

Survivor recounts avalanche in canyon

Parkite 'dug and dug and dug' for his friend after slide in Empire Canyon

By JAY HAMBURGER

Of the Record staff

Empire Canyon awed Jason DeLecour and Matthew Webb on Thursday afternoon, a day when the canyon sparkled with a fresh blanket of beckoning snow.

Inspired by one of the largest snowstorms of the winter, the two snowshoers left Webb's Daly Avenue apartment for an outing into the canyon's deep snow.

DeLecour, a commercial banker with J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., had flown into Salt Lake City from Houston earlier in the day for a vacation. The two planned to celebrate an engagement of one of their friends and to recapture the time he, Webb and other friends spent studying in the Alpine resort Chamonix, France, in 2001.

"He was saying it's great to be back in the mountains," Webb said on Monday, four days after DeLecour perished in an avalanche while snowshoeing in Empire Canyon.

Webb had to dig himself out of the slide before searching for his friend and then summoning help.

Webb, a clinical-sales specialist in the biotech industry, moved to Park City on Sept. 25, 2003, a little more than two years after their time in France, where DeLecour, who was 34 years old when he died, and Webb became friends.

The group attended Thunderbird, a renowned international-management graduate school in Glendale, Ariz., and after graduating some, including Webb, moved to Park City and frequently hosted their former classmates.

The two had not planned to go snowshoeing Thursday afternoon, instead they wanted to catch up with each other and then snowshoe into Empire Canyon the next day. The snow, though, was too appealing in the canyon, which Webb describes as "paradise."

They drove up Daly Avenue in Webb's Jeep Liberty, parked on the street outside the southernmost house on the avenue and strapped on snowshoes. Webb snapped a photo of a smiling DeLecour as they entered Empire Canyon, its

steep walls likely holding at least two feet of wet snow that had fallen in the day before the avalanche.

Webb, who had been in Empire Canyon after big snowstorms before, did not have misgivings as they made their way through knee-high snow for what was planned to be a 30-minute excursion.

"We stopped and looked around and looked at the pines and looked at the aspens," he said, recounting that the two took turns leading, each making fresh tracks in the snow. "There were several points we just stopped and made comments to look how beautiful it was."

By 6 p.m., they had snowshoed about one mile into Empire Canyon and started to return. They had traveled 75 yards down the canyon.

DeLecour was still enjoying himself.

"I saw him in my peripheral vision on my right and he started running. He had the huge Jay smile on him," Webb said. "He wasn't racing, he was running through the snow. Don't forget, he's from Texas. He doesn't see much snow."

Moments later, with Webb four or five feet away, DeLecour fell forward and Webb was thrown off balance by what he soon saw was an avalanche.

"We didn't hear a thing. It must have come down in three seconds. I saw the snow cover his whole body," Webb said. "It was fast. I didn't know what happened. When he got covered, that's when I knew we were in trouble."

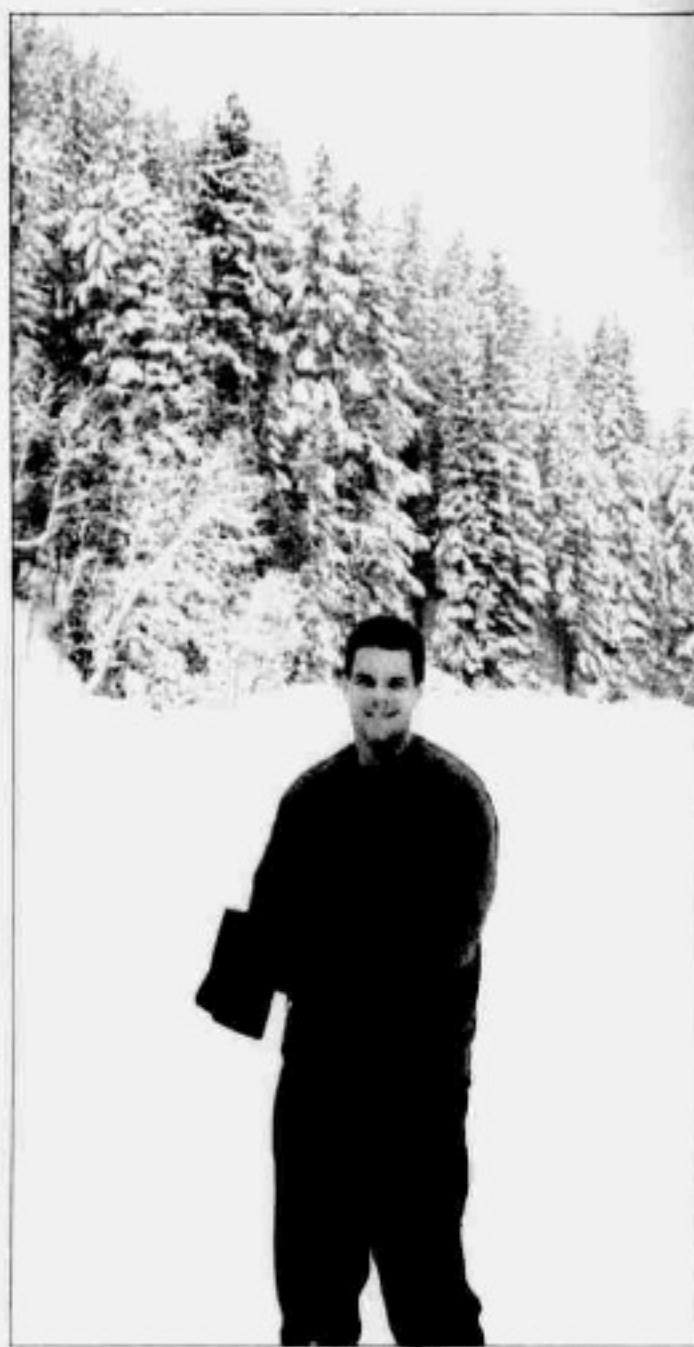
The two had snowshoed into a part of the canyon with terrain as steep as 35 degrees and a spot where there are not large trees that likely would have lessened the impact of the avalanche.

The avalanche, which reportedly measured 50 feet long and up to 100 feet wide, buried DeLecour in six feet of snow.

Webb, who was not injured in the avalanche, became stuck in the slide but was only partially buried. He was able to dig himself out with his hands within 30 seconds and started to search for his friend.

"I knew he was right there and just started digging. I dug and dug and dug until I couldn't dig anymore," Webb said. "I went down four feet and couldn't figure out why he wasn't there."

He used a ski pole they had taken snowshoeing to probe the avalanche path and yelled for assistance.



COURTESY OF MATTHEW WEBB

Jason DeLecour died Thursday in an avalanche while snowshoeing in Empire Canyon soon after this picture was taken at the northern end of the canyon. DeLecour, who was from Texas, told a friend that he was happy to be in the mountains.

Survivor recounts avalanche

• Continued from A-1

"I screamed at the top of my lungs, I don't know how many times, 'Help,'" Webb said.

He tried calling 911 on a cellular phone but it did not get reception. After about 15 minutes of looking for DeLecour, Webb quickly snowshoed out of the canyon and screamed for help to someone he saw near the bottom of Empire Canyon.

Webb then got into his Jeep and, in reverse, drove to Dana Roads' house, on the 200 block of Daly Avenue, where they called 911. The Park City Police Department received the emergency call at 6:29 p.m.

"One of your best friends is buried somewhere in there and I'm not accustomed to failure. I kind of wish I stayed there and dug more, but that's hindsight," Webb said about leaving the avalanche site to summon help. "I've re-lived

it a million times already."

A search party made of people who live on Daly Avenue mobilized and Webb followed the searchers as they headed into Empire Canyon. Webb said the searchers found DeLecour face-down within 10 minutes of the first rescuers reaching the avalanche site. They dug him out, cut off his snowshoes, rolled him over and performed CPR for a few minutes.

Webb and another rescuer started to descend the canyon in an effort to make the path down through the snow easier. The rescuers brought DeLecour to a flat clearing and again administered CPR.

"These guys came together to help two strangers. They worked together like an emergency room team," Webb said of the rescuers. "If you call them anything, call them the unsung heroes of Daly Avenue."

DeLecour was pronounced dead at 8:40 p.m., after he was brought out of Empire Canyon and taken to Park City Clinic. The preliminary cause of death is suffocation.

The friends, Webb said, gathered in Park City partly because the city reminds them of Chamonix, where they had spent a semester in mid-2001 during their studies at Thunderbird.

They did not know each other well before starting classes in the Alps but bonded there and stayed close after graduating. They especially grew fond of the outdoors together.

"If it was sunny and no snow," he said. "We'd be on a mountain bike."

Webb flew out of Salt Lake International Tuesday morning, heading to San Antonio, where a memorial service for his friend will be held Thursday at First Baptist Church.

Snowshoer perishes in avalanche

Rescuers who rushed into Empire Canyon unable to save victim

By JAY HAMBURGER

Of the Record staff

A Texas man perished while snowshoeing Thursday after an avalanche buried him in Empire Canyon, the steep, rugged and, in many places, narrow swath of mountainous terrain that stretches between Old Town and Deer Valley Resort.

Jason Delecour was 34 years old and visiting Park City from San Antonio when he was caught in the slide in upper Empire Canyon at about 6:30 p.m. He and a companion were snowshoeing when it occurred. Delecour was pronounced dead at 8:40 p.m. after he was taken out of the canyon and brought to the Park City Clinic, authorities said.

Summit County Sheriff Dave Edmunds said the preliminary cause of death is suffocation. Delecour was found under about six feet of snow and was buried for more than an hour, Police Chief Lloyd Evans said.

The avalanche hit Delecour's companion, Mathew Webb, 35, of Park City, who became stuck in snow up to his hips. He freed himself and rushed to Daly Avenue, which is at the northern end of Empire Canyon, to summon help. Neither was outfitted with an avalanche beacon, Evans said.

The slide occurred while the two were snowshoeing on United Park City Mines land just east of the Judge Tunnel about one mile south of the southern-

Snowshoer dies in slide

• Continued from A-1

most house on Daly Avenue.

They were in the canyon on one of the snowiest days of the winter, with the U.S. Forest Service's Utah Avalanche Center reporting that two feet of wet snow fell in the period before the avalanche. The Avalanche Center said in an advisory that the new snow combined with strong winds created sensitive slabs of windblown snow.

Evans, a 26-year veteran of the Police Department, said he did not know of another avalanche fatality in Empire Canyon, a popular spot in the winter for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

Talisker Property Corporation, a real-estate developer, owns the land in Empire Canyon through a purchase of UPCM, which held the land for decades. Though private property, UPCM has a longstanding policy of allowing public access in Empire Canyon.

The canyon draws Parkites and visitors year round for recreation and the views of the towering walls of Empire Canyon, which is commonly referred to as Daly Canyon, are among the most spectacular in Park City. There are a number of abandoned mining-era buildings in the canyon.

"It's regrettable whenever there is a tragedy like this. We encourage everyone to be sensitive to the hazards that exist in the backcountry, especially when we have conditions like we have right now," UPCM spokesman Kerry Gee said.

Gee was told that the slide was about 50 feet long and up to 100 feet wide. He said terrain in the location is as steep as 35 degrees and there are not large trees in that part of the canyon, which makes the spot more sus-

ceptible to avalanches.

After the slide, other people in the canyon and people on Daly Avenue conducted a search for the victim before a Summit County Search and Rescue unit and a search dog from Deer Valley Resort arrived.

Snowshoer Scott van Egeren, who lives in the Snyderville Basin, said he was at the mouth of Empire Canyon preparing to leave when he heard of the avalanche.

Van Egeren said Delecour's friend approached him for help, telling him of the avalanche. Van Egeren said he was one of about six people who found him after probing the snow.

"You could hear it rumbling up there," he said about sliding snow in Empire Canyon. "While we were digging him out, we all jumped up when it rumbled."

Dana Roads, who lives on the 200 block of Daly Avenue, near the southern end of the street, said Webb came to her house after he descended the canyon. He was in her house for five minutes and called 911, she said.

"Quite frankly, I was stunned when he said the top of Daly. I said where at the top of Daly?" she said, adding, "He was panicked. He was in shock. He was wet. He had snow on him, breathing hard."

Roads said she and a neighbor gathered flashlights and shovels and snowshoed into the canyon. It took them about 30 minutes to reach the avalanche site, which she describes as a narrow slot canyon. She was at the site when Delecour was dug out of the snow.

Edmunds said 10 members of the Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue team responded, using six snowmobiles to climb into the canyon. On Daly Avenue, emergency vehicles and snowmobiles drove up and down the



Jason Delecour

street as the search was ongoing.

The authorities' response time received criticism afterward, however. Roads said there were no authorities at the site when Delecour was found and dug out.

Avalanches the size of the one that killed Delecour are rare within Park City's limits. They sometimes occur in the mountains that ring the city, typically in the backcountry outside local ski resorts, but the land where the slide occurred was annexed into Park City in 1999 as part of UPCM's Flagstaff Mountain Resort development.

Sergio Diaz, who lives at Kimball Junction and was a friend of Delecour's, said Delecour was part of a group of friends visiting Park City. Over the past two years, Delecour had visited Park City about four times, including during the 2002 Winter Olympics, Diaz said. Park City, Diaz said, reminded Delecour of Chamonix, France, a ski resort in the Alps.

"He was (a) very smart, very happy person, overall, very positive about life," Diaz said.