



AAC Publications

Avalanche – Poor Position, Inadequate Equipment

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Huntington Ravine, Central Gully

On January 17 a party of 12 was ascending Central Gully in Huntington Ravine in four teams when one rope team triggered a soft slab avalanche. The avalanche swept over the three other rope teams, carrying one to the bottom of the gully. This team was not buried, but sustained injuries. The remaining three teams were able to rappel the route.

This was a fund-raising climb organized to raise awareness and support for Iraq war veterans. The climbers had been training for the climb in the days before the event, including ice climbing in Crawford Notch. The organized group included persons with a variety of experience and skills, from novice to experienced mountaineers. In addition, a film crew was present.

The group arrived at the Harvard Mountaineering Club cabin on Wednesday afternoon and spent the night in the cabin. Thursday morning, after receiving the weather forecast from the Mt. Washington Observatory, they decided to climb Central Gully. Before departing, a USFS snow ranger arrived and discussed weather and avalanche conditions with the group. Despite warnings of worsening avalanche danger, the group decided to stick with their plan. They departed from the cabin at 8:30 a.m.

Four hours after leaving the cabin, they arrived at the start of the climb. The group split into rope teams of three people each. They ascended to the ice bulge in the gully, and one by one climbed the bulge on belay. Above the ice bulge, the teams began simul-climbing. They reported that they skirted the newly deposited snow and tried to stay on the older crust. Prior to the avalanche, the lead team allowed the second team to pass so they could get set up for filming. At the time of the avalanche, one team was nearing the top of the gully and another was slightly below them and positioned in the center of the gully. The other two teams were lower, hugging the rock wall on climbers' left. During the time the teams were in avalanche terrain, snow continued to load many areas, including the top of Central Gully. (Source: Adapted from a report at MountWashingtonAvalancheCenter.org.)

Analysis

At this year's annual Wilderness Risk Management Conference, Thom Pollard of Eyes Open Productions, who was filming this event, and Dr. Will White, director of Summit Achievements, presented a workshop called "Central Gully Avalanche, A Case Study: How Good Intentions Slide You Straight to Hell." They raised two important questions about the causes of the incident: Are good intentions dangerous? Do fund-raisers have an effect on decision-making? They also listed four heuristic traps: familiarity (among team members), social proof (the cause for which they were climbing), commitment (to the goal), and scarcity (having to do with the separation of the roped teams). A comprehensive analysis of this incident by USFS rangers is available at MountWashingtonAvalancheCenter.org/search-rescue/. Look in the 2012–2013 section under Incidents & Accidents.

Images



Central Gully in Huntington Ravine, Mt. Washington.

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	67
Page	0
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Accident reports