

*1 caught and injured***Weather Conditions**

Six days of fine spring weather had reduced the snowpack at Alta from 104 to 84 inches by April 14. Snow began falling on the 14th, and by noon on the 15th, as much as 10 inches of new snow covered the upper mountain. Skies were cloudy on the 15th with fog, light snow, and poor visibility. Avalanche conditions were considered high for the Peruvian Gulch area, and this part of the mountain was closed to all skiing and touring at 0900 on the 15th.

Accident Summary

Terry Steward and Paula Varney had been recently hired by the Alta Lodge, and neither was very familiar with Alta and its ski runs. At about 1330, they left the top terminal of the Wildcat lift and headed down the west slope of Peruvian Gulch on a run known as Hasty Exit. This run was outside the patrolled ski area; the two skiers violated a closure to reach it. Skiers descending this run must negotiate a gap in a cliff band part way down. While skiing above the cliffs south of Hasty Exit, Steward triggered a small avalanche. He was knocked off his feet and then carried over the cliff, falling 80 feet to the rocks below! The avalanche continued down the steep incline below the cliff and carried Steward another 100 yards before coming to a stop.

Varney was not caught in the slide, but she lost sight of her companion as he was swept over the cliff. She decided the slope below was too steep for her to ski, so she took off her skis, left them there, and climbed down the cliffs ending up below Steward. She was unable to see him anywhere. She called out to him but received no answer. Deciding that help was needed immediately, Varney made her way down to the junction of the bypass road to Alta and the main road. She was picked up by Peter Lev, a visiting patrolman from Jackson Hole, who realized the seriousness of the accident and rushed back to Alta. The accident was reported at 1430 to patrol leader Bill Moss who immediately organized a rescue party.

Rescue

Two rescue parties were formed with all available patrolmen. Four men were sent up the Wildcat lift to drop in the top of Peruvian Gulch; four others along with Varney loaded a snow cat with a toboggan, resuscitator, oxygen, splints, and other emergency first aid equipment and headed for the scene. An ambulance was called from Salt Lake City to meet them at the junction of the main road and the bypass road where they would bring the victim out.

The snow cat was unable to reach the victim so the rescuers were forced to carry their equipment in on foot in a tough, uphill climb. Moss was the first to reach Steward's side. He found him on top of the snow in a half lying, half sitting position, conscious but in a bad state of shock and large lacerations on his head which proved to be fractures. He had been bleeding heavily from his head wounds, was coughing up blood, and was bleeding from his ears and one eye. It appeared to Moss that the victim had also suffered several broken bones, but because of Steward's state of shock, Moss was unable to communicate with him to find out what might be broken.

Steward was given first aid to stop the bleeding and was carefully loaded in the toboggan. He was carried downhill to the snow cat and then transported to the road where the ambulance was waiting. He was then taken to a Salt Lake City hospital where he remained in critical condition for several days. Steward's injuries were so severe that he never made a full recovery.

Comments

No matter how small, any avalanche that can sweep its victim over a cliff must be considered treacherous. This avalanche was classified as a SS-AS-2 and would have been harmless had the cliffs not been below. Few skiers enter this area because of the difficult terrain and marginal skiing conditions. Had the two skiers been more familiar with this area, they would have certainly picked another spot for