

prescription drug for severe pain. The reality of surviving an accident but succumbing to a long, cold night was all too possible."

Briar's comments are right on target. Let us reinforce two points he made. First, most backcountry skiers find it easier to recognize soft-slab instability when they are skiing in the snow, and harder to recognize hard-slab instability when they are skiing on the snow and it appears bombproof. Second, speed of recovery is critical in all burials. This victim owes his life to beacons and the experts who knew how to use them. (See accidents 80-6, 84-2 and 84-5 for similar stories involving hard-slab conditions.)

83-9

MARCH 6, 1983

Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah

1 climber caught, buried and injured

Weather Conditions

Weather records from Alta show that a storm had begun in the Wasatch Range on February 26 and snow had fallen daily from that day through March 6. A total of 6 inches fell on February 26–27, while 11 inches of snow with more than 1 inch of water fell on the 28th. March 1–3 brought 2–3 inches of snow daily, but only half an inch fell on the 4th. The storm then brought steady light to moderate snow on the 5th and then came to an end early on the 6th. In these last 24 hours, Alta recorded 13 inches new snow which contained almost 1.50 inches water. Northwest winds had averaged 15–25 mph all day on the 5th and 6th. Avalanche control on the morning of March 6 at Alta and Snowbird produced 20 size 2–3 soft-slab releases. This should have indicated widespread soft-slab formation in the Wasatch backcountry; however, the Wasatch Powderbird Guides dropped 60 hand charges without a single release on the morning of the 6th.

Accident Summary

On Sunday morning, March 6, a party of three skiers from the Salt Lake City area drove up Big Cottonwood Canyon, parked, and skied up Mill Creek Canyon. Their goal was a ski and

climbing ascent of Mt. Raymond, which lies northwest of Brighton. Two of the men, Michael Franklin, 37, and James Garrett, 30, wore avalanche beacons; the third, Eric Weber, 26, did not.

They climbed on skis to the saddle between Mt. Raymond and Gobblers Knob. There they met two other skiers—John Coburn and Nick Bervegan—who joined them for the climb to the summit. They left their skis at the saddle and kicked steps in the snow to reach the summit. On their ascent they walked one at a time over the top of a cornice. The ridge was about 8 feet wide at this point and the cornice had an overhang of 5 feet, which did not leave much room to pass by on the windward side. They reached the summit of Mt. Raymond, but they did not stay long since the weather had turned cloudy, windy, and cold.

On their descent, the party retraced their steps and soon came to the cornice. The time was 1327, and Weber was in the lead followed by Franklin. Suddenly the cornice collapsed right behind Weber, and Franklin went down. Weber recalled, "I was walking as far to windward as possible, and he was stepping in my footsteps. We were definitely on the ridge; if we'd had probe poles we would have been touching rock. I was about 6 feet from him when the cornice went. I heard an explosion like a shotgun blast next to my ear, and my heart sank. I ran back two steps to the edge (and looked down.) Michael was already a good 150 feet down. I got a glimpse of his jacket and billows of snow."

A piece of cornice and Franklin fell onto a 50° slope and triggered a small soft-slab avalanche part way down. Franklin was off on a 1,500-foot ride, which included a free-fall off a 50-foot cliff, and later recalled what it was like: "I never heard it. It went fast; it's a steep chute there. For the most part I was riding on cornice blocks and being pummeled around by them. About halfway down, the debris fractured an avalanche that ran on a sun crust. So it gathered more mass. I had a feeling of moving at a very high rate of speed. I felt myself go airborne when I went over the cliff—I could sense it. I went into a fetal position to try to cover my head.

"It was quite dark. I was on my back for most of the time. I was struggling really hard to get over on my stomach. I thought I'd have more control that way, but my pack and shovel on my back made it harder."