

Government Meadows Avalanche Accident, February 2, 2000

Time and Date: around noon, February 2, 2000

Location of incident—Government Meadows, south-central WA Cascades, just east of the Cascade crest about 10 miles N-NE of the Crystal Mt ski area

Number in party—2; 2 caught and totally buried. First victim buried about 1 foot below the surface and able to self extricate after ~1/2 hour. Second victim found 5 hours later by searcher through visual contact with helmet. This victim was transported out to the trailhead and airlifted to Madigan Hospital in Seattle. Treated for carbon monoxide poisoning and released. This remarkable outcome is described below.

Type of activity—snowmobile

Elevation—4800 ft

Aspect—North-northeast

Slope angle—38 degrees

Preliminary Avalanche classification—SS-AM-R3-D2.5 (estimated)

Other avalanche information: ~20 inch (53 cm) soft slab, propagated from apex to ~300 ft width; slide ran about 250 ft vertical before reaching a gully at the bottom of the drainage.

The snowmobiler avalanche accident described by the two accounts below occurred on February 2, 2000, near the Government Meadows area, about 10 miles to the north-northeast of Crystal Mountain Ski Area in the south-central Washington Cascades.

Ancillary Weather and Avalanche Information from the NW Weather and Avalanche Center

Avalanche and weather-wise—In the back country avalanche forecast issued at 8 AM on the 2nd of February, the NW Weather and Avalanche Center had forecast a generally high avalanche danger above 4 to 5000 feet, with the main avalanche threat expected from heavy dense wind slab overlying buried surface hoar. The avalanche incident occurred a day after NWAC had issued an avalanche warning for high to extreme danger. It also occurred immediately after a widespread natural avalanche cycle on February 1st, with warming and sustained heavy snow loading which stressed several buried weak layers and resulted in closure of both US-2 Stevens Pass and I-90 Snoqualmie Pass for much of the day. Although slow cooling and numerous natural avalanches had helped to begin stabilizing some of the highly unstable snowpack observed on Tuesday, Feb 1st, a significant danger of large human triggered slides remained--especially on north through northeast exposure slopes showing no evidence of recent avalanche activity.

Accident Investigation and narrative provided by Doug Blanchard, Snow Safety Director, Crystal Mountain Professional Ski Patrol

On Wednesday Feb. 2, two snowmobilers were caught in an avalanche east of the Cascade Crest in the Government Meadows area. The slide occurred near noon at an elevation of 4800', ran about 250' vertical into a gully at the bottom of the drainage. The slide was initiated by the riders, had a crown of 53 cm and propagated from the apex to a width of 300'

The circumstances surrounding the rescue are remarkable to say the least. As the slide was triggered both riders tried to race their machines out of the path of the avalanche. One rider described 3 waves of snow hitting him. The first buried him up to his waist, the second up to his neck and the third swept over his head. He ended up with a sapling near his hands and by shaking it, he was able to create an air pocket and establish enough freedom of movement to begin digging himself out. After nearly half an hour he extracted himself and spent the next hour searching for his buddy. Having no success he began hiking out. After 2 hours he met another group of riders and told them of the buried rider. This party had a cell phone and called 911. In the meantime a single rider, Troy, had come upon a set of boot tracks leading out of the drainage on a snowmobile track. He assumed someone had stuck their machine in deep snow and hiked out. He continued riding until he came across one of the party that had been notified by the survivor and was told they were searching for a set of boot tracks out of the avalanche. Troy said he could lead the other guy to the boot tracks and they rode over to the drop into the drainage. They stopped and discussed riding down and the one searcher thought his Phazer would get stuck. Troy had a powerful machine with 2" paddles and thought he could get in and out. He rode down to where he identified the avalanche path and debris and began to search. At this point some of the information is vague.

After searching the area he established voice contact with the other party and still couldn't locate him. The next thing to occur was a helmet which was spotted at the surface. Troy went over to the helmet and found a hole with the other victim's head about 1.5 feet below the surface. He was standing and had lost both his boots and socks trying to climb up the hole. Troy pulled him out of the hole, wrapped his exposed extremities in some material and drove him out to Government Meadows where a MAST helicopter transported him to Madigan Army Hospital. His burial time was over 5 hours but he had ripped his face shield off his helmet and had used it to dig and scrape his hole to get to the surface. When he was buried his machine had been running full throttle and he was unable to shut it off. At one point he became very concerned about carbon monoxide poisoning but it is unclear if he ever lost consciousness or how long the machine kept running. We are waiting for word back from Madigan on his condition.

A visit to the site the day after the incident (2/3/2000) gave us a chance to get some snow data from a natural avalanche of similar aspect and elevation but less exposed to the hazard approaching the site. The snowpack was 260 cm to the ground. At the Crystal study plot the previous two days we'd received 18" of new at 4500' and 2.66 water equivalent. There had been a brief period of rain at the base but we found no crust in the new snow at the site. A shear test above the fracture line produced a very easy shear at 53 cm. on 4 to 5 mm surface hoar. The slab above was a 4 finger hardness layer of heavily rimed crystal and graupel with a wind packed surface. Our shear test was done on a 32 degree slope with a north aspect. The slope that caught the snowmobilers was 38 degrees.

On Friday, 2/4/2000, the sheriff and Forest Service personnel visited the site prior to a snowmobile rally this weekend. Upon arriving at the site they found 2 snowmobile tracks into another slide, this time with exit tracks. This is the slope that kept us from accessing the burial site on Thursday. They said debris had flooded the bottom of the drainage. Two more naturals were observed further to the east. Both were similar aspect and elevation.

A recovery effort for the buried snowmobiles was scheduled for this weekend. The rider who survived the long burial said he was going to sell all his equipment after 28 years of riding. The previous weekend Troy had released another avalanche from a ridgetop on the west side of Mt. Rainier. He jumped off his machine and slid down the slope behind it and spent the next 9 hours digging out his machine.

Article courtesy [Tacoma News Tribune](#), 2/4/2000

Snowmobiler buried in avalanche 'just started praying ... '

Puyallup man digs 5 hours to free himself after partner goes for help

02/04/2000 –Written by [Hector Castro](#); --Tacoma News Tribune Staff

Snow from the steep slope above them slid toward Bill Lewis and Ken Hough, but neither thought much of it Wednesday as they snowmobiled near Greenwater. Hough wasn't alarmed even when a wave of snow swamped his snowmobile and pinned his feet. Or when a second wave covered him, letting enough light through that he knew it wasn't deep. Then the third wave hit. "It was an earth quaking, thunderous noise that made everything go dark and just compressed all the snow around me like concrete," the 35-year-old Eatonville man recalled Thursday.

Nearby, Lewis, 30, also was buried in the avalanche that struck the two about 12:30 p.m. as they rode in a valley near Naches Pass. Lewis freed himself from a foot of snow on top of him in about 20 minutes. "I was so exhausted," the Puyallup man said. "I just lay on top of the snow." Trapped under much deeper snow, Hough dug for five hours before he was clear, long after his companion and rescuers thought he was dead. "I was thinking, 'What am I going to tell his family?'" Lewis said.

The two friends and business partners - they own BNK Homes in Puyallup - have been snowmobiling together for two years. Hough has been an avid snowmobiler for 28 years. Wednesday, they arrived at Government Meadows in Hough's truck, hauling a trailer loaded with four snowmobiles, including two new models they each bought specifically for off-trail snowmobiling. Riding the new snowmobiles, the two were cruising slowly through a ravine bounded by steep sides when the slide buried them.

"I just started praying for everything I was worth," Lewis said Thursday. "I wanted out of there so bad." During his struggle to free himself, Lewis kept hollering for his friend, assuming Hough had avoided the slide. Lewis last saw Hough riding at full throttle, fighting to avoid the oncoming snow.

"That sled was screaming as loud as it could," Lewis said. "He was trying to outrun it."

But Lewis soon realized Hough had been buried. He started to dig, trying different spots for the next hour in a futile attempt to find his friend. Hough's snowmobile kept running for at least 15 minutes, but Lewis heard nothing. Then he made the painful decision to leave Hough behind and go for help. Crawling up the slope, it took more than two hours for Lewis to make it through often waist-deep snow and reach a trail. "I knew it was getting dark soon and it was already starting to snow," Lewis said. "I was at least 11 to 12 miles from the truck, then I heard a snowmobile."

Exhausted, Lewis ran to an intersection in the trail where he met a group of snowmobilers. Hearing what had happened, one of the group, Troy Larson, raced to the area where the avalanche had occurred. Lewis went with the others to get help. They ran into more snowmobilers, one of whom had a cell phone and called for help. The group then went to the snow park where Hough had left his truck and waited for

rescuers. By then it was after 4:30 p.m. Hough had spent the hours digging his way out - fighting the snow, the lack of air, the fumes his snowmobile and despair. "I thought about scratching some stuff in the snow, scratching out my last will and testament," Hough said.

Mostly, he thought of his fiancé and his four children. "I wasn't going to let them down," Hough said. "I was going to fight until there was nothing left."

Using his hands, his helmet visor and some tubes torn from the helmet, Hough dug a small hole to the surface. It was another battle to free his body enough to get one foot on top of his snowmobile. Hough was just reaching the surface when Larson reached him. "I will never forget looking up through this little hole and seeing this face," Hough said. "He kind of had a grin on his face and big eyes of surprise. That was a good thing to see."

When Larson helped Hough out, the exhausted snowmobiler was missing his boots and a sock. Other snowmobilers arrived and shared their boots, their socks and their coats with Hough. A helicopter flew him to Madigan Army Medical Center, where he was treated for carbon monoxide poisoning. Hough spent Thursday resting at home. He and Lewis say they are through with snowmobiles. "I made a lot of promises in that hole," Hough said. "One was that I wasn't going to be selfish with my time and risk my life. The snowmobiles are going bye-bye and we're going to buy a nice camp trailer."

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