

Peak 4111 Avalanche Fatality

From "The Snowy Torrents"

January 16, 1975. 1 climber caught, buried, and killed. Weather Conditions: Early January brought miserable weather to south-central Alaska. Temperatures plummeted to -40 F and colder in the mountains of Chugach State Park near Anchorage. Winds and occasional light snow compounded the misery, keeping most people indoors. Alyeska Ski Area was closed for several days from January 4 through 13 because of the unbearable cold. In the backcountry, the wind had scoured exposed areas and had drifted snow into the gullies and depressions, creating dangerous slab conditions.

January 16 was the first warm (Alyeska temperature was 32 F at 1000') and calm day in 3 weeks. The residents of Anchorage flocked to the mountains.

Accident Summary: On the morning of January 16, Cletus Kraft and Mike Neff, both 24, went to Chugach State Park for a day of ski touring and climbing. Departing from the Glen Alps entrance, they passed three posted avalanche warnings as they skied about 2 miles up Campbell Creek. Kraft then decided to climb an unnamed peak on the south side of the valley. With Neff watching from below, Kraft climbed the peak on foot and reached the summit without incident.

He chose an overly steep gully for his descent. It was 12:30 when he jumped into the gully and began sliding and jumping his way down. He had descended only a short distance when he triggered an avalanche that set the entire gully in motion. A bench, was located midway down the gully, and the slope became steeper below this transition. The avalanche overrode the bench and continued on to the valley floor.

Neff saw no sign of Kraft. He searched for about 1 an hour, probing randomly with a ski, before leaving to summon help.

Rescue: Neff first notified the Alaska State Troopers who in turn notified other rescue groups. At 16:00, a hasty search team, including Neff, left for the accident site, and at 17:00, a backup party was dispatched. By 18:30, 25 to 30 rescuers were running two coarse probe lines in the runout area and one random probe on the bench.

At 20:30 Kraft's body was found in the middle of the bench and in the center of the slide. He was found in a sitting position beneath 6-1/2 feet of snow. He had been buried 8 hours and had probably lived only minutes in this snow tomb.

Avalanche Data: This was a dry-slab avalanche triggered in a steep, V-shaped gully. The starting zone of this north facing gully was at an elevation of roughly 3,700 feet and had a pitch of 55 degrees. The avalanche was about 230 feet wide and ran 1/4 mile down the slope, dropping 700 feet in elevation. Midway down the track, the gully makes a rapid transition to a bench with a slope of 15 degrees and steepens again to 40 degrees in the lower track. Avalanche debris had piled up to 18 feet deep on the bench and in the runout.

Comments: Kraft fell victim to his own inexperience. He had passed three avalanche warning signs, chosen an exceedingly poor descent route, and used poor technique by jumping and sliding down the center of the gully. This is precisely the type accident that is preventable through public education avalanche awareness programs. Avalanche personnel in Anchorage have instituted such programs which will save lives in the future.