



AAC Publications

Avalance, Poor Position, Weather

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Huntington Ravine

On January 5 a party of two was climbing Central Gully when the leader was hit with a naturally triggered sluff avalanche. During the resulting fall, one of the climbers fractured his ankle. Much of the information below was gathered from a narrative provided by a guide who was in the area, as well as from conversations with the injured party. Just prior to the incident, the guided group climbed up to top of the ice bulge in Central Gully. The guide decided not to continue up due to excessive spindrift, blowing snow, and generally harsh conditions above treeline. He had a three-ice screw anchor built for his group in the ice. When the party of two arrived, he allowed them to clip the anchor while they climbed the ice. However, after the group cleared the ice, they were climbing unprotected with a short rope between them.

At this point the guide was at the top belay, out of the fall line, while his clients were down at an ice screw anchor below the ice, also out of the fall line. About 15 meters above the ice, the party of two was hit with a loose snow (sluff) avalanche that carried them both downslope. According to the leader, the force felt as though he had received a stiff push or kick in the chest. The guide heard, "Avalanche!" but did not see the falling climbers pass by. He descended to his clients to get them situated. He assumed that the slide had happened below him, and that the party of two was still up in the gully. About 10 minutes later he heard a call for help. The party had fallen about 100 meters, coming to rest about 30 meters below a fracture line from two days earlier. The second climber had sustained an ankle injury. The lead climber was uninjured but broke his climbing helmet in the fall. It wasn't until the guide descended to the injured party that he learned it was the climbers above him who had been avalanched past. With help from his clients and the partner of the injured climber, the guide was able to lower the patient toward the bottom of the fan. At this point two clients went to the rescue cache to bring up a litter. The guide had been able to wrap the patient in a bivy bag and help keep him warm with a water bottle of hot tea placed between his legs. The patient was placed in the litter, and they worked their way down to the Harvard Cabin. From the time of the accident (2 p.m.) to the time they arrived at the cabin was about four hours. Their efforts were very much appreciated, since the trail from the bottom of the fan to the cabin was very difficult for a litter carry in the lean snow conditions. U.S. Forest Service snow rangers met the group at the Harvard Cabin, reassessed and resplinted the injured leg, and put the patient in a new litter. They sledged him down the Sherburne Ski Trail, with help from Mountain Rescue Service and students from SOLO who were at Pinkham Notch for a Wilderness First Responder course. We received word afterward that the patient did indeed break his ankle, which required surgical repair.

Analysis

This day (January 5) was the first 5-scale avalanche advisory for Huntington Ravine that season. The advisory indicated Huntington Ravine started the day at low danger, but moved into the moderate rating as a forecasted one to three inches loaded in on west and northwest winds. The summit recorded 2.4 inches of new snow on January 5, with winds averaging 56 mph. In our experience looking at avalanche accidents and close calls on Mt. Washington over the years, constant themes, mistakes, and oversights arise. Many of them are related to human psychological factors, the mental drivers that whisper over our shoulder, "Everything is fine, go ahead and have fun, you've done this before," while others miss the bull's-eye data that Mother Nature is offering, not having as much avalanche knowledge as we all should. These are traps any of us can fall into, which highlights how important it is to approach avalanche terrain with skepticism and keep asking the critical questions. (Source: Mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org.) (Editor's note: Two days earlier, two skiers triggered a R2D1.5 avalanche in Central Gully at 2:30 p.m. The previous night, 2.9 inches of new snow had

fallen on the summit, accompanied by strong winds. During the morning and through the day, this snow was transported into the deposition area below the Central Gully ice bulge. Both Tuckerman and Huntington ravines were under a general advisory identifying snow-stability concerns in isolated snowfields.)

Images

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	66
Page	63
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Accident reports