

AVALANCHE, INEXPERIENCE

Washington, Granite Mountain

During a beautiful, hot mid-April weekend, literally dozens and dozens of individuals and small parties were on easily accessible Granite Mountain. Among them was lone climber, John Scribner (41), and a seventeen-member climbing party from the North Seattle Community College Alpine Club, which included Dave Schneider (23) and John Wright (27). At 1100 many witnesses saw the triggering of the avalanche in the upper bowl. At 1120 MRC Warren Thompson and former MRC member Henry Durham left the trailhead for the mountain and almost immediately met the first of the avalanche reporters who continued to the parking lot, jumped in his car, drove to Snoqualmie Pass and phoned the police. Next Thompson and Durham met former MRC member Claude Gagnon, who reported seeing Scribner trigger the massive slab avalanche 30–60 meters from the summit with a sitting glissade.

Most of the units composing the umbrella organization known as King County Search and Rescue Association (KCSARA) were participating in the annual "Operation Ready" exercise at Rattlesnake Ridge near North Bend, and by 1145 they had been notified by radio of the emergency. They started to move operations to the Granite Mountain trailhead, and MRC member Deb Riehl was sent to the pass to open the rescue cache and issue supplies. Thompson and Durham arrived at the scene at 1155, posted avalanche guards, and began to organize and interrogate the many climbers and hikers on the mountain. At 1205 Bill Davis heard the transmissions on the Rattlesnake relay and volunteered MRC participation to the King County Police. He was told that the initial report estimated one fatality, two persons injured, and an unknown number unaccounted for. Davis reached George Sainsbury, who immediately initiated a call-out for standby personnel. At 1245, KCP notified Davis that MRC was needed. He left for the scene, and Sainsbury started dispatching personnel directly to the scene as they became available. As the afternoon progressed, Thompson and Riehl, who soon joined him, spent their efforts stabilizing Schneider, who had sustained two broken legs and a wide variety of additional injuries.

Scribner was located within a few minutes of the start of the avalanche probe, but repeated efforts to revive him failed. Wright's injuries proved to be painful and varied, but not serious. Over a period of hours, all others were accounted for. Scribner was flown to Harborview by MAST and pronounced dead on arrival. As more and more MRC personnel arrived, Schneider was eventually taken to the parking lot in a litter and sent to a hospital by ambulance. Considering the confused nature of the accident scene with its eager, but untrained and unaffiliated volunteers, and the involvement of no less than eleven separate search and rescue organizations, the overall mission went remarkably well. (Source: George Sainsbury)

Analysis

One member of the college's Alpine Club said that his group had telephoned an avalanche forecast office Friday night and had been told that it would probably be safe to climb on Granite Mountain if climbers kept on ridges and out of the bowls and ravines which are the usual paths of avalanches. (Source: *The Seattle Times*, April 17, 1983)