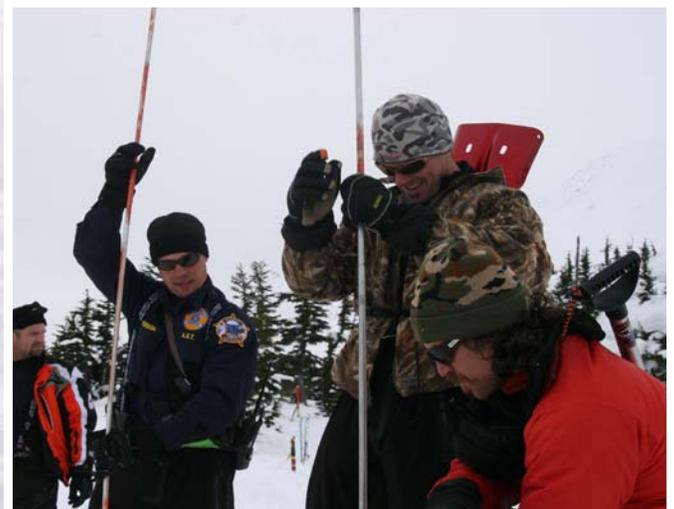


Searching the Debris: the aftermath of a fatal avalanche

When the first trucks hauling snowmachines pulled into the Granite Creek Recreational Parking Area in the early morning of April 2, 2009, the temperature barely dipped into the negative single digits. The sun hadn't yet peaked over the mountain tops when volunteers started pouring into the area and suiting up for a long, hard and emotional day.

Just under a week prior to that frigid morning, on March 28, 2009, a large avalanche surged down a mountain side in the Center Creek area, eight miles away from where searchers were gathering. A group of snowmachiners—tight-knit friends—looked on in disbelief as the snow swallowed up their friend, 35-year old Anchorage resident Yancy Flair.

The response by all standards was quick. Even though the mobile phone coverage in the area is virtually non-existent, ten minutes after the slide hit, a call reporting the tragic incident went through to Girdwood Trooper Howie Peterson. Immediately troopers from Girdwood and Seward mobilized as well as searchers with the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group (AMRG), Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs (ASARD) and the United States Forest Service. Since AST's Helo-1 was tied up in Southeast Alaska, troopers contracted a helicopter from Chugach Powder Guides to assist with



Avalanche Forecaster Carl Skustad assisted with the search by establishing a probe line and training volunteers.

Photos and Article by:
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transporting resources and searchers to the scene. In a little over an hour, probe lines were established in an attempt to locate Flair.

Unfortunately, Flair and the other machiners had not worn avalanche beacons when they ventured into the back country that day. The rescuers had only probes and the noses of rescue dogs to depend on while searching for Flair.

A little more than two hours passed when a second natural disaster hit. Mount Redoubt, which was under constant monitoring due to recent activity, erupted sending a column of volcanic ash into the air. A low pressure system carried the ash into Johnson Pass where the search for Flair was well underway. The helicopter was forced to abandon its efforts and return to Girdwood due to the potential damage the ash could inflict on the engine. It was only able to make one run to the slide area. As the sun sank toward the horizon, rescuers and Flair's friends were forced to leave as well. The weather system brought with it blizzard conditions which halted recovery efforts for days.

By Thursday morning the clouds cleared and the wind died down giving rescuers the needed window of opportunity to renew the recovery efforts. Dozens of Flair's friends congregated at the staging area. They anxiously paced and fidgeted with their machines to kill time while waiting for everyone to get check in and go through safety briefings. Terry, Flair's best mate for more than a decade, began sharing his memories of the good times.



“He was my person that I thought was always one-upping me and better than me no matter what... and I was his,” Terry said as he looked toward the pass where the avalanche hit. “We pushed each other.”

The area has long been closed to snowmachining by the U.S. Forest Service. Before it was safe for searchers to go into the field, Helo-1 needed to perform avalanche mitigation. Employees from the Department of Transportation and Public facilities rigged explosives to throw out of the helicopter. The blasts would trigger avalanches prior to snowmachiners riding out to the search area. Before heading to the pass, Helo-1 diverted to assist a snowmachiner out near Yentna who ran out of gas and became



More than 40 volunteers joined the efforts on the chilly Thursday morning.



DOT&PF employees rigged and dropped explosives .



All the snowmachines were lined up as riders paced the lot waiting for the go-ahead to move into the backcountry.



stranded. This caused Flair’s recovery crew to pace for another couple of hours.

“Hurry up and wait,” friends and rescuers mumbled repeatedly as they continued to look for distractions while they paced. At least the sun finally made an appearance over the ridge and the temperature was rising.

The good news was that Helo-1 found the missing man in Yentna quickly and was making its way to Granite Creek ASAP. At a little before 11 o’clock, AST pilot Mel Nading landed Helo-1 at the impromptu landing pad near the staging area. The first fly-over and the ensuing mitigation efforts happened in quick succession. DOT&PF was at hand to drop explosives out of Helo-1 to knock free any unstable snow prior to rescuers riding into the backcountry. A little after noon, the crew was finally able to set out and renew the search for Flair.

Nading flew two dog teams to the search area ahead of the snowmachiners. The incident command wanted the dogs to sweep the area to identify potential locations where Flair could be buried in the high probability area.

Snap and Jack, two rescue dogs with ASARD, put their noses to the white ground and began sweeping the fresh layer of snow that covered the avalanche debris. Shortly after they set to work, Rosie and Sky arrived with their handlers.



Chad and Trooper Peterson helped probe the debris. Both men were good friends of Flair’s. They worked tirelessly throughout the day.

“The easy part is we know he is here. The hard part is actually locating him.” Corey Aist, Snap’s handler, said as he paused and sported a 14-foot probe over his shoulder. He waved his arm indicating to Snap to search the area to his left. “It’s frustrating. We have good dogs. It’s difficult to not push them too hard. If the dogs find him, they will tell us.”

About an hour after the dogs began their sweep, the reinforcements flooded into the search site on snowmachines.

After preparing a batch of probes, Blaine Smith provided ‘probing 101’ to the first-time SAR volunteers. In less than a half hour, three probe lines were established using the 30-plus volunteers comprised of Flair’s friends and regular SAR volunteers.



Three probe lines were established as ASARD continued to sniff for clues in the avalanche debris.



**A volunteer stops to watch
AST Helo-1 hover above the
search area while it drops
supplies.**



**Two of Flair's friends dug a large hole to
check a probe hit.**

When Terry arrived on scene to help with the probe lines, he surveyed the area. "If we had beacons on, this wouldn't be necessary."

The SAR team worked for hours. Despite the grim purpose for the gathering, Flair's friends and the other rescuers physically focused on the task at hand while talking about happier times. When it was time to dig, it was not difficult to find someone willing to throw snow. No one complained because everyone wanted to bring Flair home.

Thursday ended without success. Weather delayed efforts for another day.

Troopers, AMRG, ASARD, the Nordic Ski Patrol and Flair's friends returned to the site again Saturday. After more avalanche mitigation efforts and acquiring three high-powered metal detectors in hopes of pinging the buried snowmachine, Flair was finally pulled from the snow.

Terry found him.



Search and rescue operations and body recovery missions are carried out frequently by troopers. Literally hundreds of SAR operations are conducted throughout Alaska every year. The people needing to be rescued are not always novices. Skilled outdoorsmen who have traveled or played in Alaska's backcountry countless times sometimes get into situations where they need to be rescued. Simple things like running out of gas or trying to beat the weather are the reasons troopers hear time and time again.

When a call comes in that indicates a search and rescue operation is warranted many things come into play in rapid succession. What resources are available? How many personnel do we have? What are the conditions of the weather and terrain? Troopers, other state, federal and local agencies and volunteer groups work tirelessly in an attempt to make every aspect of an incident come together so everyone makes it home safely. Alaska doesn't always make that a possibility. There are times when man-power is limited, weather keeps searchers out of an area or the terrain is just too difficult to transverse.

Reviewing this tragedy, there are a few things that jump out as lessons learned:

The snowmachiners were operating in an area closed to snowmachining. Prior to allowing rescuers in the area, avalanche mitigation work had to take place. There are more than 40 separate avalanche chutes within five miles of the search area. All recreationists should research the areas they plan to be in prior to their excursions.

The men also didn't utilize avalanche beacons. Safety should always be the number one priority! If someone is buried by an avalanche, the best chance they have of being rescued alive is for everyone in their group to carry—and know how to use—beacons, probes and shovels. When snowmachining in Alaska, you should also carry emergency supplies such as first aid kits, extra cold-weather gear, flares, a satellite phone and provisions.

The Division of Alaska State Troopers encourages everyone to recreate responsibly. Alaska can be unforgiving—even when you are prepared.

Troopers would like to thank the volunteer agencies and their personnel. Without their expertise and willingness to assist the people of Alaska, many search and rescue operations would not be so successful.