

Accidents in North American Mountaineering

2010

Avalanche, Underestimated Hazard, Poor Position Alaska, Deltas, Canwell Glacier

About mid-day on February 27, we (author and two others) parked at Miller Creek and began skinning up through sustained high winds towards the terminus of the Canwell Glacier. While skinning on the flat river valley, occasional “whoomping” was heard and remarked about with casual interest. At one point a very large portion of the snowpack settled, forming a crack that was visible in the horizontal snowpack. As we made our way up-valley, we began to speculate about an objective. There wasn’t a lot of snow on the ridges bordering the glaciers, so we easily settled on the one part of the slope that actually had reasonable snow-cover, on the south side of the ridge separating the Canwell from the Fels Glacier.

As we approached, we realized that the slope was steeper than it looked, and one of us remarked that it looked dangerous and might not be a good idea to ski. But time for the ski was running short, and we just decided to go skin up for one hour and have a look at the slope more carefully. We agreed we would choose our route on an intermediate ridge, and the expectation was that good route choices would allow us to travel safely.

We arrived at the terminus of the Canwell Glacier and started skinning up towards the ridge on our north side. The base of the slope was covered by a 70-cm thick, very loose, powdery snow-cover, which had some depth- hoar at the base. It was basically skinning up on nothing and a few times the skis touched rocks on our way up. It was very, very difficult to skin up. Only the fact that the three of us have been doing ski-alpinism for years made us continue. I would not, under any circumstance, skin up that slope if I was a beginner.

About 50-80 meters up from the valley bottom, the snow was settled, way harder, and easier to skin on. In places it was sufficiently steep and hard that it was difficult to keep an edge in while skiing, and switchback turns became more challenging as the skis slid out from beneath. As we continued up, we became impressed about how much “whoomping” we were encountering beneath the very hard snow surface, but reasoned that the snow was not very deep (“not deep enough to kill you”), and the

unstable snow was probably in isolated pockets, so we continued up. We were all equipped for avalanche rescue and all the team had a pretty good idea on what to do in case of avalanche. Sinister noises were warning us.

Before we got to our turn-around time, there was only one last steep face to cross. Up there probably it was steeper (approaching 45 degrees). We recognized that this cone needed extra caution and we proposed to get it done one at the time. About 30 seconds later, the wind slab fractured completely and began to avalanche. The slab cut loose about 100 to 150 meters above the top of our party. The snow broke in hard-edged, tabular blocks—consistent with the hard wind-slab we had been skinning up. The avalanche was perhaps 100 to 150 meters wide and encompassed more than the entire slope we had been traveling up.

Two of us were caught on the sides of the avalanche and got carried down with it, including one of us who thought he was safe on a little rocky knob sticking out of the slab. One of us was fully immersed in the slide and got carried down about 100 meters.

The avalanche was probably not powerful enough to rotate the person during its travel and carry the person all the way down. This person, however, disappeared from view and got into the avalanche, but it let him out after ten seconds. The two remaining team members were ready to perform a beacon search, but the avalanche had released him right when confusion started becoming fear because he realized that he could not breathe or move in it. A lot of snow in his mouth, a ski pole broken, and a bruised body. After the avalanche, we teamed up again and we skied down one at the time over the slope covered by the avalanche.

Analysis

We are friends from work and are reasonably experienced backcountry skiers. All have taken avalanche safety courses and would say that we know how to identify dangerous avalanche conditions and pick safe routes through the snowy mountains. The conditions were not good. It was not a day for ski- alpinism. Lack of wise judgment and strong underestimation of the hazard did the rest. It looked like there was just enough snow to ski up there, and indeed for Alpine standards, it was a poorly covered slope. We had many warnings. But it took one of us getting fully swept away for us to turn around.

We think our experience shows that being well educated and experienced in the outdoors does not make you safe. To be safe, you also need to be sufficiently engaged to take responsibility for your own actions and position in the mountains. We strongly encourage everyone who goes in to the mountains to think and speak for yourselves, be critical and examining of your surroundings, and to follow your gut instincts. Do not surrender your personal responsibility for safety to the rest of the group. (Source: Did not want names in report)

2011

**Cornice Collapse — Fall on Snow, Washington, Mount St. Helens
Washington, Mount St. Helens**

On February 15, Joseph Bohlig (52) from Kelso fell into the crater at about 1:00 p.m. A veteran climber on his 69th trek up the mountain, Bohlig was posing for a picture about five feet from the crater's edge when the snow beneath him collapsed.

His longtime climbing partner and best friend, Scott Salkovics, watched in horror as Bohlig slid about 1,500 feet along rock and ice and settled into the crater wall at a 70-degree angle. "He was just getting his picture taken, and all of the sudden I saw a crack and him grasping for the edge and a look of surprise and fear on his face," said Salkovics (49) of Longview. "And then he disappeared."

The pair reached the summit in four hours, Salkovics said. After taking off his backpack and jacket and handing a camera to another hiker, Bohlig was backing up toward the edge of the crater when the snow gave way, Salkovics said. The hiker with the camera threw himself toward the edge but was unable to catch Bohlig. "The first thing I did was start screaming, 'No, no!'" Salkovics said. "It was the hugest sense of helplessness I've ever had." Salkovics said he tossed a backpack with supplies into the crater in hopes it would help his friend. It was determined later the backpack had landed out of Bohlig's reach.

A helicopter from Whidbey Island Naval Air Station removed Bohlig's body from the south crater wall at 2:45 p.m. It was the fourth attempt to reach Bohlig after weather halted two tries Monday and one Tuesday morning.

Analysis

Climbing accidents are rare but not unprecedented on Mount St. Helens. There hasn't been a climbing death on the mountain since the 1970s, Skamania County Sheriff David Brown said.

Richard Bohlig said he hopes his son's death will serve as a reminder to other climbers. "I hope that they would learn to don't be so sure of the edge of the rim," he said. "It can break off almost any time, and that's what happened." Dave Cox, Skamania County Undersheriff, said he wasn't sure whether the death would have any impact on safety procedures on the mountain. "I just think we're dealing with a very unfortunate accident today," he said. (Source: Edited from an article by Brian Rosenthal in the Seattle Times)

1994

Fall Into Crevasse, Uncontrolled Glissade, Descending Unroped, Washington, Olympic National Park, Mount Olympus

On June 16, 1993, Mason Flint, David Whiting and Paul Hood left the Hoh Ranger Station in Olympic National Park for a planned five day backpack and climb of Mount Olympus, about 20 miles from the trailhead. While trekking to the base camp, they were passed by Dave Skinner, a frequent climber of Mount Olympus and volunteer at the University of Washington Glacier Research Center on Mount Olympus. On June 18, the three climbers left their base camp at 0600 and approached the Blue Glacier where they roped up. After crossing the base of the glacier, they began the ascent toward the Snow Dome, a plateau below the summit spire of Olympus. After a short distance, Hood suggested that the climbers unrope because there was little apparent crevasse danger, and the other two agreed.

After ascending the Snow Dome and following the well traveled route between the Middle and West peaks and around to the backside of Olympus' summit pyramid, the climbers successfully reached the summit around 1300. Just before reaching the summit the climbers passed Dave Skinner who was descending alone from the summit. After spending approximately one hour on the summit, the climbers descended the summit pyramid and wound around the backside of the Middle peak unroped.

Flint led, followed by Hood and then Whiting. Flint glissaded down a short, steep snow slope behind the Middle peak where he realized that they were

off the ascent route. Hood and Whiting also glissaded down the short slope while Flint traversed 25 yards west between the Middle and west peaks to check out the route. As there was a clear set of tracks (later confirmed to be Skinner's) and the route was relatively straightforward, the climbers agreed to continue. Flint led an additional 50 yards where he stopped at the edge of a small avalanche slough. The runout of the slough was not visible from that vantage point. While he decided whether to cross the slough, Hood approached and, possibly mistaking the avalanche slough for a glissade path from earlier climbers, immediately began to glissade down the slope where he disappeared below the surface 15 yards from where he started. This was around 1530.

Flint descended a short distance while calling for Hood until he saw that there was a steep drop-off and probable crevasse where Hood had disappeared. Hood did not respond to repeated yelling. When Whiting caught up and was informed of the situation, he and Flint roped up and descended to the west where Hood fell and where the crevasse came into view. Flint and Whiting walked to below the crevasse and built two dead-man anchors and set up a belay. Whiting belayed Flint to the edge of the crevasse where Flint tried to make visual and/or voice contact. From the edge of the crevasse Flint could not see the bottom because of a slight overhang. After about 20 minutes of attempts to make contact with Hood, Flint and Whiting discussed whether or not to attempt a descent into the crevasse. Although Flint and Whiting had training in crevasse rescue and were familiar with the Z-pulley, they were concerned about the possibility of avalanche or ice-fall.

Knowing that Dave Skinner was at the glacier research station on the Snow Dome, Flint and Whiting decided to descend around 1630, with the hope that the station would have a radio and/or Skinner would have climbing equipment and rescue experience. When they reached the station, the climbers learned that there was no radio and that Skinner did not have climbing equipment or rescue experience. The climbers, joined by Skinner, decided to reascend to the crevasse and again try to make contact with Hood. They reached the crevasse around 1730 and again tried to make contact. Skinner agreed that attempting a descent into the crevasse would be risky considering the chances of ice-fall and avalanche.

At 1815, the three returned to the research station and discussed walking out that night. Because of fatigue, the lateness of the day and the distance (approximately 21 miles), they decided to leave early on June 19. The three descended to the climbers' original base camp, gathered all their gear and began the hike out. Skinner, who travels extremely fast and light, set off ahead and reached the Hoh ranger station at 0530. Flint and Whiting reached the station at 0730. Skinner contacted the Park Service and Olympic Mountain Rescue. A military helicopter carried Skinner and the rescue team to the site of the accident, but a recovery attempt was not made because of failing light. The following morning three flights took six Olympic Mountain Rescue personnel and their equipment to the site, set up anchors and recovered the body. Hood had died on impact of a severe upper cervical spinal cord contusion.

Analysis

The decision to unrope was the pivotal one of the climb. Once that decision was made, other standard safety precautions, such as abstaining from glissading on glaciers and wearing helmets, were harder to enforce. The climbers had helmets but were not wearing them. Although Hood was ostensibly the most experienced climber, we later learned that he had little formal climbing or glacier travel instruction. He had climbed Mount Olympus ten years earlier, as well as numerous other peaks in Washington and abroad. Flint, who had recently completed a climbing course through the Mountaineers, was concerned about Hood's apparent ignorance of basic mountaineering techniques (including the use of prussiks for crevasse self-rescue), but he and Whiting did not feel comfortable questioning Hood's experience. Although Hood made some major judgment errors during the climb, particularly the decision to glissade on the glacier, Flint and Whiting feel that their reluctance to express their concerns about safety and share the leadership role were also contributing factors. (Source: Mason Flint)

(Editor's Note: Thanks to Mr. Flint for his willingness to share this experience. In a letter to me, he expressed the hope that others will learn from his misfortune so they can avoid similar mistakes.)