Squaw Creek Avalanche – Accident Report
Cantwell, Alaska

Date: 14 March 2015
Place: Squaw Creek drainage, near Cantwell (N 63 14’ 130” W 149 17’ 552”). Matanuska-Susitna Borough.
State: Alaska
Reporting Agency: Chugach National Forest Avalanche Center (CNFAIC)
Fatalities: 1
Synopsis: One snowmachiner caught, fully buried, recovered and flown to an Anchorage area hospital with serious injuries, later succumbed to injuries on 18 March 2015.
Avalanche: HS-AFu-D2-O/G

Avalanche Details:
Type: Hard Slab
Problem/Character: Wind Slab
Crown Thickness: 18” average, max 3’ (estimate)
Width: 1,000-1,500’ (estimate)
Vertical Run: 50-60’ (estimate)
Trigger: Foot penetration, after jumping off snowmachine
Weak Layer: Unknown
Aspect: South
Angle: Unknown
Elevation: ~2,300’
Path Character: Terrain trap, creek bed/cut bank
Debris: 8’ deep and possibly deeper in places

Accident Summary:
On Saturday morning March 14th, 2015 a group of five snowmachiners began riding from a parking lot near MP 191 on the Parks Highway. All riders were advanced snowmachiners and had at least some familiarity with this region. One member of the party had been riding here for 10 years or more. The objective for the day was to ride in the area of Squaw Creek drainage and access some meadows that the group was familiar with. The victim was the only one in the party of five wearing an avalanche beacon (he also had a shovel, probe and Snow Pulse Airbag) that
morning. Although wearing an airbag, it was not in the ‘armed’ position meaning there was not an opportunity to deploy. At least one of the other party members had an avalanche beacon but it was left in the truck; he didn’t recognize this area as avalanche terrain and therefore did not wear it. Three party members (excluding the victim) had shovels and two had probes. No red flags (recent avalanches, shooting cracks or whumphing) were observed during the day.

Right before the avalanche occurred, the victim proceeded to side-hill a steep 50-60 foot tall slope in a creek bed. He rode from the looker’s lower left to right, making one pass before turning downhill. He then looped back around for a second pass using his same track (lower left to right) until he got to mid-slope and turned slightly uphill, presumably to climb to the top of the slope. His snowmachine became stuck at this point and with two witnesses watching, the victim jumped off of his machine to the downhill side, sinking up to his waist. One witness stated at the moment of boot penetration, the slope avalanched above the victim and propagated as wide as 1500’. The victim and his machine were very quickly at the bottom of the slope (25 – 30 vertical feet) and snow began piling on top of the victim and the machine.

**Rescue Summary:**
Witness 1 watched the victim and his machine tumble in the avalanche and disappear with a fairly good idea of where he was buried. Witness 1 immediately grabbed his shovel and began digging where he thought the victim was located. It took him a minute to slow down and recognize that he needed to probe first before digging, in case he was digging in the wrong spot. By this time witness 2 was on scene and both witness 1 and 2 began spot probing where they thought the victim was. Within 2 minutes of burial a separate group of three riders (Father, Son and Son’s friend) were on the scene, immediately followed by the other two members of the initial party. One of the initial party noted they could just barely see the tip of the victim’s mud flap on the buried snowmachine. One of the members (Son) of the separate group of three had an older model SOS Analog avalanche beacon. He went into search mode and was not getting a signal (or phantom signals) at which point a member of the initial party grabbed the beacon from him. After this, a definite beacon signal was picked up through an increasing tone on the SOS beacon and someone with a probe struck the victims boot at approximately 2 feet below the surface. Estimated time between burial and positive probe strike was 10 minutes. With a positive strike everyone with shovels (5 shovels for 7 rescuers) began digging. At approximately 1348 hours, during the digging process, a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) was initiated in addition to a cell phone call to 9-1-1.

Witness 1 estimated that it took not less than 20 minutes but not more than 30 minutes from burial to having the victim on the surface with an airway. The victim was buried 6-7’ deep with their head down and oriented perpendicular to the slope. The victim was unresponsive and not breathing when pulled from the snow. CPR
commenced immediately and the victim had a pulse and was breathing on his own within an hour of CPR efforts. Shortly after this, Cantwell EMS and Alaska Wildlife Troopers arrived on scene and provided patient care. Around 1539 hours a Life Med helicopter was hovering over the site and by 1600 hours was able to find a landing zone ~500yrds away. The victim was then flown to an Anchorage area hospital in critical condition. On March 18th the victim succumbed to his injuries.

**Snowpack and Weather History:**
On March 6-8th a winter storm brought 2-3 feet of snow to the Cantwell area. Strong Northerly outflow winds followed the next several days with the most intense wind reported on March 11th. There is no snowpack data available. With this limited weather information and analyzing the photos of the avalanche, it is suspected that this was a wind slab avalanche (1-3’ thick) that stepped down (~1’) into old snow near the ground in areas.

**Images:**

Google Earth Image: Location of the Accident
Lat Lon: N 63 14’ 130” W 149 17’ 552”
Photo 1: Panorama view of the avalanche. The slide wrapped around the Squaw Creek creek bed out of view for an estimated width of 1,000'-1,500'.
Photo 2: Closer view of the avalanche.

Photo 3: Burial site is behind the probe in photo. Mud flap is only section of snowmachine sticking out of the snow.
Photo 4: Life Med preparing the patient for transport via helicopter.

Photo 5: Witness locations and burial site with rescue gear surrounding hole where victim was found.
**CNFAIC forecaster comments:**

The bulk of information and all the photos included in this report were shared with CNFAIC staff through personal interviews with three members of the victim’s party. We are very grateful for their willingness to share this experience and photos for others to learn from. Additional information was provided by the Alaska State Troopers.

A couple of points to emphasize in light of this accident report are as follows: First, always carry avalanche rescue gear (beacon, shovel and probe) when traveling in the backcountry. Even if the objective for the day is to avoid avalanche terrain and stay in the flats, you may find yourself in small terrain capable of producing an avalanche or be called upon to assist another group in the event of an avalanche accident. Get in the habit of checking your partner’s gear at the trailhead before every outing.
Secondly, the recognition of small avalanche terrain is much more difficult than recognizing big, classic avalanche terrain. As shown in this accident report, small terrain intersecting with terrain traps such as steep gullies, creek beds or cut banks proves just as dangerous as big mountains given the likelihood of a deep burial.

**Avalanche Forecast:**
There is no avalanche information or avalanche forecast in this region.

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