

A crack, slide and a desperate dig

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-  Video
-  Comments 
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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
DECEMBER 29, 2008 AT 10:48 PM EST

SPARWOOD AND VANCOUVER — The group of 11 snowmobilers — old friends, two cousins, a father and son — set out on their snowmobiles well before daybreak Sunday from their homes in Sparwood in southeastern B.C. for the 500-kilometre trip to Revelstoke.

The men, most in their 20s and 30s, some married, some with infant children, some so close they referred to each other as "the wife," had been snowmobiling together for years, even conducting search-and-rescue operations for other lost or buried sledders.

But the roads soon became so bad they decided to pull off the highway and head for familiar grounds closer to home in the Harvey Valley. They had worked their way into a pass at the bottom bowl of the valley by 10:30 a.m. when the first snowmobiler into the bowl got stuck.

Two sledders, one of whom was Jeff Adams, headed in to help him when a cornice let go and buried the three of them. One dug himself out and the other eight snowmobilers came to their aid. That's when a second cornice gave way burying all 11 sledders.



Staff Sgt. Lorne Craig, with Fernie, B.C. RCMP speaks to the media about eight missing snowmobilers Monday. (*Jeff McIntosh/The Canadian Press*)

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One man still missing

CTV Newsnet: The search for the last man missing after two avalanches will resume Tuesday morning, ahead of another storm expected in the area

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RCMP on avalanche deaths

The bodies of several snowmobilers have been dug out from underneath an avalanche in Fernie, B.C.



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Sparwood Mayor David Wilks said they probably heard a crack when the slab broke off. "But once you hear the crack, it is too late. These avalanches come down at hundreds of miles an hour. You have no opportunity to get out of the way."

After 15 minutes, Mr. Adams and Jeremy Rusnak dug themselves out from debris and called out for survivors. They heard James Drake's voice and started digging. They got one of his arms out — dislocating his shoulder in the process — but before they could pull him all the way out, a third cornice broke.

"The two that had freed themselves ran for cover in a treed area," Mr. Wilks said. "These two brave souls went back, found him [Mr. Drake] and were able to bring him out of

the snow after 15 or 20 minutes."

All of their gear — shovels, probes, gloves — was buried under metres of snow. They had no way of digging or doing anything to help the remaining eight who were buried. They decided to walk out.

"We lost all our stuff," Mr. Adams later told his mother, Deb.

"It was at this time these three guys had to make a serious decision that hopefully none of us ever have to: start walking back towards Fernie to get help or try and find those that are still under the snow," Mr. Wilks said.

One sled was still on top of the bowl that they might have reached. But they also spotted another cornice that might break loose. And it did.

"That was the right decision," Mr. Wilks said. Ten minutes after leaving the area, another slab of snow, which was probably the largest, fell off, burying the whole bowl.

"They got out just in time," Mr. Wilks said.

Mr. Adams was in rough shape when Mr. Wilks saw him yesterday. "Physically, he's beaten up but the mental part is killing him. He's going through a process of 'Why wasn't it me?'" Mr. Wilks said.

"They did not give up on their friends," Deb Adams said, insisting media reports be corrected that suggested the three chose to walk away rather than dig for their friends. Yesterday, search teams recovered seven bodies. One is still missing. Mr. Adams lost his two best friends in the slide.

Mr. Rusnak spent yesterday recovering at his rural home. People there and answering his phone declined requests for interviews. He lost his cousin, Kane Rusnak, in the slide.

Mr. Drake was also recovering from the ordeal.

"I'm his brother and he won't even talk to me right now," his brother said when he answered the door.

All over Sparwood, people talked about the accident and their friends in disbelief. Everybody in the community of 3,954 seemed to be connected to the "valley boys."

Friends described the adventurers as "knowledgeable sledheads" who were experienced with search-and-rescue equipment including transceivers, shovels and probes.

"I can't go up there and help with the search because they're friends," said one man as he gassed up his pickup truck, a snowmobile in the back.

He was out sledding Sunday in a different area and declined to identify himself, but said he sledded with at least four of the men.

He chalked up the accident to bad luck, acknowledging the activity does involve risk.

"It's sad. Really sad," he said.

"More people are killed in the area by vehicle accidents compared to the amount of snowmobilers," he said, adding that these incidents give backcountry use a black mark.

"It's an eye-opener for everyone who lives here too. People will respect it a little more," he said.

The area where the avalanches occurred is described as a normally pleasant area to ride with some extreme terrain. Despite the huge recent dump of snow, the area would have been impossible to engage in what's known as high-marking — riding up the side of a mountain and travelling back down. There were too many stumps and boulders in the valley and not enough snow.

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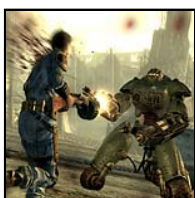
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