

backcountry skiers made for a speedy and live recovery, even though through lucky circumstance, Franklin would have been found alive without a beacon. Nonetheless, the beacon hastened Franklin's recovery and minimized his exposure to the snow and hypothermia.

In retrospect Weber, who had skied out to notify the sheriff, had these thoughts: "If I had it to do over, I wouldn't have skied out, because that terrain was dangerous. Besides that, I think it would be better to be down there searching and helping to dig out. It took 40 minutes to get help, and what good is that if he's deeply buried."

Franklin agreed: "If I had been 7 feet under, we could have used a lot of help digging. The critical thing is to get as many survivors of the party down to the zone as fast as possible. The other big thing is that everyone take a couple of minutes to work it out and have one person in charge, taking responsibility the way James (Garrett) did. And everyone should have a beacon and shovel."

The three skiers without beacons vowed to buy them immediately, or in Weber's words: "I'm never skiing again without a beacon. I mean it." (See 84-11 for a less fortunate accident involving a cornice.)

83-10

MARCH 6, 1983

Deer Creek, Silverton, Colorado

2 backcountry skiers caught, 1 partly buried, 1 buried and killed

Weather Conditions

A small storm moved into the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado on February 25. From February 25 to March 2, Purgatory ski area, located 7 miles south of the accident site, recorded 20 inches of snowfall, while Red Mountain Pass, 12 miles to the north, received 30 inches. Then on March 4 through about noon on March 6, another 32 inches of snow fell at Red Mountain Pass. Winds recorded at an anemometer on Red Mountain Pass averaged 25-50 mph on March 5 and 30-55 mph on the 6th. The snow and blowing snow was falling on a snowpack weakened by depth hoar.

The avalanche danger in the San Juan Mountains was high to extreme, and an avalanche warning was posted on March 5. From March 4-6, 62 separate avalanches were logged along the U.S. Highway 550 corridor extending north and south of Silverton. Many of these blocked the highway, and Red Mountain Pass, north of Silverton was closed by avalanches on March 5-7. Many of the avalanches ran to ground and were classified as size 5 (maximum for the avalanche path).

Accident Summary

Into this storm three experienced backcountry skiers headed for a day tour. On Sunday morning, March 6, Phil Swanson, 32, Bill Plotkin, and Janet Zabka, who was Swanson's girlfriend, left Durango and drove north to Coal Bank Pass for a tour to Jura Knob and Deer Creek. This is a popular loop tour that offers excellent skiing, at least during nice weather and stable snow conditions. Skiers park at Coal Bank Pass, which is south of Silverton, and ski several miles to Jura Knob which offers a wide variety of aspects and steepnesses, all above timberline. They can then return via Deer Creek to hit the highway and catch a ride back to Coal Bank Pass.

That was the trip Swanson, Plotkin, and Zabka had in mind, but wretched weather and an avalanche ruined their day. Perhaps because they had done this trip many times before and two times in the last few weeks and had always avoided avalanche terrain, they left their beacons and shovels at home. They also were unaware that Red Mountain Pass, north of Silverton, had been closed by avalanches and that an avalanche warning was in effect for the San Juan Mountains.

The group skied through the trees for about 2 miles before breaking out above timberline on the southeast side of Jura Knob. In good weather the skiers would have had a stunning view of the San Juan Mountains at this point, but on this day they were treated to whiteout conditions that limited their view to a few yards. They talked over their situation and agreed that continuing to Jura Knob was hopeless and foolish. They decided to turn east and head into Deer Creek that would take them back to the highway.

The time was 1315 when they turned around and started feeling their way down a slope that would get them back into the trees. Swanson was in the lead, followed by Plotkin