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Long-time Nelson resident John Buffery is one of the most experienced and respected mountain guides in Canada. He's travelled the world, safely leading clients, pro athletes and cinematographers through some of the most spectacular, and consequently dangerous, mountain environments on the planet. But even for the smartest, most calculated avalanche safety experts, the unexpected can rush upon you in a wave of destruction.

This is the tale of one such incident, deep in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia. While guiding a film crew off of the Astral Star, a 36-metre helicopter-armed yacht moored at the top of Knight's Inlet, Buffery would have one of the most harrowing moments in his 28 years of working in the mountains.

9 SECONDS IN A SIZE 4 AVALANCHE

By John Buffery

Pro skier Dan Treadway signals for stoke, shortly before all hell breaks loose deep in BC's Waddington Range. Photo: Adam Clark

March 27, 2007

12:06:00

Clear Skies. -11 Celsius. Light SW winds. West Whipped Cream Peak, 2,620 metres. Foot penetration 35cm. NE aspect. 46 degrees inclination. Observed 40cm fracture line on west shoulder of this concave alpine bowl, probably 72 hours old.

12:20:00

Mike King's Bell L4 helicopter drops part of the shooting crew off at a wide saddle adjacent to the lines skiers Dan Treadway, Billy Poole and Bryce Phillips intend to ski. Mike then flies to the summit of Whipped Cream Peak, located in the southern Waddington Range, dropping off skier and guide Stian Hagen and cinematographer Jane Mauser. Immediately the two move into position in preparation for filming.

12:24:00

Mike is on final approach to the flat glacier pick-up spot to lift the remaining crew: Treadway, Poole, Phillips, photographer Adam Clark, and myself. Our pick-up location is 700 metres in elevation below and 1,400 metres horizontal distance from the summit of Whipped Cream Peak.

12:25:26.0

Stian postholes down from the summit toward an easy entrance at a sinus between two cornices.

Powder Playground



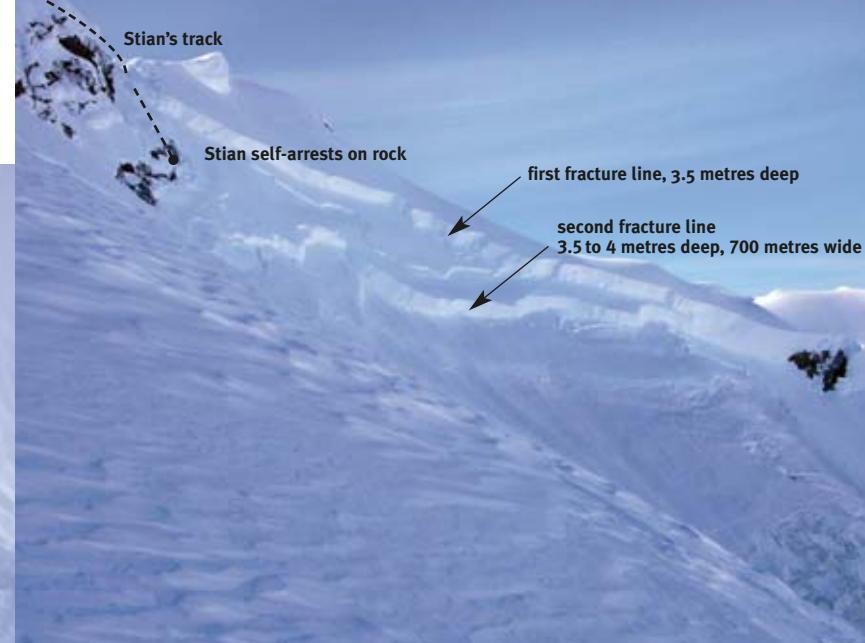
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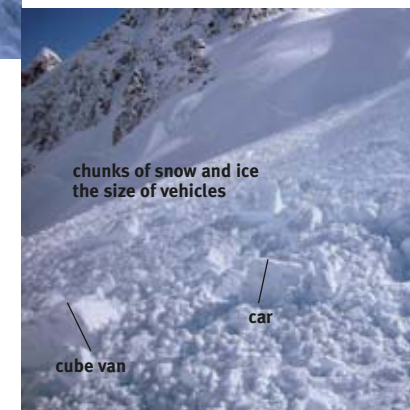
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Photos: John Buffery



A SEARING, CLEAN CRACK SPLITS BETWEEN STIAN'S FEET, 12 METRES BACK FROM THE SLOPE, PEELING DOWN THE FACE WE HAD INTENDED TO FILM, DIRECTLY TOWARDS WHERE JANE IS STANDING.



12:25:27.0

A searing, clean crack splits between Stian's feet, 12 metres back from the slope, peeling down the face we had intended to film, directly towards where Jane is standing.

12:25:27.5

Stian is plummeting but able to grasp on to a rock ledge, as he watches Jane catapult from the root of the cornice, through the air, fumbling into the churning 700-metre-wide avalanche.

12:25:28.0

A second slab avalanche steps down an additional four metres onto the glacial bed surface of the slope.

12:25:28.5

Jane dislocates her shoulder fighting to stay on the surface of the avalanche caused by the first four-metre fracture, but does not succeed, settling into her tomb.

12:25:29.5

Jane is scooped up in the second avalanche. Her final fight leaves her sitting at the edge of the slope's last bench, as the accelerating, chunky slide catches up to the first wave.

12:25:30.0

While this is happening, I'm down on the glacier below loading the skis into the helicopter's basket, readying to lift the two skiers into position. As I head toward the co-pilot's seat, I observe the size 4 avalanche. It's no more than three seconds away from impacting our idling, loaded helicopter. I think it is impossible to be in the path of an avalanche this far out on the glacier with the noted instability I had researched in my snow profiles.

12:25:30.5

Treadway, Poole, Clark and Phillips look up from the back seat when they hear my exclamation "Avalanche!" above the spinning blades. They respond loudly to the pilot, "move, move, go, go!"

12:25:31.5

I lurch the co-pilot's door open to see Mike looking into the back seat wondering what the commotion is about. Glancing back up at the snow tsunami, I interject: "Mike, avalanche!"

12:25:32.0

As I hold the door open, I weigh the survival odds: jump in with thousands of spinning, turning metal parts encased in plastic or run in the opposite direction and try swimming in the now 10-metre-high breaking face of snow.

12:25:32.5

Mike pulls on the middle collective stick. I understand the engine does not have enough rpms to fly, but I think Mike is correct in changing the angle of the revolving, spinning blades to catch the wind of the avalanche. As I dive onto the seat, with my foot hooking the door partially closed, the air blast launches us up and backwards.

12:25:33.0

Sirens are blaring as we're swallowed in the white powder cloud, and I watch the waves of snow pass just underneath the skids. The bucking, whipping and tossing of the helicopter seem to be caused by the sheer force of the air that is displaced by the powerful avalanche.

12:25:34.0

Spinning, out of control helicopter, no seat belt on.

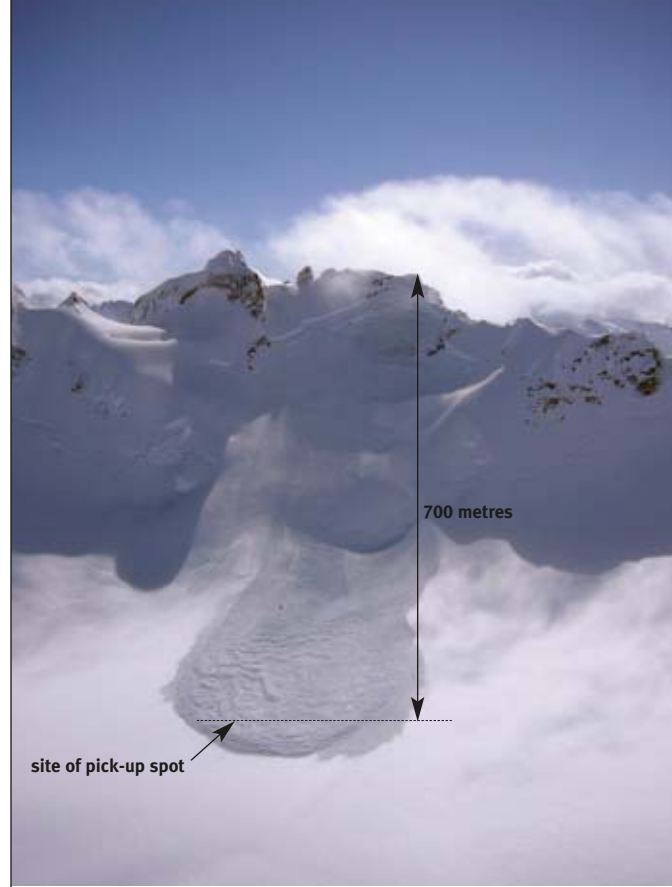
plan A: be a rock star



plan B: get a rock solid education

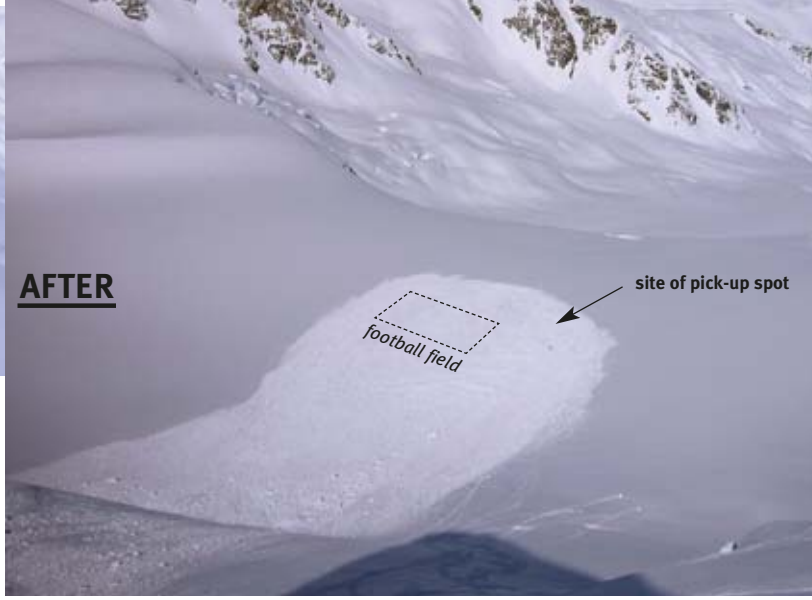
Let's face it, a career in rock'n roll is a big roll of the dice. A solid education that trains you in a specific field will get you career mileage for years to come.

Whatever you choose for your future, Selkirk College can help you be a star in your field.



Photos: John Buffery

I GAWK AT THE EIGHT-METRE STEPPED FRACTURE LINE ON A BLACK GLACIAL BED SURFACE — A CLIMAX AVALANCHE. IT IS ONE OF THE LARGEST SLIDES I'VE EVER SEEN.



12:25:34.5

I remember my fallen friends Sarah and George. Their heli went down because of clogged snow in the engine's air intake.

12:25:35.0

The shooting crew on the summit are stupefied to witness the tail boom of the helicopter swing out of the powder cloud and dip back in. They're sure we're going down.

12:25:35.5

A flash of blue sky is revealed across the front bubble, as I find my seat, buckle up and shut the door tightly.

12:25:36

Because of our pilot's superb instinctive pedal and stick reactions, we fly out of the turbulence straight and level from the settling avalanche.

12:26:00.0

Jane is standing tall on the slope's second bench, 400 metres from the summit that Stian is climbing back onto. I hear the radio confirm what I see. "They are both all right."

12:30:00.0

After leaving the pro riders on the glacier, Mike toes the heli into the steep slope and picks up Stian. I help Stian as he traverses along the skid into the back seat, suspended hundreds of metres in the air above the incident site.

12:30:10.0

I gawk at the eight-metre stepped fracture line on a black glacial bed surface — a climax avalanche. It is one of the largest slides I've ever seen.

12:31:00.0

We're parked between large chunks of five-month-old cornice debris on the second bench. Stian assists Jane into the back seat.

12:35:00.0

On the glacier, it takes a couple of minutes to further assess Jane's dislocated shoulder, load skis and begin to shuttle our crew back to the Astral Star. "Mike, please don't shut off the heli when you refuel."

12:38:00.0

Stumbling to a better vantage of the bowl, I pull out my camera. A deep breath sinks into me as I observe and try to understand what just happened.

13:13:13.0

We fly very high and far away from Whipped Cream Peak.

