

Two separate Northwest avalanche accidents on Friday and Saturday

March 5 and 6, 2004...with several injuries and one fatality

Date: 3/5/2004

Location: near Salmon la Sac, WA (about 15 miles east of Snoqualmie Pass, WA)

Activity: Snowmobile (high marking)

Victims: One snowmobiler caught, buried, & killed [recovered by beacon under ~8 ft of snow]

Fatalities: 1

Date: 3/6/2004

Location: Stampede Pass, WA (Crystal Springs Snow Park)

Activity: Snowmobile (high marking)

Victims: Two snowmobilers caught, one partially buried, second totally buried, both recovered alive by others in area [one recovered alive by probing and visual clue (glove) after 20 minutes (no beacon)]

Injuries: Two injured—minor muscle strains reported

The following is a Seattle Times article on 3/8/2004 describing the Stampede Pass (Crystal Springs Snow Park) accident as related by the victims

In 'comfort zone,' snowmobilers forgot safety rules

By [Jonathan Martin](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

The four snowmobilers were so familiar with the terrain they didn't feel the need for precaution Saturday. They brought no beacons and no probes. They didn't check the avalanche report.

"We went out blindly because we were in our comfort zone," said Glenn Cummings, a 45-year-old home builder from Sumner.

A day later, Cummings and his friends were shaking off a near-disaster in Kittitas County, vowing not to be so cavalier about safety next time.

Cummings survived being buried for about 20 minutes Saturday morning after an avalanche south of the Crystal Springs SnoPark near Stampede Pass overwhelmed his snowmobile. A second member of the group was also buried briefly. Both suffered nothing more than sore muscles.

"It's a 1-in-10,000 deal, to survive buried that long," said Fred Slyfield, head of Kittitas County's search-and-rescue team.

With avalanche danger at a season peak, others weren't so lucky. A 29-year-old man from Gold Bar, Snohomish County, Dez Vanassche, died Friday while snowmobiling at another Kittitas County site near Salmon La Sac. And a Washington man was killed in an avalanche while snowmobiling near Sandpoint, Idaho, on Saturday. His identity was not released yesterday.

According to others snowmobiling with Cummings, he was trying to climb a steep, 45-degree slope when his snowmobile got stuck. A friend, Doug Phelps, tried to climb the slope to help but turned back because of the steep slope.

Another of Cummings' friends plowed ahead. But when he, too, was forced to turn back, he triggered a 200-foot-wide snow slide that plowed over Cummings, then Phelps.

"I remember a rushing sound, like a hurricane," said Cummings. "Then it was like I was in a big cloud of cotton balls. Everything was floaty."

Two thoughts flashed in his mind: his lack of an avalanche beacon and his three children, ages 8, 9 and 22.

"I remember saying I don't want to die," said Cummings. "Then I ran out of oxygen and passed out."

Phelps said he managed to restart his snowmobile, and almost outran the avalanche before it swallowed him. He was found in shallow snow, his feet sticking straight up.

Other snowmobilers at the base of the hill had 10-foot avalanche probes and began jabbing the snow for Cummings. They found his sled first. Then someone spotted a glove.

Cummings was buried standing up. "His eyes were rolled back, and he was blue," said Phelps, who introduced Cummings to snowmobiling four years ago.

Before anyone could begin CPR, however, Cummings coughed and woke up. He was wrapped in warm clothes and airlifted to Kittitas Valley Hospital in Ellensburg. He went home Saturday evening.

Slyfield said Cummings and his friends aren't the only ones to head into the backcountry without first checking the avalanche conditions, which are extremely dangerous right now. "I'm sounding like a broken record, because it's too typical today," Slyfield said.

Cummings says he is now a convert. He and Phelps plan to take avalanche training and buy beacons and probes immediately.

"Life is great," he said. "I didn't die, but I shut down and thought I'd die. I want to tell everyone to have the gear and be prepared."

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Ancillary Avalanche Information:

NWAC Avalanche Forecasts

The following forecasts were issued by NWAC on the 5th and 6th of March, 2004, respectively. The forecast issued on the 5th for the Cascade east slopes indicated an increasing avalanche danger for the Cascade east slope areas: "*Avalanche danger increasing and becoming considerable above 5-6000 feet and moderate below Friday morning, continuing Friday afternoon and evening.*" The forecast indicated that some 1-3 ft or larger slides were possible...and overall discouraged back country travel: "*however new snow instabilities should allow for slides triggered in the upper new snow to break to the crust or older weak layers making some 1 to 3 foot or deeper slides possible. Back country travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended on Friday.*"

Meanwhile, the NWAC forecast issued on the morning of the 6th indicated that although avalanche warning conditions had just expired for most areas near and west of the Cascade crest (including the Crystal Springs Snow Park area on Saturday, 3/6/2004), an avalanche watch was in effect for late on the 6th and the 7th with a considerable danger persisting above about 4000 feet on Saturday. "*The dense new wind slabs overly earlier snow deposited over the past few days. This is making triggered slab releases probable on steep slopes that have been loaded by wind transported snow, mainly northeast through southeast facing above about 4000 feet where the strongest winds occurred..*"

NWAC Forecast issued on Friday, March 5, 2004

BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE FORECAST FOR THE OLYMPICS, WASHINGTON CASCADES AND MT HOOD AREA
These forecasts apply to back country avalanche terrain below 7000 feet. They do not apply to highways or operating ski areas.

830 AM PST Friday, March 05, 2004

ZONE AVALANCHE FORECASTS.....

OLYMPICS...WASHINGTON CASCADES NEAR AND WEST OF THE CREST...

.....AVALANCHE WARNING.....

Avalanche danger increasing and becoming high above 4000 feet and considerable below Friday morning. Avalanche danger further slowly increasing Friday afternoon and evening. Avalanche danger gradually decreasing Friday night through Saturday becoming high above 6000 feet and considerable below through early Saturday night. Significantly increasing danger expected late Saturday night becoming high below 7000 feet.

MT HOOD AREA...

.....AVALANCHE WARNING.....

Avalanche danger increasing and becoming high above 5000 feet and considerable below Friday morning. Avalanche danger further slowly increasing Friday afternoon and evening. Avalanche danger gradually decreasing Friday night through Saturday becoming high above 6000 feet and considerable below through early Saturday night. Significantly increasing danger expected late Saturday night becoming high below 7000 feet.

WASHINGTON CASCADES EAST OF THE CREST...

Avalanche danger increasing and becoming considerable above 5- 6000 feet and moderate below Friday morning, continuing Friday afternoon and evening. Danger gradually decreasing Friday night and Saturday becoming considerable above 6000 feet and moderate below. Increasing danger expected late Saturday night.

OUTLOOK SUNDAY...

Near and west of the Cascade crest and Olympics and Mt Hood area...Rapid and significantly increasing danger early Sunday morning becoming high to extreme with natural avalanches certain and some large and potentially destructive slides possible. An increasing danger is also expected along the east slopes Sunday with the danger becoming high. Danger gradually decreasing later Sunday. Backcountry travel in avalanche terrain should be avoided Sunday.

SNOWPACK ANALYSIS...

Strong storms over the past two days have deposited increasing amounts of new snow with 48 hour totals generally between 10 to 20 inches along the west slope areas. The recent new snow has been accompanied by periods of very strong westerly crest level winds. The new snow is very poorly bonded to an old crust surface in many areas. Field observations Thursday and control results from Thursday morning indicated that sensitive to very sensitive soft slabs would be triggered by skis along ridges and on wind loaded slopes. Most of the avalanches Thursday morning released on the melt-freeze crust formed early this week. Some areas had surface hoar with some near surface faceted snow above this old crust suspected. Our observations in the Stevens Pass area indicated a somewhat stronger bond to the crust below about 5000 feet; however several weak layers were present within the 8 to 14 inches of snow above the crust. There was a significant decrease in snowfall late Thursday and Thursday night that likely allowed for some settlement and stabilization of new snow weak layers. However, with a poor bond to the old crust in many areas and additional new snow being received with strong winds early Friday a significantly increased avalanche danger is once again expected. Another strong storm is moving into the area early Friday bringing additional heavy snowfall and strong winds. This is combining to make mostly unstable snow and a high avalanche danger, especially on slopes that did not release naturally early Thursday. Natural or triggered slab avalanches are likely above 4000 feet, especially on lee slopes near ridges. Travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended. Less recent new snow has been received over the east slope areas; however an increased danger is expected with generally shallow unstable wind slabs on lee slopes above about 5 to 6000 feet expected.

FRIDAY...

Strong crest level winds and increasing moderate to heavy snow is expected through Friday evening. This should lead to an increasing danger through late Friday. Mostly unstable wind slabs are expected above about 4000 feet, especially on open slopes receiving wind transported snow, mainly northeast through southeast facing. A lower danger is expected on some exposed wind-scoured westerly facing slopes. Weak layers may have settled from Wednesday night and early Thursday's storm, however new snow instabilities should allow for slides triggered in the upper new snow to break to the crust or older weak layers making some 1 to 3 foot or deeper slides possible. Back country travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended on Friday. Decreasing showers and decreasing winds should lead to a slowly decreasing danger Friday night.

SATURDAY...

Decreasing light to moderate snow showers early Saturday may continue to add additional loading to lee slopes, mainly easterly facing slopes where mostly unstable snow should remain above 6000 feet with unstable slabs remaining probable on lee slopes below about 6000 feet. Decreasing showers and winds later Saturday through early Saturday night should lead to a further slowly decreasing danger. Increasing rain or snow and significant warming with increasing winds should lead to a rapidly increasing danger late Saturday night.

OUTLOOK SUNDAY...

Moderate to heavy rain or snow and further and significantly rising freezing levels early Sunday should lead to an increasing danger. The danger is expected to become high to extreme Sunday with natural avalanches certain and large and potentially destructive slides possible. Travel in avalanche terrain should be avoided Sunday.

Kramer/Forest Service Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center

NWAC Forecast issued on Saturday, March 6, 2004

BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE FORECAST FOR THE OLYMPICS, WASHINGTON CASCADES AND MT HOOD AREA

These forecasts apply to back country avalanche terrain below 7000 feet. They do not apply to highways or operating ski areas.

830 AM PST Saturday, March 06, 2004

ZONE AVALANCHE FORECASTS.....

OLYMPICS... WASHINGTON CASCADES NEAR AND WEST OF THE CREST... MT HOOD AREA...

....AVALANCHE WATCH FOR SUNDAY....

Considerable avalanche danger above 4000 feet and moderate below Saturday. Locally increased danger Saturday on slopes receiving sunshine, especially during the afternoon. Significantly increasing danger expected late Saturday night and early Sunday becoming high to extreme above 5000 feet and high below. Danger gradually decreasing late Sunday becoming considerable above 5000 feet and moderate below.

NOTE: Natural avalanches are certain by early Sunday and some large and potentially destructive slides possible. Backcountry travel in avalanche terrain should be avoided Sunday.

WASHINGTON CASCADES EAST OF THE CREST...

....AVALANCHE WATCH FOR SUNDAY....

Considerable avalanche danger above 4 to 5000 feet and moderate below Saturday. Increasing danger expected late Saturday night and Sunday becoming high below 7000 feet. Decreasing danger late Sunday becoming moderate below 7000 feet.

SNOWPACK ANALYSIS...

A series of strong frontal systems have moved across the area over the past three days with fluctuating freezing levels and periods of very strong winds. Total storm snow accumulations have been between 20 to 30 inches over most west slope areas and 5 to 10 inches over the east slopes. A period of mild and sunny weather preceded the recent snow. This produced a crust on most slopes that is now buried under the recent snow. Recent field reports, avalanche control results and natural avalanches all have indicated a weak bond of recent snow to this crust exists in many areas, mainly above 5000 feet. Several avalanche cycles have also accompanied the recent storms and helped to lower the present danger. Daytime warming Friday along with precipitation produced a widespread natural avalanche cycle in the Snoqualmie Pass area. One skier was caught but fortunately not buried by about a 14 inch naturally released slab on a well known ski run. Recent very strong winds and some 6 to 10 inches of new snow has accumulated since early Friday. The strong westerly winds were recorded with sustained winds of 30 to 40 mph with gusts from 50 to over 100 mph late Friday and Friday night. This has scoured much of the recent snow on exposed slopes while depositing dense wind slabs on a variety of exposures. The dense new wind slabs overly earlier snow deposited over the past few days. This is making triggered slab releases probable on steep slopes that have been loaded by wind transported snow, mainly northeast through southeast facing above about 4000 feet where the strongest winds occurred. At lower elevations, periods of daytime warming have helped to settle recent snow or develop new near surface crust layers, leading to an overall lower danger.

SATURDAY...

Decreasing light snow showers early Saturday may continue to add additional loading to lee slopes, mainly easterly facing slopes with unstable slabs remaining probable on lee slopes above about 4000 feet. Decreasing showers and winds later Saturday through early Saturday night should lead to a further slowly decreasing danger. Increasing rain or snow and significant warming with increasing winds should lead to a rapidly increasing danger late Saturday night.

SUNDAY...

Moderate to heavy rain or snow and further and significantly rising freezing levels early Sunday should cause an increasing danger. The danger is expected to become high to extreme above about 5000 feet early Sunday with natural avalanches certain and large and potentially destructive slides possible, especially on slopes that have received the greatest amounts of recent snow and that have yet to slide over the past few days. Travel in avalanche terrain should be avoided Sunday. Decreasing precipitation and winds late Sunday and the likelihood of prior natural avalanches should lead to a decreasing danger late Sunday.

Kramer/Forest Service Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center