

A cold new year in the valley of tears

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SPARWOOD, B.C. — At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 81 erupts with paper bugles honking and ragged cheers.

The hall is half-empty. The revellers, with their plastic hats and streamers, try to muster a good time in a town deep in mourning. The DJs keep the music upbeat for a mixed crowd of about three dozen. A few people are up dancing to Abba. Most, however, sit and nurse their drinks.

On any other New Year's Eve, partygoers in Sparwood, B.C. would be lined up outside the door. Not tonight. Most parties have been cancelled as the town of 4,000 prepares to bury eight men killed in their prime. The families of those men grieve at home tonight. But in a one-industry town where everyone is connected, there are people here sitting in the corners, quietly sharing stories about the co-workers and friends they've lost.

Three days earlier, in the Rocky Mountains, a fast, lightweight helicopter thundered over the Harvey Pass on a search-and-rescue mission in the southeast corner of British Columbia.



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Residents of the small town of Sparwood, B.C., look over printed lists of public memorials to be held that were posted in the window of Greenwood Florists, on December 31. *(Chris Bolin/Globe and Mail)*

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The crew was responding to a distress signal sent out by a Sparwood resident, one of 11 men caught in a series of avalanches in an alpine bowl, a favourite backcountry spot for snowmobilers.

The call came in just after 2 p.m. on Dec. 28. Big Horn Helicopters pilot Greg Goodison lifted off in a B2 AStar Eurocopter from his base in Fernie at 3:30 p.m. with four search-and-rescue team members aboard. Mr. Goodison zeroed in on snowmobile tracks heading into a bowl and traced them to a large slide. Then, despite the flat light, he spotted what rescuers had hoped to find: Signs that someone had walked away. "We followed their footprints to them," he said.

The helicopter would eventually land and pick up three men who had set out that morning for a day of playing in the backcountry.

The other eight remained buried under snow at an elevation of 6,000 feet.

'SLEDHEADS' UNITED

The 11 men who set out on Dec. 28 were bonded by friendship, family and work. One cousin survived and another didn't; a father and son died together. Most of the men grew up here, hunting, fishing and honing their skills as "sledheads" in the East Kootenays, about 240 kilometres southwest of Calgary, when they weren't working in the coal mines or for companies that support the five mines in the valley.

The men ventured out in two separate groups and only met up once their nightmare had begun. On Dec. 27, while the groups were preparing for their outing, the Canadian Avalanche Centre posted a risk assessment that rated the danger at the tree line as "considerable" in the Elk Valley, "moderate" if you stayed down below. But a special warning noted that mountain conditions in the region were deteriorating. "People are keen to get out, and have time to do so over the holiday period, but don't let your enthusiasm, or that of your friends, carry you to places you'll regret later on," it said.

Warren Rothel, a true father figure, was the key organizer of one snowmobiling group planning to get up well before dawn and head for Golden, northwest of Sparwood.

The 33-year-old felt responsible for the seven men in his group. "Warren took care of everyone, he was so protective," said his wife, Erin Sevinski.

Mr. Rothel worked at a fabricating shop, Rayco Steel, but like many in this town, his passions were the the outdoors and fast machines.

When there was no snow, he threw himself into “mud bogging” with trucks. But with fresh powder, he wanted to get out with his RX1 turbo Yamaha snowmobile, after spending \$7,000 on upgrades just two weeks earlier.

Ms. Sevinski never missed a sledding trip herself. But this time, a cold convinced her to stay home with the couple's children, four-year-old Austin and one-year-old Hailey.

Early that Sunday morning, he checked weather conditions and made plans while loading up his 2007 Dodge diesel truck to haul four sleds. Three others would travel with him: James Drake, 32, Leonard Stier, 45, and Mr. Stier's 20-year-old son, Michael.

The foursome were more than sledding buddies. The day before the trip, Michael had spent the day playing video games with Mr. Rothel's young son. Mr. Drake and Mr. Rothel's wife are cousins.

The elder Mr. Stier and Mr. Drake both worked in the mines. Mr. Stier had just been promoted to foreman at the Elkview Mine, while Mr. Drake's work at the Fording River coal operation left him time to pursue what he loved – getting outdoors. “Those boys always played together – the same sports, hunting, fishing,” said his sister, Danielle Drake. He and Mr. Rothel were inseparable.

Also in Mr. Rothel's sledding group were Jeff Adams, 29, Danny Bjarnason, 28, and Kane Rusnak, 30.

Mr. Adams had just purchased a \$13,000 snow machine and poured another \$10,000 into tweaking it just so. Mr. Bjarnason had also bought a new sled and was looking forward to a season of riding with family and friends. He worked at the Line Creek Coal mine, but snowmobiling and dirt bikes were his passions, as well as those of his partner, Theresa Roberts.

Mr. Rusnak has an 11-year-old son, Joey, and worked at his father's company, Crowsnest Properties and Development. His father, Rod, called him “super-wrench” for his instinctive mechanical skills. He had so many Snap-On Tools the company gave him leather jackets for free, recalled his sister, Bambi Bodie.

The group pulled out of town around 4 a.m., but they hit poor road conditions.

Mr. Rothel fired off a text message to his wife a little after 6 a.m., telling her of their change of plans.

“He said he was going to Harvey [Pass] and would be home by one,” Ms. Sevinski said. The message ended: “I love you.”

SLEDDERS SET FORTH

Meanwhile, the second group was making similar preparations, but with a different destination in mind. They were excited for their first ride of the season in Harvey Pass.

Kurt Kabel, 28, and Thomas Talarico, 32, rode in one vehicle.

Mr. Kabel grew up ski racing, hunting and riding horses, when he wasn't hanging around with his twin, Terri – his big sister by six minutes.

Mr. Kabel trained to become a machinist in Calgary. It was the only two years he spent away from Sparwood. Once he was offered a job back home, “he took it in a heartbeat,” said his mother, Charmaine.

In April, Mr. Kabel married his long-time sweetheart, Lori. In July, his son, Eric, was born.

Mr. Talarico spent Saturday at a friend's wedding. The married father of two, Madison, a toddler, and Payton, just a baby, had been asked to help lead a major computer system overhaul at Elk Valley Coal.

The two other members of the smaller group, Jeremy Rusnak, 32, and Blayne Wilson, 26, headed out together.

Jeremy Rusnak lived just down the road from his cousin Kane, who was sledding that day with the other group of men. Jeremy was a groomsman last spring at the wedding of Mr. Kabel, who he'd be riding with that day. Mr. Rusnak left his wife, Amy, and their 11-month-old daughter, Carly, at home before heading out the door.

Mr. Wilson, the youngest of four children, developed his taste for excitement early. When he was three years old, he hopped on his father's snowmobile and crashed it through a snow fence, his brother Derrick said.

“You didn't see him in town. You'd see him in the bush,” said Amy Morrow, Mr. Wilson's partner of nine years.

When the four men set out at a leisurely hour bound for the Harvey Pass area, they spotted the vehicles of their friends. Mr. Rothel's truck was distinctive, with its eight-inch lift kit and 37-inch tires.

They thought, “We'll go catch up, see them and have lunch,” said Ms. Morrow, “All it was, was just lunch.” She expected him home for supper.

SNOWBOUND

In the fresh snow, the tracks of the first group would have been easy to follow.

Around 1:40 p.m., the big group paused as Michael Stier's snow machine got stuck well below the tree line as the crew traversed the valley floor. As they tried to dislodge his sled, a cornice hidden above the clouds cracked from the monstrous cliff, sending snow careening down the mountain, burying both Michael and Mr. Adams. Mr. Bjarnason rushed to the rescue, pulling a stunned Mr. Adams from the snow as others tried to find Michael. That's when the smaller group of four showed up and jumped into action.

Mr. Kabel hit his newly purchased GPS device to signal for help. Back in Sparwood, his family got a call from the service provider in Texas asking where Mr. Kabel was.

“Jack knew right away something was wrong,” Mr. Kabel's mother said. “But because Kurt pushed the button, we were hoping against hope he had just come up upon something.”

Five minutes after the distress call, a second avalanche came down, burying all 11 men. Mr. Adams managed to float to the surface and holler to his friends. He heard only Jeremy Rusnak's voice and used his bare hands to dig his friend out. The pair had set their sights on helping Mr. Drake when they heard the crack of another slide, sending them running for their lives.

“Don't leave me here. Don't leave me here,” Mr. Drake screamed. “We kept saying, ‘We're sorry,’” Mr. Adams said.

After the snow cloud settled, they went back for their friend.

But there was not a soul in sight. They heard a signal from Michael Stier's transceiver, but he was buried so deep, there was no way to get him out. The slides had swept away all their survival gear including shovels and probes.

The trio made what Mr. Adams called the “gut-wrenching decision” to walk away. It was too risky to stay. They looked back one more time, but the mountain would not relent. A fourth slide buried their friends one last time.

THE SURVIVORS ESCAPE

By the time the search-and-rescue team spotted three survivors, the trio had limped several kilometres from the avalanche, following an old resource road.

Mr. Drake was draped over Mr. Adams's shoulders. Mr. Drake's bright green jacket – purchased to match his Arctic Cat M700 snowmobile – was gone, along with his mitts, helmet and tuque. He had been buried three times and by the time his friends had hauled him out in a panic, he had a dislocated shoulder and punctured lung.

Seven bodies were pulled from the valley on Monday. It would be another day before Mr. Bjarnason's remains were found, buried maybe a metre away from where he saved Mr. Adams from the snow.

The bodies were lined up in separate rooms at the Fernie hospital, their names written in felt marker on each door. Relatives were escorted in to identify their loved ones. “You could hear the grief coming from behind each door in room after room after room after room,” recalled Pastor Shawn Barden, who was on hand to support the grieving.

That would be the next time Charmaine and Jack Kabel saw their son. “We looked at our son and went home,” Charmaine said.

At the hospital, Kane Rusnak's sister, Ms. Bodie, wanted everyone to know the men did nothing wrong by enjoying the sport they loved. “He wasn't this irresponsible thrill seeker,” she told the pastor. “They really knew what they were doing.”

Mr. Drake and his sister spent part of New Year's Eve sitting together as he recovered from his injuries. She said he is too traumatized to talk about his ordeal, but he told her he would be dead if not for the determination and willpower of Mr. Adams and Jeremy Rusnak. “He was buried three times. He was ready to give up,” Ms. Drake said. “Jeff poked and prodded and said, ‘you're coming with us.’”

His physical injuries are nothing compared to the survivors' guilt. “He doesn't want to go back there,” she added.

Sparwood's mayor, former Mountie David Wilks, spent the holiday planning tomorrow's public memorial in the local hockey arena, expected to draw up to 7,000 mourners.

One woman started calling every resident to see if they had extra rooms for out of town guests. Local floristCarolynn Elliott has been swamped with orders for the families of the victims, every one of them someone she knows, and is relieved to keep busy.

The hard part is delivering to the families,” she said. “I'm sending my husband.”

Most folks around here wouldn't have thought it possible, but somehow, the tragedy has linked this small town even closer. And outside, as the snow piled up and the mercury dipped just below zero, the roar of a snowmobile could be heard passing by.

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