beacons and shovels can save a life.
Avalanches were nothing new to Whittaker. Working as a professional mountain guide and professional ski patroller, he was well trained and experienced around avalanches, but because he worked in the mountains full time he had had a few close calls. In the late 70s he was caught and injured in an avalanche. A few years later in 1981 (see accident 81-22), he witnessed the destruction and carnage of a large avalanche that caught 22 climbers and killed 11, but it was this little avalanche in Mineral Fork that changed Whittaker. He came away from this avalanche humbled and much more respectful of avalanches. He later said, "I learned not to be so concerned about making nice tracks and getting face shots when I'm skiing. I learned to be a little more conservative, a little more aware of that slope. I also learned that there really is no such thing as an 'island of safety.' Safety is all relative. Now, I'm always prepared for the worst. Sometimes, I'm lucky."

"Always prepare for the worst" are good words to live by for people who work and play in avalanche country.

85-12 MARCH 10, 1985

Eagle River, Alaska

1 backcountry skier caught and killed

Accident Summary

While only a few miles from Anchorage, the South Fork of the Eagle River area is both a housing development and a backcountry adventurer's dream. Modern homes are perched at and just below timberline. Right outside the front doors and the back doors are the wild Chugach Mountains. Though the immediate mountains are not as rugged as many of the Chugach peaks, the rounded peaks around South Fork reach well above treeline.

It was probably these qualities that attracted Captain Fernin Koch, 29, to the area. A flight surgeon at nearby Fort Richardson, Koch was an avid outdoors man who moved to Eagle River 4 or 5 months earlier.

On Sunday morning, March 10, Koch and his two dogs left their home to ski one of the unnamed peaks in the area. After a short walk up Hiland Road, he turned left and started the 2,000-vertical-foot climb up the mountain. After a quick climb through the open willows at the bottom of the slope, he was soon kicking steps in hard snow on a broad open slope above treeline. The dogs followed, and nearby residents from the comfort of their homes followed his progress with binoculars.

At the top of the mountain Koch put his skis on and soon started down, making a few tentative turns on the hard snow. One of the dogs refused to follow down the steep slope. Residents watched as Koch side-stepped back up to the disobedient hound and drug it down. He pulled the dog down far enough so that the dog would have to follow. Koch then started to ski again.

From below, several residents watched the entire side of the mountain fracture and avalanche. Engulfed by the raging torrent of snow Koch and his dogs were swept down the hour-glass-shaped slope. The local volunteer fire department responded and found the victim within 15 minutes of the avalanche. They found his battered body on the surface of the debris, but the report makes no mention of what became of the dogs.

Avalanche Data

The avalanche that Capt. Koch triggered was a large hard slab (HS-AS-4). It fractured 410 feet across the heavily wind loaded 34° slope. The fracture line varied in depth from 4–6 feet, and the avalanche fell almost 2,000 vertical feet. So powerful was the avalanche that all the branches of a 40-foot spruce, near the bottom of the avalanche, were broken off for the first 22 feet above the ground. Snow was plastered on the trunk of the tree for its entire height.

Comments

The next day avalanche experts Doug Fesler and Jill Fredston climbed up the peak to learn how Capt. Koch triggered such a large avalanche. They found several clues Koch no doubt would have also observed and should have warned the Captain that he was venturing into a deadly trap. First, the few spruce trees at the bottom of the slope were missing branches on their uphill sides. Second, on the top Fesler and Fredston experienced hollow, drum-like sounds, and shovel-shear tests showed the snow layers on the steep wind-loaded slope to be poorly bonded. It is not