

Comments

Driving up the pass, the group didn't notice any slides; however, by afternoon avalanches became obvious on the surrounding mountains. They heard the familiar "whoompf" sounds made by the collapsing snowpack along their route. The snowpack was stressed out. But people sometimes react differently when confronted with warning signs of dangerous avalanche conditions. This group was divided. Holle, described as an excellent cross-country skier with some 10 years experience, took a cavalier approach. He appeared overconfident. Tandberg and Parzyk knew little about avalanches but showed genuine concern for the hazard. Davidson had previous exposure to avalanches while climbing in Alaska, and suggested to Holle that they should be wearing avalanche cords. Holle replied with, "Avalanches are a fig-newton of your imagination." It was the last thing he said before the accident.

Tandberg felt that Holle really knew there was some avalanche hazard, but might have been trying to reassure the others. If this was true, that in itself was dangerous because of the group dynamics: Holle was the leader who displayed apparent knowledge of the local conditions; the other three were guests on "his turf." Instead of altering their route, Tandberg, Parzyk and Davidson continued to follow Holle even though they recognized a clear and present risk.

of weak depth hoar. A late-February storm on the 26th–27th brought 22 inches of snow to Snowbird and 20 inches to Alta. From March 1–8, Snowbird recorded an additional 12 inches of snow, while Alta got 8 inches. Wind for these periods was surprising light and there was little drifting. Temperatures reached into the 30s during the day, with upper teens and 20s for overnight lows. It looked like an early spring as snow temperatures 20 cm below the surface hovered between 0°F and -1°F in the first week in March. The morning of the 8th broke with sunny skies and a few scattered clouds; heavy fog and snow flurries developed by mid afternoon with a sudden drop in temperature.

Accident Summary

One mile north-northwest of Alta lies 10,530-foot Flagstaff Mountain, and the upper drainage of Day's Fork falls off to the northeast. On the afternoon of March 8, three groups of backcountry skiers were out to enjoy the snow on the steep slope. In the first party were Steve Conant and Wendy Beck. Conant had just made a run from the ridge above and was standing at the bottom of the pitch watching the others. At 1355, from Conant's vantage point looking up into the center of the cirque, he could see his partner, Beck, to the left. She had made some turns, had fallen, and was in the process of getting back up. The second party consisted of three skiers and two huskies. They had nearly completed their traverse back uphill to get their packs left on the ridge and make one final descent. Eight skiers were in the third party a few hundred feet to the right (looking uphill). They were also traversing back up to make another run but were separated from the others by a low shoulder of the mountain. It was a longer route, but easy and away from the slide path. Each group was aware of the other.

Creighton King was the leader of the third party. He was concerned about how the snow felt and the fact that it had gotten significantly colder in the last few minutes as low clouds and precipitation moved in. He and two others in his group were higher on the slope and told the five trailing skiers below that they didn't feel good about them being in an exposed and vulnerable position should an avalanche occur. King said they would stay put until the lower skiers moved off into the trees. At 1400, his group felt and heard the ominous collapse of

81-13
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Days Fork, Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah

3 backcountry skiers caught and 1 partly buried; 2 dogs caught, buried and killed

Weather Conditions

The Wasatch Range had seen only sporadic storms from November through February. It had been a winter with mild temperatures, but periods of clear weather provided prime conditions for a temperature gradient to develop in the snowpack. This, in turn, created layers