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WILLARD PEAK, NORTH OF OGDEN, UTAH

December 14, 2000

One snowmobiler caught, buried, and killed

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS

Storms during the first half of November 2000 were generous to the Ogden-area mountains, depositing several feet of snow. But then winter's generosity stopped, with no additional snow for about three weeks. Instead, an arctic airmass brought clear skies and record-setting cold, which metamorphosed the snow cover on the shaded northerly aspects into about 18 inches of unsupportable depth hoar.

A storm cycle began on December 9 and deposited fresh snow on top of the very weak layer of depth hoar. By December 14, the Ogden Mountains had received approximately 30 to 40 inches of eight- to 10-percent density snow that formed a soft slab with four-fingers resistance. Additionally, there were west winds of 20 to 30 mph in the period leading up to and including the day of the accident. One survivor of this avalanche, Dave Hogan, commented later that the wind was moving a lot of snow around, limiting the visibility prior to and during the avalanche.

The Utah Avalanche Center rated the avalanche danger as Considerable the day of the avalanche.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

On Thursday, December 14, four friends went for a nighttime snowmobile ride on Willard Peak Road. They left for the trip after work, arriving and unloading their machines at the snowmobile parking area at about 19:30. They rode about eight miles up the road and made it to the east side of the north ridge of Willard Peak.

Rob Allred (30) rode out in front of the other three and was on the road, which traversed several avalanche paths. The group was unaware of this danger. Allred unknowingly crossed one avalanche path and then got stuck in a drift part way into the track of another avalanche path. Dave Hogan and Don White stayed in place, shining their headlights in the direction of Allred so he could see while excavating his stuck sled. The fourth rider, Eric Wadman, headed forward on his machine to assist Allred. He triggered—apparently remotely—two avalanches, which released in both of the avalanche paths. Wadman had the good luck to be on the road between the two avalanches. Allred was not so lucky; he was hit and disappeared in the avalanche.

RESCUE SUMMARY

No rescue
equipment

The group was not equipped with any rescue gear—no transceivers, shovels or probes. The party did have a cell phone that they used to dial 911 at 20:11. The Box Elder

County Sheriff's office activated their search and rescue plan at that time. Donald White left the scene by snowmobile to return to the parking lot to lead the search and rescue group to the avalanche site. The remaining two party members, Hogan and Wadman, began scuffing and digging with their hands near where they had last seen the snowmobile and Rob Allred.

The search and rescue team began arriving at the avalanche site at around 21:45. One of the rescue leaders organized a probe line that started at the toe of the avalanche and worked its way up until they found a ski from the buried snowmobile sticking slightly out of the snow. While some rescuers excavated and moved the snowmobile, others continued to probe in the area until one probe struck something. Rescuers shoveled down the shaft of the probe approximately four feet until they exposed Allred's helmet and head.

Allred was uncovered at about 23:10, about six feet uphill from his sled. He had been buried about three hours. He had no pulse and was not breathing. With no signs of trauma, he had apparently died of asphyxiation, which was later confirmed by an autopsy.

AVALANCHE DATA

This avalanche released in an east-northeast-facing bowl at an elevation of 8,760 feet and fell 340 vertical feet. The start zone slope angle was 35 degrees.

The avalanche was classified as SS-AMr-R3-D3-O. Crown depth was 2.5 to three feet and was 150 feet wide. The weak layer was depth hoar.

Investigators later determined that a third path located to the south had also run sympathetically.

COMMENTS

Experience counts for a lot. This party of four lacked avalanche experience in every way—no rescue gear at all, no awareness of avalanche terrain, no awareness of avalanche danger in the midst of a sustained storm, no knowledge that their local avalanche center was warning of a Considerable avalanche danger.

If this had been a group with avalanche experience, an avalanche death might not have occurred. First, an experienced group most probably would have not been in avalanche terrain in a storm at night. Second, this is the type of burial where companions can often save a life with a fast beacon search and shovel excavation.

Persistent Slab
avalanche

Lack of training