



AAC Publications

Fatal Avalanche

Alaska, Mt. McKinley, West Buttress Route, Rescue Gully

On June 10, two NPS rangers on an acclimatization ski near the 14,200-foot camp witnessed a skier and a snowboarder get caught and carried by a size D2.5 soft slab avalanche that released from the Rescue Gully. One victim was partially buried and the other was fully buried. Due to the rangers' proximity to the slide, they were able to respond immediately; the fully buried victim, Nicholas Vizzini (29, Washington state), was located by beacon search and recovered within an estimated ten minutes. He was found to be pulseless, and resuscitative efforts were initiated.

A second ranger team positioned at the top of the fixed lines had a sight line into the Rescue Gully and observed that avalanche hazard remained in the area. Despite repeated radio warnings to avoid the gully, two other skiers continued attempting to descend the slope. Resuscitative efforts were briefly paused so that Vizzini and his rescuers could be moved to a safer location. After 35 minutes, efforts were discontinued per NPS protocol and Vizzini was determined deceased. He was packaged, carried to the 14,200-foot camp, and flown to Talkeetna. His partner, who sustained minor injuries, was evacuated with him. This was the second fatality on Mt. McKinley during the 2025 climbing season.

ANALYSIS

The Rescue Gully has become an increasingly popular ski and snowboard descent from High Camp at 17,200 feet, and this incident illustrates the avalanche hazard inherent to that terrain. A size D2.5 avalanche—capable of burying, injuring, or killing a person—released without warning on a slope that sees regular traffic during the climbing season. The rangers' proximity and immediate response were the decisive factors in recovering Vizzini within ten minutes of burial; even so, the injuries sustained in the avalanche were unsurvivable.

Two elements of this incident warrant particular attention. First, the behavior of the two skiers who continued attempting to descend the Rescue Gully despite repeated radio warnings while resuscitation was underway represents a serious lapse in situational awareness and judgment. Their actions forced a temporary halt to lifesaving efforts and placed additional people at risk in an active avalanche zone. Climbers and skiers in the Alaska Range must monitor radio communications and respond to warnings from NPS personnel without delay.

Second, this case underscores the limits of avalanche rescue at high altitude, where the combination of elevation, cold, and complex terrain compresses the margin between a survivable and unsurvivable burial. Parties descending the Rescue Gully and similar couloir terrain should assess current avalanche conditions before committing to the descent and carry beacon, probe, and shovel as a matter of course. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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