

known if Capt. Koch had avalanche training, but it seems from the obvious clues of instability that were present that he had no training, or maybe he dismissed their message because he had already skied the same bowl earlier in the winter. Had Koch had a little knowledge about avalanches, he probably would have picked another spot to ski that day.

85-13

MARCH 15, 1985

Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah

a close call

Weather Conditions

Early on March 10 light snow started to fall at the Solitude Ski Area in Big Cottonwood Canyon. By the morning of the 13th, 25.5 inches had fallen. During the storm winds were light from the north and east and caused little if any loading of leeward slopes. March 14 was sunny and the high temperature reached 38°F. The 15th was also sunny, but cold in the morning. During the afternoon the high reached 39° F, and winds were less than 10 mph.

The Utah Avalanche Forecast Center issued their morning backcountry avalanche report at 0730 on Friday, March 15. It said the danger was rated high on northwest to northeast to east aspects 30° and steeper between 8,500 and 10,500 feet elevation. The report went on to say that large, deep slides, from 2–6 feet deep, were likely and that these slopes should be avoided.

Accident Summary

In Salt Lake City, spring seemed to be in full bloom and in the air was perhaps a little amour when Scott Ogilvie, 23, suggested a one-day ski tour to his friend Barbara Sheldon, 25. Sheldon was fairly new to backcountry skiing. She was more of a “golf-course skier,” but to improve her skills she took a cross-country downhill course offered by the University of Utah. Ogilvie was also in the course and their friendship blossomed.

Ogilvie planned a one-day tour starting in Big Cottonwood Canyon. Their route would take them part way up Beartrap Fork and then

angle to the northwest up the side of the drainage to the top. From top they would ski out Mill Creek.

March 15 was another sunny and warm morning in Salt Lake City when Sheldon arrived at Ogilvie’s home at 0900 hours. Sheldon borrowed some heavier-duty backcountry ski gear from Ogilvie’s sister. Ogilvie meant to call the UAFC hotline but in the rush to leave he forgot. He wasn’t too concerned as the weather for more than a week—in the city—had been sunny and warm. He knew that the greatest avalanche danger occurred during times of precipitation.

In separate cars they headed to Mill Creek Canyon. At the end of the plowed road Sheldon parked her car and joined Ogilvie for the drive to the trailhead in Big Cottonwood Canyon.

At Beartrap Fork in Big Cottonwood Canyon the pair attached climbing skins to their skis and started the climb to the ridges. The initial climb from the canyon floor up Beartrap Fork was fairly steep but the climbing eased further up the drainage. Then the ascent route followed mostly gentle terrain with a southerly aspect. The two made good time skiing on frozen sun crust.

About a mile up Beartrap Fork the pair turned west and headed to the ridge separating Beartrap Fork and the Mill D drainages. Their goal was a saddle at about 9,100 feet on the ridge. From the saddle the rest of the tour would be all downhill, or so they thought. The climb to the saddle went quickly and once at the saddle they enjoyed a well-deserved break with a leisurely lunch in the solitude of the mountains. So far they had not seen anyone else. They reveled in the beauty of the day, the warmth of the sun and their overall good fortune to be alone, but together in the mountains.

After a lounging in the sun after lunch, Ogilvie was getting restless. While Sheldon was content with a short tour with no particular destination, Ogilvie wanted to “cover ground.” After some prodding by Ogilvie the paired started off. With climbing skins still on they traversed a west-facing slope covered by aspens. Though the slope was not steep Ogilvie mentioned the possibility of avalanches and that both needed to think about avalanches as they continued the tour.

Once out of the aspens the pair angled over to a narrow ridge. They figured they