

Avalanche Incident Summary

Washington, Mount Rainier, Ingraham Glacier—October 24, 2004

On Sunday October 24th, climbers Aaron Koester and Matt Little contemplated an ascent of the mountain. Due to a late start that morning, the pair instead decided to explore and train in the crevasses on the Ingraham Glacier. Near 11,700 feet, the team entered a large cavernous crevasse close to the Disappointment Cleaver. They traversed inside the crevasse and found an exit ramp, roughly 75 yards from the entrance. While ascending the 35-40° slope, the ramp fractured above them and the snow beneath their feet began to slide. The slab was estimated to be about 8-14” thick. The avalanche swept both climbers roughly 150 feet back into the crevasse. It completely buried Koester as he was swept against the wall of the crevasse and partially buried Little, whose arm and head were exposed. Little spent about 30 minutes extricating himself from the snow that had set up around him immediately following the slide. Once free, Little began a search for Koester. It took Little about an hour to locate Koester and dig his head clear. Koester had no pulse and was “very blue.”

Little left the accident site and descended the Ingraham Glacier back to his high camp near Cadaver Gap. There, he packed up the team’s equipment and continued onto Camp Muir. During his descent of the Cowlitz Glacier, Little used a family service radio to attempt communication with authorities. A hunter near Naches picked up his transmission and placed a 911 call for Little and reported the accident. The NPS was notified at 1658. Twenty minutes later, having arrived at Camp Muir, Little called the park on Camp Muir’s emergency public radio and provided more specific information. Little then descended to Paradise and met with park rangers.

The following day, NPS climbing rangers Mike Gauthier, Bree Loewen, and Adrienne Shered with the assistance of an MD 500 helicopter performed a body recovery. An analysis of the fracture, slide, and ramp area was not possible, due to lingering instability in the snowpack, time limitations and deteriorating weather

Analysis:

A recent storm had laid down only a few inches of snow, but high winds had served to transport the new snow significantly, scouring many areas of the upper mountain while creating pockets of wind slab on others. Crevasses are not only one of nature’s ultimate terrain traps but also tend to accumulate large amounts of fresh snow on ramps and ledges during wind events.

October is not a typical time of year for avalanche accidents. The fact that Koester and Little chose to wear avalanche beacons on the day of the incident, however, seems to indicate that they were aware that they were in avalanche terrain and that there was a possibility of a slide occurring. The climbers made no physical assessment of the snow stability on that day or the previous one.

As the use of avalanche transceivers becomes standard practice in alpine climbing, it also appears possible that there may be an increasing disconnect with the reasoning of wearing such a device. If donning an avalanche transceiver gives the user a reassurance of safety against the consequences of an avalanche then perhaps the wrong message is being received. If wearing a transceiver increases the amount of risk one is willing to take on a given day, something has gone wrong.

(Source: Glenn Kessler, Climbing Ranger)