

UNITED STATES

AVALANCHE, UNDERESTIMATED HAZARD, POOR POSITION

Alaska, Deltas, Canwell Glacier

About mid-day on February 27, we (author and two others) parked at Miller Creek and began skinning up through sustained high winds towards the terminus of the Canwell Glacier. While skinning on the flat river valley, occasional “whoomphing” was heard and remarked about with casual interest. At one point a very large portion of the snowpack settled, forming a crack that was visible in the horizontal snowpack. As we made our way up-valley, we began to speculate about an objective. There wasn’t a lot of snow on the ridges bordering the glaciers, so we easily settled on the one part of the slope that actually had reasonable snow-cover, on the south side of the ridge separating the Canwell from the Fels Glacier.

As we approached, we realized that the slope was steeper than it looked, and one of us remarked that it looked dangerous and might not be a good idea to ski. But time for the ski was running short, and we just decided to go skin up for one hour and have a look at the slope more carefully. We agreed we would choose our route on an intermediate ridge, and the expectation was that good route choices would allow us to travel safely.

We arrived at the terminus of the Canwell Glacier and started skinning up towards the ridge on our north side. The base of the slope was covered by a 70-cm thick, very loose, powdery snow-cover, which had some depth-hoar at the base. It was basically skinning up on nothing and a few times the skis touched rocks on our way up. It was very, very difficult to skin up. Only the fact that the three of us have been doing ski-alpinism for years made us continue. I would not, under any circumstance, skin up that slope if I was a beginner.

About 50–80 meters up from the valley bottom, the snow was settled, way harder, and easier to skin on. In places it was sufficiently steep and hard that it was difficult to keep an edge in while skiing, and switchback turns became more challenging as the skis slid out from beneath. As we continued up, we became impressed about how much “whoomphing” we were encountering beneath the very hard snow surface, but reasoned that the snow was not very deep (“not deep enough to kill you”), and the unstable snow was probably in isolated pockets, so we continued up. We were all equipped for avalanche rescue and all the team had a pretty good idea on what to do in case of avalanche. Sinister noises were warning us.

Before we got to our turn-around time, there was only one last steep face to cross. Up there probably it was steeper (approaching 45 degrees). We recognized that this cone needed extra caution and we proposed to get it done one at the time. About 30 seconds later, the wind slab fractured

completely and began to avalanche. The slab cut loose about 100 to 150 meters above the top of our party. The snow broke in hard-edged, tabular blocks—consistent with the hard wind-slab we had been skinning up. The avalanche was perhaps 100 to 150 meters wide and encompassed more than the entire slope we had been traveling up.

Two of us were caught on the sides of the avalanche and got carried down with it, including one of us who thought he was safe on a little rocky knob sticking out of the slab. One of us was fully immersed in the slide and got carried down about 100 meters.

The avalanche was probably not powerful enough to rotate the person during its travel and carry the person all the way down. This person, however, disappeared from view and got into the avalanche, but it let him out after ten seconds. The two remaining team members were ready to perform a beacon search, but the avalanche had released him right when confusion started becoming fear because he realized that he could not breathe or move in it. A lot of snow in his mouth, a ski pole broken, and a bruised body.

After the avalanche, we teamed up again and we skied down one at the time over the slope covered by the avalanche.

Analysis

We are friends from work and are reasonably experienced backcountry skiers. All have taken avalanche safety courses and would say that we know how to identify dangerous avalanche conditions and pick safe routes through the snowy mountains. The conditions were not good. It was not a day for ski-alpinism. Lack of wise judgment and strong underestimation of the hazard did the rest. It looked like there was just enough snow to ski up there, and indeed for Alpine standards, it was a poorly covered slope. We had many warnings. But it took one of us getting fully swept away for us to turn around.

We think our experience shows that being well educated and experienced in the outdoors does not make you safe. To be safe, you also need to be sufficiently engaged to take responsibility for your own actions and position in the mountains. We strongly encourage everyone who goes in to the mountains to think and speak for yourselves, be critical and examining of your surroundings, and to follow your gut instincts. Do not surrender your personal responsibility for safety to the rest of the group. (Source: Did not want names in report)

HAPE, ASCENDING TOO FAST

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

An eight-member expedition climbed from 7,200 feet to 14,200 feet in three days via the West Buttress. On May 14, eight days after the start of their climb, the expedition arrived at the 17,200-foot camp. Soon after their