



AAC Publications

Avalanche

Alaska, Neacola Mountains, Mt. Neacola

Less than two weeks prior to completing the first ascent of the 4,600-foot north face of Mt. Neacola (5.10 A2 M6), a trio of New Hampshire-based climbers were nearly killed in an avalanche.

On April 1, I (31), Ryan Driscoll (34), and Justin Guarino (32) landed via ski-wheel airplane on the remote Lobster Claw Glacier below the east face of Mt. Neacola (ca. 9,350 feet). Deep snow caused our bush pilot to drop us off about a quarter-mile farther down-glacier than during our first attempt on the mountain in 2019. As luck would have it, this probably saved our lives.

At around 4:30 a.m. on April 4, serac fall high on Neacola triggered a deep slab avalanche with a crown line estimated at eight feet high and 2,000 feet across. The three of us were sound asleep in separate tents in base camp, waiting out yet another storm after caching climbing gear at the base of the north face. In the blackness, we were awoken by a loud noise just one second before being lofted—in our tents—into the night sky. Death appeared to be just moments away, and I felt a sense of disappointment rather than real fear. The avalanche instantly crushed our tents around our bodies as we were hurled through the air. After the initial air blast subsided, we briefly decelerated. This allowed for a glimmer of hope we might survive. But any hope was quickly dashed as a second powerful wave of energy (which we assume was avalanche debris) swept us further across the glacier.

In the end, all three of us survived the avalanche with minor injuries, such as a sprained neck and chest pain. We had been blasted horizontally about 300 feet. A snow picket that had been sitting in the snow had somehow passed through the wall of my tent and completely through my sleeping bag. Though we weren't badly hurt, our entire base camp had been erased. As the blizzard continued unabated, we found ourselves lacking tents, food, boots—everything was gone. Furthermore, the weather prevented us from moving our camp or even digging a snow cave. We braced a broken tent into place and huddled inside. At dawn, we walked forlornly across the snow, picking up scattered pieces of food or supplies. One heavy duffel bag was found a half-mile down the glacier, on the far side of a tall moraine.

For two stressful days, we suffered in our destroyed camp as the wind and snow pummeled us. Falling asleep in the same location was quite stressful. In the whiteout, it was impossible to see what other avalanche hazard remained overhead—not that we wanted to know. My neck was badly sprained, so Ryan and Justin suffered greatly to retrieve our heavy cache of gear from below the north face during the storm. Fifty-two hours after the avalanche, the weather improved and our bush pilot was able to retrieve us. Eleven days later, we returned and completed the first ascent of the north face of Mt. Neacola.

ANALYSIS

Essentially, the entire 6,500-foot-tall east face of Neacola avalanched into the one-third-mile-wide valley where we were camped. As experienced mountaineers, guides, and avalanche educators, all three of us were well aware of the hazards that one faces on an alpine climbing expedition in a remote area. However, exploratory alpinism in big mountains requires a risk tolerance that far exceeds what one would consider acceptable at the crag or even in the mountains in the Lower 48.

In 2019 we were surprised by how tight the valleys in the Neacola Mountains were compared with the Central Alaska Range (including Denali National Park). However, during storms in 2019, none of the many natural avalanches affected our camp. This may have caused complacency in 2021.

In a relatively unexplored area, there is no communal history to inform decisions. For example, the West Buttress Route on Denali has avalanche hazard. But tens of thousands of climbers have been able to pass down their experiences, allowing today's mountaineers to make better decisions. The small likelihood of a monster serac-triggered avalanche (as we experienced) was weighed against the difficulty of moving our base camp even farther away from the bush pilot's landing zone. It was also weighed against our desire to explore a remote area and try a huge, unclimbed big wall. In the end, we knew the hazards and we accepted the risk. We almost paid with our lives. (Source: Nick Aiello-Popeo.)

Editor's Note: See the 2022 American Alpine Journal for Ryan Driscoll's feature article about the attempts on and first ascent of the north face (a.k.a. the "Medusa Face") of Mt. Neacola.

Images



Ryan Driscoll standing behind Nick Aiello-Popeo's destroyed tent. The red tent was nearly ruined, but the team sheltered inside of it.



Google Earth image of the east face of Mt. Neacola showing the serac that calved, the estimated extent of the avalanche, and base camp on the Lobster Claw Glacier.

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