

# Patrick McDaniel 1973-12-30

## Flattop Mountain Avalanche Fatality

From "The Snowy Torrents"

December 30, 1973. 10 hikers caught, 8 partially buried, 2 buried, 1 injured, 1 killed. Weather Conditions: Weather conditions during the week prior to the accident had been unseasonable in the Anchorage area. From December 25 through 28, the air temperatures climbed to the high thirties and low forties, about 6 to 22 F above normal for December. During this warm period, rain and wet snow fell, accompanied by high winds. On December 29, the area received approximately 12 inches of new snow. On December 30, winds were calm to light from the southeast, and the air temperature ranged from 11 to 25 F.

Accident Summary: After church on Sunday, December 30, the youth group from the Evangelical Covenant Church in Anchorage decided to climb Flattop Mountain. Flattop Mountain is located 6 miles southeast of Anchorage in Chugach State Park. Several members of the group had climbed Flattop during the summer, and they decided it would be fun to try the climb during the winter. At 14:30 the group, consisting of seven teenagers, ages 13 through 17; chaperone Patrick McDaniel, 35; youth pastor Dean Honnette, 22; and Jim Richardson, 27, a writer with the Anchorage Times newspaper, began their ascent. Reaching the summit at about 17:00 hours, they sang songs and admired the lights of Anchorage. It was dark when they decided it would be fun to slide down the west gully in their descent of the mountain. Jim Richardson was one of the first to jump into the gully, sliding backwards. In his words, "It was grand fun. I stopped while others passed me. We slid into each other, knocking each other over. Suddenly, I felt a rumble and I realized I was in a snowslide. At first it added to the fun, but then I heard Dean yell to get to the side. I realized it was worse than I had thought." Nine of the group had begun to slide down the slope, and when the tenth person started down, the slab fractured. Patrick McDaniel, the ninth person to slide, was just below the fracture when the slab released. The rest of the party was spread all over the slope, but everyone was buried to some extent by the avalanche. Seven people were able to dig themselves out, but three were not. Dorene McDaniel, 14, was totally buried except for one hand. Sharon Miller, 16, was not totally buried, but her scarf was buried and it was strangling her. Richardson and Honnette quickly extricated both girls. One of the boys, Brian Outwater, 13, received cuts on his head, but was only partially buried. Patrick McDaniel was missing.

Rescue: Richardson and Honnette sent the seven survivors down the mountain to get help while they began searching for McDaniel. They walked back up to the top of the slide. On their return trip, they saw a boot sticking out of the snow. At 17:35, they dug out Patrick McDaniel, unconscious and with no pulse. After an hour of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and closed heart message, with no response, they started down the mountain. Meanwhile, the seven survivors had reached the Bowder residence, low on the mountain, and the alarm was sounded at 17:39 hours. At 18:30 a search party started out, followed by a second rescue group. The second group reached the Bowder residence, by then the command post for the rescue operation, at 19:00 hours. They learned that the first party had met Honnette and Richardson at about 19:00 hours, halfway down the mountain. The rescue turned into a body recovery and concluded at 22:00 when McDaniel's body was turned over to the Alaska State Troopers at the Bowder residence.

Avalanche Data: This avalanche, classified as an SS-AO-0, was triggered by the hikers sliding down the slope. The mostly concave slope, at an elevation of 3,500 feet, faces northwest and has a slope of between 24 and 33 degrees in the track and a steeper starting zone at 38 degrees. Starting from a 12-inch fracture line, the avalanche ran a length of approximately 3,000 feet, with the width varying from 30 to 250 feet. The snowpack consisted of 18 to 24 inches of weak depth hoar, covered by a very hard icy layer, 4 to 6 inches thick, that had developed during the previous week. About 12 inches of new snow was on top of the ice. Some bonding existed between the icy layer and the depth hoar below, but there was little bonding between the hard layer and the new snow. Only the soft, new snow released. Snow depth in the deposition zone was approximately 3 feet.

Comments: Nothing points out the need for public education more than this accident. Avalanche conditions, due to the snow and weather conditions of the previous week, were extremely hazardous. Yet the party did not have the knowledge to realize they were in an avalanche area, much less check on avalanche conditions. Some members of the group knew so little about avalanches that they actually thought the moving snow added to their fun. It was fortunate that only one person was killed. All the odds were against them. They began a 2-1/2-hour climb approximately 30 minutes before sunset without flashlights or headlamps. They had to search for buried friends in the dark. The moon provided them with just enough light to see hands and feet protruding from the snow. Most providentially, only the new snow released while the icy slab and depth hoar remained in place. This factor may have prevented the loss of the entire party. Nearly 10 years earlier, in April 1963, nine boy scouts and their instructor were caught in an avalanche on Flattop Mountain. As a result of the two Flattop accidents and the one on Tanaina Peak 2 days later (see **No. 74-1**), several changes were made in the Anchorage area that vastly improved avalanche awareness and rescue response. The Anchorage Rescue Council was organized. This put all related organizations, agencies, and groups under one set of standard operating plans. The Alaska Division of Parks beefed up the avalanche training for its rangers, and in 1976, Chugach State Park and Chugach National Forest formed the first back country avalanche advisory program in the state - forerunner to the present Alaska Avalanche Forecast Center.