



## AAC Publications

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### Avalanche

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, House Peak

**The following report is based on the photographic record and equipment found with Hansjörg Auer, David Lama, and Jess Roskelley after an accident on April 16 on the east face of Howse Peak.** Jess' iPhone was found on him at the base of the face. The phone provided exact time, altitude, and GPS locations from each of his photos, which not only proved they made the summit of the 3,295-meter peak, but also gave clues to the location of their route, a substantial new variation of the climb M-16, and the nature of their accident.

On my second trip (of three) to the accident site, on June 2, we found David Lama's GoPro and Hansjörg Auer's camera, both with informative photos. Using Jess' iPhone as the control for time and location, I sequenced the photos into a time line. The evidence shows they climbed the east face of Howse from their camp at the base to the summit (an altitude gain of 1,340 meters) in less than seven hours. Their ascent is a tribute to their strength, talent, and tenacity. Their deaths prove once again, though, that the mountain passes final judgment on success or failure.

The three men, all members of the North Face athlete team, arrived in Canmore the first week in April. They quickly made ascents of Andromeda Strain and Nemesis, and then, on April 15, the three headed for Howse Peak. After an eight-kilometer ski approach, they camped below the east face. That evening, Hansjörg took several photos of small powder snow avalanches sweeping their intended route.

The route they followed the next day started up M-16, a difficult mixed climb with only one previous ascent (1999), then began a series of leftward traverses on some previously unclimbed and difficult terrain. Eventually they reached a large, concave snow basin above a waterfall route known as Life by the Drop. Ankle-deep in sun-warmed snow, Jess took the lead up the moderate snow basin to reach the southwest ridge. After more mixed climbing along the ridge, the three reached the summit prior to 12:41 p.m. The sun was shining, but a few clouds were starting to move in.

Sometime after Jess' summit photo taken at 12:44 p.m., the three climbers began their descent. At 1:27p.m., Hansjorg took the last photo found on any of the three cameras. The photo is probably of David at the bottom of their rappel from the ridge into the snow basin.

Just before 2 p.m., Quentin Roberts, an alpinist living in Canmore, stopped along the Icefields Parkway on his way back from a climb farther north to examine the routes on Howse Peak. As he and his partner stood looking at the east face, an avalanche swept the basin above the route Life by the Drop and billowed onto the glacier at the bottom of the face. They did not know that Hansjorg, David, and Jess were on the face at the time. A massive snow cloud formed at the bottom of the face. It was 1:58 p.m., 31 minutes after the three climbers had entered the basin.

Jess always phoned in after a climb, and he had told Allison, his wife, they would be out of the mountains that night. If he was unable to phone, he would have texted his position to her on his Garmin inReach device. No message came. At 7:30 a.m. on April 17, I called Royal Canadian Mounted Police dispatch, which connected me with a Parks Canada ranger. They immediately dispatched a ranger to the Waterfowl Lakes parking lot to see if Jess' truck was still there. It was.

A Parks Canada search and rescue team was flown by helicopter to the base of Howse Peak. Clouds now blanketed the mountain. As they flew toward the avalanche cones at the bottom of the face, the rangers were drawn to a dark shadow in the snow. A close inspection from the helicopter indicated at least one climber was buried halfway up the large avalanche cone below Life by the Drop.

Avalanche conditions were extreme, so the SAR team decided not to put rescuers on the ground. Because the climbers were not wearing transceivers, the team tossed two large uorescent traffic cones and two avalanche beacons where the climber(s) were located and then departed. For the next four days, bad weather prevented search and rescue or recovery efforts.

On April 20, the weather was clear and sunny. A SAR team on board a helicopter searched up and down the mountain, looking for signs of survivors. Nothing was seen after a meticulous search. They then concentrated their efforts on recovery. The SAR team, plus a recovery dog and her handler, were flown to a staging area below the face. They made one sortie to probe the avalanche cone, with the SAR members working while attached to the long line below the helicopter, but after four days of snow and wind, they could not locate the climbers. As the avalanche danger increased and the light became poor, the search operation was suspended for the day.

The following day, rangers returned to the site, and after two unsuccessful attempts to probe for the climbers, the pilot long-lined the dog and her handler into the site, and the dog soon located one of the climbers. The rangers were flown back to dig out the three climbers, who were close together. The rangers quickly cut their two 50-meter ropes in as many as 30 places to free the climbers from the ice and each other. They were then long-lined to the staging area and eventually to ambulances waiting on the highway.

## **ANALYSIS**

More likely than not, an avalanche swept the climbers to their deaths. Evidence from the ropes and equipment suggests the climbers did not rope up once they had rappelled into the basin. As competent as they all were, they would have plunge-stepped quickly down the slope toward the traverse leading back to the first part of their ascent line.

When found, their two ropes were still joined for rappelling with an overhand knot and long tails backed up with a second overhand. In addition, there were two loops formed with overhand knots. After the ropes were pulled from the rappel into the basin, one of the climbers, most likely Jess, must have located the centers of the two ropes and then tied an overhand with a 20-inch loop. I believe that Jess, who had by far the most rope wrapped around him when the climbers were found, put this big loop over his shoulder and then loop-coiled the rest of the two ropes over his neck. He must have planned to carry them across the traverse and down to the next rappel.

I think Jess also tied the fourth knot, a standard-size overhand on a bight on two strands, approximately 21 feet below the center loop, and clipped this loop to a carabiner attached to the ferrule on one of his tools, possibly as a moveable anchor as he descended. There's strong evidence that Jess had placed his ice tool with significant effort, with the loop attached, prior to the avalanche reaching them. The force snapped the ferrule of his tool at the point where it's pinned to the shaft, and the carabiner through the ferrule was twisted, with the gate sprung permanently open. The overhand knots with loops were pulled so tight it's like they were woven of steel.

In conclusion, it's unlikely the accident was caused by a fall, because the evidence shows they were unroped and, if one had fallen, he likely wouldn't have taken out the others. All the evidence indicates they were swept to their deaths in that short window from the time they dropped into the basin and the photo from the highway confirmed an avalanche. It doesn't bring them back into our arms, but the story of their last climb gives some closure to families and friends. (Source: John Roskelley.)

**Images**

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