



AAC Publications

Avalanche – Failure to Assess Conditions, Inadequate Equipment

Vermont, Smugglers' Notch

ON MARCH 14, two instructors and four students of the Army Mountain Warfare School were ascending Easy Gully, a wide snow gully that rises from near the high point of the unplowed road through the notch, following a prominent landslide path. The gully rises at up to 40°. The Vermont Army National Guard team was participating in a rough-terrain training exercise that the Army has conducted in this area for many years. Easy Gully is also frequently used to approach several ice climbs above it.

At 1:05 p.m., as the team reached a point near fixed ropes the Army had installed near the start of the ice climb Grand Illusion, they triggered an avalanche. One team member was able to “swim” off to the side. Two slid 500 feet along the gully. Three others slid 1,000 feet and 50 feet vertically over a large rock. It is not known if any of the team members were roped together at the time. No one was carrying avalanche beacons, shovels, or probes.

Fortunately no one was completely buried and everyone was conscious. The team located everyone within 10 minutes. All were removed from the mountain within 1 hour 40 minutes by Army personnel. Five injured persons were then transported by local emergency services to the University of Vermont Medical Center. Injuries were reported to include fractures, contusions, and abrasions.

ANALYSIS

While there is no avalanche forecast available for Smugglers' Notch, it would have been reasonable to assume the avalanche hazard was elevated. The snow pack's history was one of unseasonably warm weather followed by freezing, creating a sliding surface, and then several days of heavy snowfall. Two days prior to the Army incident, backcountry skiers triggered a significant avalanche in a nearby Smugglers' Notch gully that was reported on local television and in social media. On the day of the Army incident, the Smugglers Notch Resort ski area reported 23 inches of snow in the previous 24 hours. The local climbing guidebook clearly states that many of the gullies in Smugglers' Notch, including specifically Easy Gully by name, are common locations for both natural and climber-triggered avalanches after recent snowfall. The specific site where the avalanche started is a natural collection point of snow coming off the cliffs above.

In follow-up investigations, the officers overseeing the training and the on-site instructors acknowledge they were overconfident in their assessment of the avalanche risk. Various faults in Army procedures—and failure to follow procedures—were noted. More thorough and honest communications among the extended team might have prevented this incident. The team was also overconfident in its ability to mitigate the risk. One day before the ascent, an instructor had attempted to reduce the avalanche risk by “... breaking the weak layer and knocking down snow from areas above Easy Gully that have been known to trigger slides in the past.” It is doubtful that a small amount of snow management could significantly reduce such high avalanche risk.

A cardinal rule of travel in avalanche-prone terrain is to expose only one person at a time to hazardous situations. In this incident the entire six-person team was following each other in the gully at the same time. Although they were able to find and extricate all the avalanche victims, their lack of beacons, shovels, or probes could have had life-threatening consequences. (Sources: Technical Report of U.S. Army Ground Accident (redacted), published reports, and the Editors.)

Images



Army team near the avalanche site in Easy Gully during an earlier training exercise in 2015.



Army team training in Easy Gully during an earlier exercise in 2015.

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