



AAC Publications

Avalanche - Climbing Alone and Unroped

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

On March 1, James “Jimmy” Watts died as a result of injuries sustained in an avalanche in Pinnacle Gully. Jimmy left the Harvard Mountaineering Club cabin near the base of Huntington Ravine, intending to climb multiple gullies. Based on earlier conversations and by tracking his footprints in new snow, it’s believe he climbed the ice pitches in Odell Gully. He then descended a snow ramp into the bottom of South Gully before heading up into Pinnacle. Approximately two-thirds of the way up the route, on what would be the second pitch for a roped party, Jimmy triggered a slab avalanche that carried him downslope. He was found by a climber halfway down the Fan (the talus slope in the lower portion of the ravine) at approximately 3 p.m. The climber, who is a physician, called 911 to report the accident. He reported that Jimmy had no vital signs. USFS snow rangers responded to the scene from Hermit Lake. They located Jimmy, confirmed his status, and prepared him for transport to Pinkham Notch.

The avalanche released in the upper portion of the second pitch of the ice climb, just below a narrowing formed by exposed rock in the gully. The crown line was about 20 to 30 feet uphill from where we believe the climber was when the avalanche released. The crown was two feet deep, 20 feet wide, and slid on a bed surface of water ice. Avalanche danger on the day of the incident was rated “moderate.”

Analysis

Jimmy Watts was a strong mountaineer with seven years of climbing experience, and was president of the Harvard Mountaineering Club from 2009 to 2010. He had spent dozens of winter days on Mt. Washington over the years. He had climbed every gully in Huntington Ravine, including Pinnacle, multiple times. All of the gullies were well within his technical abilities. Jimmy had read about and studied the dynamics of avalanches, and gained decision-making experience from years of mountaineering and backcountry snowboarding. However, he had never taken a formal avalanche safety course.

At the time of the accident he had been climbing on the mountain and staying at the Harvard Cabin at the base of Huntington Ravine for several days. He was well aware of the recent snow cycle and weather conditions on the mountain. A few days before the accident he climbed Pinnacle and Damnation gullies with a partner. On the day of the accident he read the posted avalanche report and discussed his plans with the Harvard Cabin caretaker and the Mt. Washington snow rangers.

Jimmy knew he might encounter unfavorable conditions, and even though he was climbing solo he carried a pack containing all the equipment he might need for retreat: a 60-meter rope, harness, and anchor-building materials for ice and rock. Of course, this equipment could do nothing in the event of a sudden hazard such as an unexpected avalanche.

The avalanche that killed Jimmy was not large. He was not buried and did not suffocate, but instead died from internal injuries caused by his fall. Had the avalanche occurred in lower-consequence terrain, he likely would have been unhurt. However, once above the first-pitch ice bulge in Pinnacle, any fall would have been severe.

The Jimmy we knew liked to go for it, and it was one of his many admirable qualities. He was no doubt trying to balance this enthusiasm against rational risk calculations and his love of life. In the end, it all added up to a decision to go. It's a good opportunity to reflect on our own decision-making processes and what goes into them. (Source: Edited from a report submitted by Will Skinner and various members of the Harvard Mountaineering Club.)

Images

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