

numerous natural avalanches occurring. Authorities suspended the search after “three avalanches struck in two hours.”

Clearing skies on Wednesday, December 25 allowed a helicopter fly-over. Rescuers spotted the climbers’ tent on a bench above Source Lake and a faint hiking trail that disappeared into avalanche debris. They also saw evidence of an avalanche crown extending around much of the cirque to the east of Chair Peak. They concentrated their efforts in the avalanche debris and located the climbers late Wednesday afternoon by transceiver search. The transceivers were early Christmas presents. The climbers were found within 30 feet of each other, buried under 2.5 to 3.5 feet of avalanche debris.

AVALANCHE DATA

The Northwest Avalanche Center issued avalanche warnings for High danger December 20, 21, and 22. Over two feet of snow had fallen on “several weak layers” of surface hoar and storm instabilities in the area since December 20. Numerous natural and triggered avalanches were reported from the nearby Alpental Ski Area, in avalanche paths above Interstate 90, and in the surrounding backcountry Sunday and again on Monday.

**High
avalanche
danger**

COMMENTS

The victims headed into the backcountry when the avalanche danger was rated High and an avalanche warning was in effect, though whether the victims knew of the warning is unknown. In these conditions, large natural avalanches and human-triggered avalanches are likely or very likely. It is difficult to avoid being in or below avalanche terrain, so backcountry travel is not recommended. Sadly, the victims’ newly-gifted beacons did them little good, because they were both buried. One hopes the beacons did not contribute to an over-confidence in their skills to manage the dangerous conditions.

FLAGSTAFF MOUNTAIN, NORTH OF ALTA, UTAH

19961226

December 26, 1996

One backcountry snowboarder caught, buried and killed

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Flagstaff Mountain is a popular backcountry area in the Wasatch Range above the town of Alta, Utah. Greg Dres (35) was last seen around 15:00 on December 26, heading up Flagstaff in stormy weather. He failed to meet his girlfriend that night. The morning of December 27, she and friends discovered that Dres’s car had been towed from the Flagstaff trailhead overnight.

Traveling alone

RESCUE SUMMARY

Search and rescue personnel began looking for Dres on December 27. Late in the day, Al Soucie, the US Forest Service Snow Ranger for Little Cottonwood Canyon, joined the crew of a Life Flight helicopter in an aerial search. They noticed a large avalanche in Days Fork, the drainage just northwest of Flagstaff Mountain. However, it was too windy to land and too late to launch a ground search.

According to his girlfriend, Dres would often boot up Flagstaff ridge, take a quick run in Day's Fork, boot back up to Flagstaff and snowboard back down to Alta. The Day's Fork slide thus became the primary search area. She also said that he always wore an avalanche beacon.

The ground search began at 07:00 on December 28. Rescuers first searched the Day's Fork avalanche debris with transceivers. The avalanche was hundreds of feet wide and debris covered several acres. Rescuers found no transceiver signal and called in avalanche search dogs.

Rescuers then began to search along the south side of the Flagstaff Mountain ridge, Dres's likely descent route back to the trailhead. Rescuers encountered avalanche debris below the ridge, but they assumed it was from routine avalanche mitigation above the village of Alta. They searched it nonetheless and found a transceiver signal near the toe of the avalanche debris, in the bottom of a narrow gully, about 1,000 vertical feet below the starting zone.

Rescuers found Dres fully buried, three to four feet deep. He was face-down, head oriented downhill, with his snowboard still attached to his feet. With his hands near his chest, he was unable to make an air pocket.



Recovering the victim. *Photo Bruce Tremper, Utah Avalanche Center.*

AVALANCHE DATA

**Wind Slab
avalanche**

The avalanche was a soft slab, presumably triggered by Dres on descent, moderately sized relative to the path, sliding on old snow (SS-ARu-R2-O). The avalanche started around 10,000 feet on a south-facing slope about 35 degrees in steepness. Winds often drifted snow into the starting zone, and the path funneled into a narrow gully. Investigators were unable to conduct a crown profile, but assume the crown was one to two feet deep as recent snow was drifting into the starting zone. The weak layer was probably low-density storm snow, and the bed surface a subtle rain and rime crust formed on December 25.

**High
avalanche
danger**

The avalanche bulletin for December 26 forecasted "High danger on any slope steeper than 35 degrees, especially in wind loaded areas." The weather was snowy and windy with rapidly rising avalanche danger. The Utah Avalanche Center issued an avalanche warning December 27 cautioning people about widespread natural avalanche activity. No one knows if Dres checked the avalanche bulletin before leaving.

COMMENTS

There is no margin for error when traveling alone in avalanche terrain. If Dres had been with skilled partners who could effect a quick companion rescue, this accident could have been a scary, instead of tragic, experience. Rescuers found signs of asphyxia, and no signs of trauma, when they recovered Dres's body.