

Accident Write-up from ACC Edmonton Website

<http://alpineclub-edm.org/accidents/index.asp>

CAC Accident Information

Date: 20/01/2003 Activity: Backcountry Skiing Mtn Range: Selkirk Mtn Range
Location: La Traviata West Province: BC
Loc. Descr.: Selkirk Mountain Experience tenure

ACC Accident Write-up

Eight American back-country skiers were killed and a number of others rescued after an avalanche crashed down a mountainside Monday in eastern British Columbia. The slide came down near the Durrand Glacier, 37 kilometres north-northeast of the town of Revelstoke in the Selkirk Mountains. There were conflicting reports of how many people were caught in the avalanche, which happened late Monday morning. Some reports put the group's size at 20 but Ian McKichan, regional coroner for the B.C. Interior, said it was a party of 10 people and a guide. McKichan said eight died and two were injured. The B.C. Ambulance Service's dispatcher in Kamloops, B.C., received a call at 11 a.m. about the disaster, said spokesman Bob Pearce. The bodies and injured skiers were located on the remote mountain by search-and-rescue workers and airlifted to hospital in Revelstoke. At least one was in stable condition but Pearce said the status of the other victims was not known. "There are five ambulance crews at the heliport in Revelstoke where a makeshift morgue has been set up in the hangar of Selkirk Mountain Experience," which Pearce said had handled the skiing excursion. A coroner was also on the scene, he said. Selkirk's Web site says the Revelstoke-based company was founded in 1985 and caters to adventurers who enjoy the mountains. It describes the area around Durrand Glacier as "very remote and wild." The adventure travellers were ski touring, which involves a helicopter ride to a mountain hut or base camp and ski trips in the area. "They wear special ski gear, climb up hills, lock into their skis and ski down," said Clair Israelson, director of the Canadian Avalanche Association in Revelstoke. "These are true back-country skiers." McKichan said avalanche conditions in the area Monday were rated as hazardous, but he did not know if they were moderate or extreme. Israelson said the slide wasn't forecast and had it been, he said he is quite sure the group would not have gone out. The Canadian winter sports industry has an excellent record when it comes to protecting people from avalanches, he said. "In the past five winters, 70 people have died in avalanches in Canada," said Israelson. "Of those, five were involved in commercial operations such as this. "I think that's a pretty good safety record for the industry, considering they're out there every single day of the winter season." Of the 70 fatalities, Israelson said 50 occurred in British Columbia, at a rate of about 10 per year. The province has already lost 10 people to avalanches this winter, he said. The association and tour operators spend a lot of time and money staying current and maintaining the highest standards when it comes to predicting avalanches and protecting the public, he said. "If we had one area we struggle with it's that we need to understand more about what makes an avalanche trigger and how to better predict them," said Israelson. Canada is the only country in the world where government-based funding isn't available for such research, he added. McKichan, who is based in Kamloops, B.C., said there was no preliminary report on how the slide victims died. "I can only assume that for some of them it's going to be asphyxia from being buried," he said. "But I don't really know any further information as to type of terrain that they were in, whether there was trees or anything like that." UPDATE: Officials now say seven skiers were killed by the snowslide near Durrand Glacier in eastern British Columbia Monday. Three are Americans. The others are from Canada. Officials earlier reported eight Americans had been killed. Authorities say two of the American victims are from California and another is from Colorado. No identities have been made public. Police said one other skier was hospitalized while the rest of the group of 21 avoided serious injury. UPDATE: B.C. avalanche victims buried under four metres of snow Last Updated Tue,

NOTE: Write-ups originally copied from ACC website by Jeff Boyd during summer of 2007; extracted from CAA Accident database and converted into PDF format by Pascal Haegeli on May 19, 2009. Accident information (first section) comes from CAC avalanche accident database.

21 Jan 2003 17:57:45 VANCOUVER - The avalanche that killed four Canadian and three American skiers on Monday was a wall of snow as much as 30 metres wide and 100 metres long, the RCMP said Tuesday. The bodies of the victims, recovered Monday, were buried under three to four metres of snow, Sgt. Randy Brown said. Well-known snowboarder Craig Kelly was among the dead. An eighth person was buried in the slide, but was not badly hurt and has been released from hospital in Revelstoke. The avalanche occurred north of Revelstoke. By the time rescuers arrived, about 90 minutes after the slide began, survivors had dug out all of the bodies, Brown said. The skiers were among a party of 24 who took a helicopter to ski on the Durrand Glacier 55 kilometres north of Revelstoke, B.C. The group split into two parties. The lower group of 11 people was caught in the slide. Three people "were able to extricate themselves," Brown said, and they dug out the injured person. The dead are: a man from Canmore, Alta., aged 50; a woman from Calgary, 25; a man from New Westminster, B.C., 30; a man from Nelson, B.C., 36; a man from Littleton, Colo., 49; a man from Los Angeles, 50; a woman from Truckee, Calif., 39. The names will be released when the relatives have been contacted. Thirteen people in the party were unharmed, Brown said. The survivors and some emergency crew members – up to 20 people – will be brought to Revelstoke once the weather clears. Brown said the RCMP is in contact with the people at the mountain lodge, who can hear a helicopter sent to get them but cannot see it. The glacier is a remote but popular back-country skiing destination that attracts tourists from all over the world. The owner of the café where the group had eaten before heading up the mountain said the people in the group seemed to be very fit and experienced. Layne Seabrook also said the group had a top-notch guide. "He's well known around the world for his guiding abilities. When it comes to guiding, he's known as a guru," said Seabrook. The avalanche hazard in the Selkirk Mountains, north of Revelstoke is listed as "moderate." Clair Israelson, with the Canadian Avalanche Association, says the snowpack seemed to be stabilizing, but it is still a dangerous time. An average of 10 people die every year from avalanches in B.C. Up until Monday, there had been two deaths this winter on B.C. mountains.

UPDATE: Updated 1/22/2003 8:37 AM Survivor recounts deadly avalanche CALGARY (AP) — First there was a loud crack, and then the avalanche came — a 100-foot-wide wall of rock-hard snow that buried seven backcountry adventurers, including snowboard pioneer Craig Kelly and three other Americans. John Seibert said the avalanche was "like swimming down the roughest river." Legendary snowboarder Craig Kelly was guiding the group and was among 7 killed. John Seibert said Tuesday he never seen anything like it in more than three decades of climbing mountains, skiing desolate slopes and kayaking wild rivers. "It was like swimming down the roughest river I've ever been in and trying to keep my head above water," Seibert, 53, said of the avalanche that thundered 300 feet down a remote British Columbia mountainside on Monday. He was lucky, riding the avalanche until it left him buried except for his head and left arm. The seven who died were buried deeper, up to 15 feet down, and suffocated. None of the other 13 in the group was injured. "If you get caught in one of those things, you can't flex a muscle, let alone breathe," said Ian Stratham of the Revelstoke ambulance service, who arrived at the scene about two hours after the snowslide. Seibert, a geophysicist, said the weeklong backcountry ski trip to a mountain chalet accessible only by helicopter was dedicated to safety, starting with a seminar Saturday on using the avalanche beacon each member carried. He said he detected no signs of trouble as the skiers and snowboarders, divided into two groups, worked their way up a steep slope Monday. Then he heard a loud crack. "A few seconds later, the moving snow swept me off my skis and I started down the slope," he said. "It's like being in white water until it stops, and then it's like being in concrete." Survivors helped each other dig out and located the dead, with rescuers arriving by helicopter within 35 minutes. Some stayed on the mountain Tuesday until a helicopter could return for them. "There was nothing in my mind that was a warning sign we should not be on that slope on that day," he said, calling the tragedy "a fluke of nature." Sgt. Randy Brown of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said investigators were looking at what caused the avalanche. The remoteness of the area contributed to confusion in the hours following Monday's avalanche. Initial reports said eight skiers died, all of them American, out of a group of 11. Later, Brown said seven people died from a group of 21 skiers that split into two groups on the mountain. All the deaths were caused by lack of air, said Chuck Purse, the British Columbia coroner. He said none of the victims suffered traumatic injuries. Clair Israelson, director of the Canadian Avalanche Association in Revelstoke, noted that only one other avalanche was recorded Monday in

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the Selkirk Range, which he called an unusually low number. Avalanche safety became a national issue after former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's son, Michel, was killed in a 1998 avalanche. Michel's brother, Justin, started an avalanche awareness group. To Seibert, the danger is part of the experience. "I think the risk is well worth the reward," he said. "I've skied 35 years and this is the first time I've been caught in something like this."

UPDATE Jan 23-03 REVELSTOKE, B.C. -- The avalanche that killed seven back-country skiers in eastern British Columbia appears to have been simply a tragic accident, RCMP said yesterday. Investigators returned from Durrand Glacier, about 55 kilometres north of Revelstoke, Tuesday night with no evidence Monday's slide was triggered by the skiers themselves, Sgt. Randy Brown said. "There's nothing for us to believe that it's anything other than just an accident," Sgt. Brown told a news conference. There were actually three separate slides on the mountain Monday, he said. Although one let go just below where the top group of skiers was traversing the slope, Sgt. Brown said there was no evidence the upper group set off the slide that engulfed 13 people, killing seven. The police's role now is to support coroner Chuck Purse's fact-finding investigation, he said. "We're not looking for any type of criminal negligence. That's not where our investigation is leading," said Sgt. Brown. Seven skiers and snowboarders died in the avalanche. Despite the tragedy, several members of the group involved in the slide were continuing their holiday. "The other four skiers that were involved in the incident have elected to stay up at the ski lodge and they'll be skiing there at least till Saturday," said Sgt. Brown. Mr. Purse also revealed the preliminary result of post mortems on the seven victims. "The cause of death was classified as asphyxiation," he said. The dead were crushed by a wall of snow 30 metres wide and almost 100 metres long that packed to the consistency of concrete, survivor John Seibert said Tuesday. Thirteen of the 21 skiers and snowboarders were completely or partially buried up to 3.5 metres deep. Their companions and guides from Selkirk Mountain Experience, which organized the trip, dug them out within about 30 minutes, still too late for seven of them.

UPDATE Jan 24-02:VANCOUVER -- The avalanche that killed seven skiers and snowboarders near Revelstoke started some distance from where the victims were traversing the slope, the guide who was leading the group said yesterday. "It was almost like a bomb took off beside me," said Ruedi Beglinger. "For a tenth of a second or less it was quiet. Then it felt like a missile fired off ... the whole ground was vibrating." Mr. Beglinger somberly described Monday's avalanche while television cameras rolled in the dining room of the same Revelstoke inn where most of the skiers had stayed before helicoptering into a remote lodge on the Durrand Glacier for a week of back-country skiing. With his wife Nicoline occasionally putting her arm around him, Mr. Beglinger carefully detailed all the safety precautions he took before he led 21 skiers up the slope that would later tumble down on them. It was an accident that despite 28 years of guiding -- 18 of which were spent on the glacier -- Mr. Beglinger said he couldn't have avoided. A preliminary RCMP investigation in Revelstoke has come to the same conclusion. "I always say, the mountains, especially the high mountains, are the perfect place where the incredible happiness and the biggest sadness are extremely close together," Mr. Beglinger said. "Unfortunately at 10:45 on the 20th of January the line jumped to the other side." Seconds after the avalanche, Mr. Beglinger radioed his wife in the lodge, setting into action the avalanche rescue plan. "I looked down and saw the worst nightmare a human can ever imagine," he said. "I knew right away this avalanche is extremely deep and we need to get down there fast." He slid down the slope on his rear, still talking on his radio. He used avalanche transceivers -- which can send and receive a signal -- to locate each of the buried in under 10 minutes. Seven of the buried were dead from asphyxiation before skiers reached them. Six survived. "It's very sad that we lost such wonderful people and I grieve with the families very deeply, but we can also say we saved six lives," said Mr. Beglinger. His company is now busy preparing for the next batch of skiers, who will arrive today for a week in the back-country. Despite the North America wide attention the avalanche has received, no one has cancelled, he said. UPDATE: REVELSTOKE, B.C. - Ruedi Beglinger, the Swiss-born mountain guide and operator of Selkirk Mountain Experience, said yesterday the avalanche that killed seven guests at his remote mountain lodge earlier this week was like a bomb going off, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent the tragedy that followed. Mr. Beglinger, 48, who has spent almost 30 years as a professional backcountry guide, has never experienced such a powerful force as the massive snow slide that caused the side of a mountain to collapse below him. He said the avalanche on Monday near the Durrand Glacier in eastern B.C., likely was caused by a

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"settlement" in the snowpack, a naturally occurring phenomenon in which snow slumps under its own weight. Mr. Beglinger, who spends about 280 days a year in the mountains, said he has seen and felt settlements before, but nothing on this scale. It released energy so powerful the mountainside shook, causing a primary and two smaller avalanches that buried 13 people out of a party of 21. "That settlement of the snow, it's a 'whump' noise. I have heard many noises like this in my life," he said. "But this was different. This was very loud. It was almost like a bomb went off beside me. A great big noise. And then -- it was maybe for one-tenth of second or less -- it was quiet. And then it felt like a missile firing off." Mr. Beglinger, accompanied yesterday at a news conference by his wife, Nicoline, 40, said he was devastated by the deaths, the first clie