180 Cessna had crashed on the mountain with William Stevenson and Robert Elliott on board. Sheldon said that was the highest landing he ever did on McKinley.

Sheldon talks about bringing out the body of a climber named Jattinger who was from Anchorage. He was with a group of five. They were at the 16,000 foot level when Jattinger fell. He sustained a broken arm and possible jaw fracture. They were in radio contact through the Institute of Biology radio. Sheldon told the climbers to bring Jattinger down, but they took him up in elevation. Jattinger developed pneumonia and developed pulmonary edema. They started to bring him down and abandoned him at 16,000 feet. The Outward Bound crew was on the mountain and carried him down to 15,000. Another storm hit and this group abandoned Jattinger, too. Jattinger's parents were desperate to get him off the mountain. Genet and Sheldon went up and landed in six feet of fresh snow at 13,300 feet. A wind came up and Sheldon was able to leave. Genet was able to bring Jattinger's body down to 14,300 feet. In the morning Genet told him it was good weather and he could fly in. Sheldon couldn't land. Genet called again and told him to come up. Sheldon was able to bring Jattinger's body down to Talkeetna. He couldn't return get back to the mountain right away to pick up Genet because of a storm. He ended up flying Jattinger's body down to Anchorage. When he got home Genet told him there was no wind. He finally was able to get Genet off the mountain with about 200 pounds of equipment. They had to fly to Farewell to get to Talkeetna because of overcast and thunderstorms.

Greiner asked him about Jattinger's rescue. Sheldon said he had a finely tuned plane. At the high elevation the power is reduced. He talked about other factors to consider at the high elevations and the type of oxygen he uses. He discussed turbulence and wind and cloud observations. He described how a radio patch was used. When they had the Day rescue the airlines were hauling the rescue workers for free. He talked about the use of helicopters on several rescues or recoveries.

Sheldon said the weather to the north over the Tanana Valley is not as thick as the layer moving in from the south. The area around Nenana will have a thinner cloud cover. You have to get through the layers and then orient yourself.

Greiner said he will be asking questions about the Devil's Canyon trip. Sheldon said it is about 65 air miles north of Talkeetna. It is about five miles of narrowed canyon. The group was gone about two days before Sheldon spotted the wreckage of the rafts. He took the men to Curry on the Susitna River. No one was waiting for the people he unloaded. The canyon walls are six to eight hundred feet high.

Sheldon talked about the Helmut Raithel Expedition. A number of peaks in the Alaska Range had never been climbed. Prior to 1961 only two major climbs had taken place. The Raithel team arrived by the Alaska Railroad in 1962. They had good weather and proceeded to the northwest ridge of Mt. Russell. There were eight passengers and 1260 pounds of freight. He made four trips to get them out to Mt. Russell. The weather was fair during the first flights. On the fourth load the wind had picked up. They quickly unloaded the load and he was able to lift off in a forty mile an hour wind. He discussed the difficulty of taking off in tail winds. As he climbed up to 14,000 feet he headed over a pass. The wind coming through the pass exceeded his air speed and he found himself going backwards. He went over to Minchumina for eight hours until the winds died down. Sheldon described Helmut Raithel. Sheldon thought he was sixty years old at the time of the Mount Russell climb. Three days after dropping off the climbers he met up with Dr. Von Wetzel and loaded him on the plane. Sheldon described Von Wetzel. They headed to Mt. Russell, but heard a distress call. A worker had been crushed by a caterpillar tractor at a road construction camp on Troublesome Creek north of Talkeetna. They flew over to the camp, landed on a sandbar and Von Wetzel attended to the injured man. Sheldon called out and a helicopter in the area arrived to take the man to a hospital. Six months later Sheldon delivered another patient to the hospital and ran into the construction camp accident victim.

Sheldon said the Mt. Russell climb was successful. It was a first climb for the mountain.