

Bruce Hickok, 11-08-92
Geoffrey Radford

Peak 3 Avalanche Fatality

By Liz Ruskin&, ADN, 11/9/92

"Two die under avalanche in park"

An avalanche caught three backcountry skiers near Flattop Mountain on Sunday, killing two men. Alaska State Troopers said the bodies of Bruce D. Hickok and Geoffrey W. Radford, both 38, were recovered Sunday evening. Survivor Dave Hart said the slide occurred at 11:45 a.m. as three of the four people in his party were crossing a gully on their way up Peak Three, a mountain in Chugach State Park.>
"All of a sudden it hit me and I went over backwards," said Hart, a 25-year-old engineer. "It was like being in a washing machine." Hart said the avalanche swept him 300 feet downhill and ripped his goggles and glasses off his face. He was able to get out on his own and was uninjured except for small cuts to his face. The fourth skier, whose name was not available Sunday, witnessed the avalanche but was not caught in it, rescuers said. Early in the afternoon, as members of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group searched the gully, Hart was optimistic Hickok and Radford would survive. They were uphill from him, he said, and may have been out of harm's way. "Hopefully they triggered it and were unaware of what happened," he said, sitting in an ambulance parked at a rescue staging area near Upper Canyon Road.

The other skier said he 2 heard voices after the slide, according to Hart. But by 3:30 p.m., rescuers reported they had found Hickok's body buried under 4-1/2 feet of heavy snow. Radford's body was later located a few feet away, said Doug Fesler, one of the rescuers and an avalanche expert. Fesler said he knew the victims. Both were geologists who lived near the slope they died on. Radford was training for a planned Himalayan expedition, he said. "The two that died had more than 20 years' (climbing) experience," he said. "It's kind of like the 20-year carpenter that saws his thumb off. People get so comfortable with the medium that they get complacent." Neither of them had formal avalanche training, he said, but Hickok was wearing a locator beacon that helped rescuers find the bodies. Hart had completed an avalanche training course in March that was taught by Jill Fredston, who also participated in the search. Hart said he and his friends discussed the possibility of a slide before they set out Sunday morning but decided to forge ahead, following rocky ridges most of the way to stay out of the avalanche zones. Two wore telemark skis and the other two had Alpine touring gear.

The slide occurred about an hour into the ascent. Sunday provided "perfect avalanche conditions," Hart acknowledged afterward. Heavy, wet snow settled atop a layer of dryer snow, creating unstable slopes ready to give way. Fierce wind added weight to the already loaded slopes, creating what Fesler described as "an upside-down layer cake. "Although avalanches are associated more with spring, they can happen at any time of year, said Al Meiners, superintendent of Chugach State Park. "This kind of weather pattern is a warning," Meiners said. "We tell people to watch out for rapid warming and cooling and to stay out of gullies. Don't go out in the backcountry unless you know the area." In this case, the skiers apparently had enough training, he said. "It was perhaps a simple question of risk," Meiners said. "It was a judgment call."

Mark Williams, another volunteer with Alaska Mountain Rescue Group said the group had to traverse the gully to make the ascent. "In crossing that gully I imagine they were aware of the danger," Williams said. "They picked their spot and crossed ... They picked the wrong spot."

Avalanches in Chugach State Park have claimed other lives. Two years ago, snowmachine driver Curt Falldorf, 57, was killed in an avalanche off the north face of Ptarmigan Peak, about four miles southeast of Flattop. In December 1973 10 people on a church outing were caught in an avalanche as they were descending Flat top. Group chaperone Patrick McDaniel, 35, was killed. Another skier was buried in a 1976 avalanche on the other side of the slope the Radford-Hickok party was skiing, Fesler said.