



## AAC Publications

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### **Avalanche - Fall into Crevasse, Poor Position, Weather**

Alaska, Denali National Park, Mt. McKinley, West Buttress

On June 13, a five-member Japanese expedition, "Miyagi Workers Alpine Federation—Mwaf-2012 Denali," was involved in an avalanche while descending the West Buttress of Denali. At an unknown time during the early morning, the expedition triggered an avalanche on a feature immediately above the 11,200-foot camp known as Motorcycle Hill. All five were roped together for crevassefall protection, so all were swept into a crevasse.

After an unknown amount of time, survivor Hitoshi Ogi (69) was able to extricate himself from the crevasse. He stated there was no sign of Yoshaki Kato (64), Masako Suda (50), Ms. Michiko Suzuki (56), or Tamao Suzuki (63). Ogi then descended to the 11,200-foot camp.

At noon on June 13, Tim Townsend of expedition "Hard Rock" was packing up camp, intending to descend, when he noticed and took a photo of a new avalanche just above camp on Motorcycle Hill. At 1:45 p.m., while descending from the 11,200-foot camp, Townsend noted a solo climber below him, without snowshoes or gear sled, "weaving erratically between wands, leaving a curvy track that was adding at least 25 percent more distance than a straight line between wands would require." Around 10,000 feet, Townsend's expedition members caught up to the climber, whom they believed was Japanese, and asked if he was "OK." The climber confirmed that he was, and Townsend's expedition continued their descent.

At 4:10 p.m. on June 14, Ogi arrived in base camp and alerted ranger Kevin Wright that there had been an avalanche, and that his other four expedition members were missing. Wright contacted the Talkeetna Ranger Station and alerted them to the situation. Ogi stated that his team was swept by an avalanche into a crevasse, and that the rope they were all tied into had "broken" during the event.

At 5 p.m., helicopter 3AE departed Talkeetna with ranger Dave Weber and myself (Mark Westman) on board. We conducted an initial search and reconnaissance flight over the entire avalanche site. The avalanche was classified as a soft slab avalanche, artificially triggered, with a destructive size of 2 (could bury, injure, or kill a person), and had released within a layer of recent storm snow (SS-A-D2-S). No clues or signs of survivors were found.

On June 15, helicopter 3AE transported rangers Kevin Wright and Mark Westman, along with two volunteers, to the site. A ground search ensued, using avalanche probes, avalanche beacons, and a RECCO locating device. Likely catchment areas and crevasses were identified, probed, and looked into. Avalanche debris boundaries were marked with color-coded wands. At a location mid-slope, just below the presumed trigger point, ranger Wright located gear at the bottom of a crevasse. Descending into the crevasse, Wright found one sled of miscellaneous gear, but no additional clues. At 1:10 p.m., due to deteriorating weather, search efforts were postponed until the next day. Ranger Coley Gentzel and three volunteers (on their way up the mountain) ascended from 7,800-foot camp to the 11,200-foot camp to help with search efforts.

On June 16 we abandoned the search due to dangerous overhead snow and ice hazard, extreme difficulty of extrication, and hazards posed by maneuvering in the confined space. (Source: Mark Westman, Mountaineering Ranger.)

## Images

## Article Details

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