

85-11

MARCH 4, 1985

Mineral Fork, Utah

2 helicopter skiers caught, 1 injured, and 1 buried

Weather Conditions

At Snowbird Ski Area in Little Cottonwood Canyon 11 inches of cold, dry snow was reported on the morning of March 3. The light, 5 percent density snow (50 kilograms per cubic meter) continued to fall that day and evening. On the morning of the 4th, another 9 inches had fallen. During the day the temperature reached into the upper 20s.

Accident Summary

On Monday, March 4, a Utah Powderbirds group of heli-skiers was in Mineral Fork drainage in Big Cottonwood Canyon. At about 1100 hours rear guide Peter Whittaker stood at the top of an open powder slope and watched his group ski down the southeast-facing slope. The lead guide and eight skiers were at the bottom when the lead guide called over the radio and asked Whittaker to ski a different aspect and to check conditions for the next run.

Whittaker glided over to the slope and shoved off. He made about two turns when he noticed that everything was moving. The whole slope around him had fractured and was sliding. The slab quickly broke up and gathered speed. He could barely see above the moving snow and the rising powder cloud, but he could see some trees and they were coming up fast.

In seconds he was slammed into a tree. The force of the avalanche pushed his head and shoulders around one side, and his legs were wrapped around the other side. Just when he thought he might black out the avalanche stopped.

He still had his radio and could hear the pilot saying he could see him, but the next transmission scared him. Over the radio he heard that one of the other skiers had been buried and was missing.

From below an "island of safety" the eight skiers and their guide watched, probably in amazement, as their rear guide triggered an avalanche. Within seconds their amazement probably changed to fear when they realized the avalanche was headed right towards them.

Their so-called safe spot was not going to be so safe, so the skiers took off as fast as they could skate in the soft snow.

Only one skier, a young woman from New York, wasn't fast enough. The avalanche bowled her over from behind and buried her.

After the snow stopped the lead guide quickly did a head count and found that one client was missing. Still pinned against a tree, Whittaker grabbed his radio and in a dazed state asked for his skis and poles. That transmission was a good-enough indication that he was relatively okay and would have to wait. Back on the debris the lead guide switched his avalanche rescue beacon to receive and started to search. Almost immediately he picked up her signal and in minutes had dug the buried woman out from 3 feet of snow.

She had been buried face down and was not breathing, but after her mouth was cleared she started to breathe on her own. It appeared that she had also suffered seriously leg injuries. Her skis had been stripped off her feet and her legs were folded backwards. The helicopter was called in and within 6 minutes of the avalanche she was being flown to a nearby hospital. There her leg injury was found not to be serious. She later walked out on her own from the hospital.

While the guides rescued the woman, Whittaker waited, still partly buried against the tree. While he waited he could feel swelling in his abdomen and felt the pains in his body increase. After the woman was evacuated other guides returned to rescue Whittaker. Quickly, he was loaded into the helicopter and flown to the hospital. He had suffered a ruptured spleen, broken ribs and a severely sprained knee. He eventually made a complete recovery.

Avalanche Data

The avalanche that Whittaker triggered that almost killed him and the woman skier was a soft slab. No other specifics about the avalanche were given, but the one report stated the sliding layer was once again the weak layer of faceted snow that formed during the intense cold period in late January and early February.

Comments

This accident showed that even the experts are sometimes fooled, but when things go wrong, properly trained and equipped skiers with