

# Preparing for the Avalanche



The sun rises while search and rescuers participating in multi-agency avalanche training exercise prepare in staging area to dispatch people to the four different avalanche sites in Hatcher Pass and the Independence Mine State Recreational Area on Sunday, Dec. 16. The orange tent served as a warming tent for those coming back from the field.

PHOTOS AND STORY  
BY BETH IPSEN, PIO

Emergency response vehicles were parked next to family Subarus at the Independence Mine State Recreational Area December 15-16. Children raced down on sleds and adults swooshed down mountainsides on skis and snowboards after the arduous hike up.

But there was more activity than just recreationalists enjoying the snow at Hatcher Pass.

The more-than-usual activity was a weekend full of avalanche rescue training for a multitude of search and rescue agencies and volunteers. The first day was spent going through training on how to find a person buried beneath avalanche debris using beacons and avalanche probes. They also trained for recovering and tending to the subject after the recovery.

For many of the 60 people there, the training was a refresher, or as Andy Dietrick of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group and Alyeska Ski Patrol said, “to knock off the dust from the summer.”

On the second day, the knowledge and skills were put to the test.

Four avalanche scenarios were created and run by the incident command that tasked volunteers with searching the areas and combing the debris for people. Somewhere around 60 searchers including skiers, snowshoers, snowmachiners, search and rescue dogs, incident managers, Alaska State Troopers and

AST’s helicopter, Helo 1, spent the day shuttling between the four avalanche areas. Many skied to the top of Hatcher Pass and spent hours probing the mountainside for subjects trapped beneath the snow.

One recreational skier remarked as he headed out for a day of telemark skiing – a mixture of downhill and cross-country skiing – it was comforting to see all the emergency responders in the area.

Like the day of training where temperatures dipped as low as zero degrees, avalanche search and rescuers often spend long hours in sub-freezing weather combing the landscape for a virtual stranger.

And they do it for free.

Training Incident Commander Dean Knapp, who’s been involved with Alaska Mountain Rescue Group for nine years, said what sparked his interest in the rescue side of wilderness adventure was to ensure the safety of his son, who at an early age, accompanied him on many of his rafting and climbing trips.

For Knapp, whose son is now 26 and climbing big rocks and kayaking whitewater all over the northwest, knowing somebody is willing to drop everything to rescue his son if he’s in trouble gives him comfort – something he hopes the people in Alaska feel as well.

“Every person we look for is somebody’s son, daughter or husband,” Knapp said. “Their family and friends count on us to drop whatever we’re doing, get into the area, be highly organized, search with

dedication and competence, do everything possible to help and not get hurt ourselves.”

“That means the pager going off at 1:37 a.m., and getting up and going,” Knapp said. “But what could be more important?”

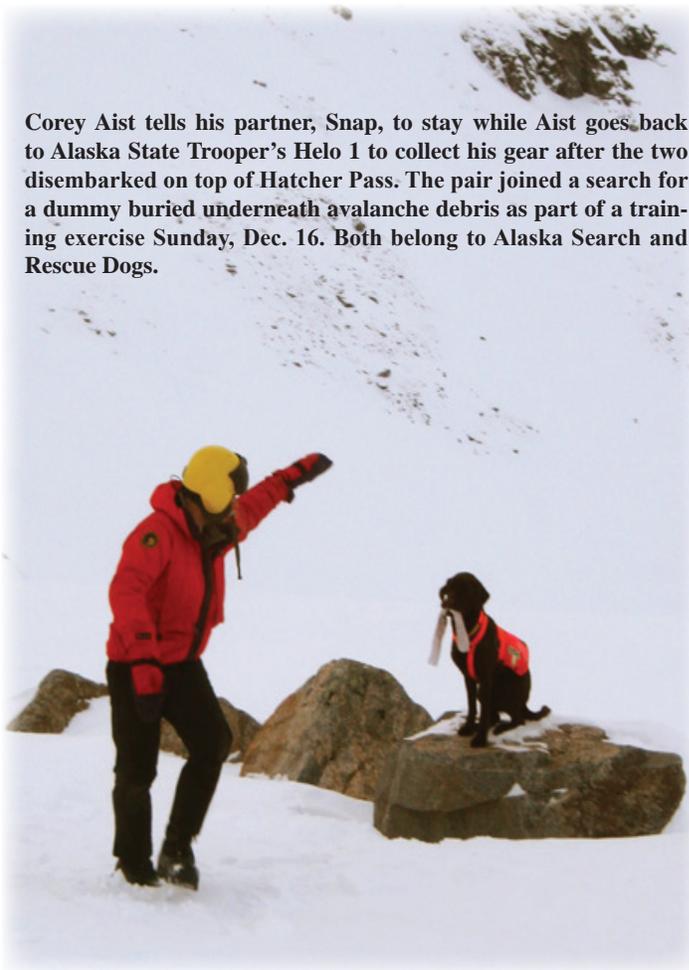
Corey Aist of the Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs put his years of experience teaching, guiding and playing in Alaska’s backcountry to good use, first as a member of the Nordic Ski Patrol, then as a member of ASARD after seeing a rescue dog in action on an avalanche. He said the first few years require training three to four times a week. It’s a lot to ask of a volunteer, but he believes he’s “paying it forward.”

He works aside Snap, a 7-year-old chocolate lab, who is his second partner since joining ASARD in 1994.

“It’s not only search, its obedience, temperament, chaotic situations, gunfire and other loud noises,” Aist said. “Dogs must be comfortable with the uncomfortable. Chaos must be the norm for a search dog.”

The ASARD dogs are the “most loyal partners and unconditional friends,” Aist said. “The biggest downside is they leave us far too soon.”

Alaska State Troopers rely heavily upon these volunteer search and rescue organizations. By state statute, the Department of Public Safety is responsible for overseeing search and rescue operations within the state. Sometimes that responsibility is shared with the U.S. Coast Guard or the Air National Guard’s Rescue Coordination Center. Seventy to 75 percent



Corey Aist tells his partner, Snap, to stay while Aist goes back to Alaska State Trooper’s Helo 1 to collect his gear after the two disembarked on top of Hatcher Pass. The pair joined a search for a dummy buried underneath avalanche debris as part of a training exercise Sunday, Dec. 16. Both belong to Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs.

of all SAR operations are done by volunteers on behalf of the DPS and the Alaska State Troopers.

“Without the search and rescue volunteers, the Alaska State Troopers would be extremely limited on our ability to do search and rescues across Alaska,” said AST Lt. Barry Wilson, who took over as the statewide SAR coordinator six months ago. Wilson was also shadowing Knapp who was coordinating the avalanche response during the training at Hatcher Pass.

As of 2007, there are 45 volunteer search groups



Jill Missal of the Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs uses a RECCO unit to detect a reflector buried underneath the snow. Missal, who is also an avid backcountry downhill skier, turned the unit in different directions until she picked up a signal from a reflector during one of the training sessions at the multi-agency avalanche training at Hatcher Pass on Saturday, Dec. 15. The RECCO unit increases its volume the closer it gets to the reflector, guiding rescuers to the buried subject. Unlike beacons, which can hit on the rounded flux line sent out by a transmitter, the RECCO can take the searcher on a straight line to the buried reflector. Beacons of varying designs can cost hundreds of dollars, but have been increasing in numbers due to public awareness. They also can detect another beacon from 20 to 40 meters away, depending on the type of beacon. The reflectors, on the other hand, cost only about \$5 at an outdoor store and are increasingly sewn into outdoor gear. However, the RECCO unit is expensive and there are only a few in Alaska. They also have a range of about 20 meters.



Searchers line up in a line and probe in a 50-by-50 centimeter grid as marked by tape along the orange guidon cord. Once the searcher probes 50 centimeters to the left, then to the middle and finally to 50 centimeters to the right, the guidon is moved 50 centimeters forward with the searchers following. This is then methodically repeated over and over throughout the avalanche debris area. This method of probing greatly increases the probability of finding a person buried underneath the snow, but is monotonous. However, as session instructor Trish Herminghaus pointed out to those attending the training on Saturday, Dec. 15, SARs are about being thorough and finding people, not cutting corners to save time.

throughout Alaska. Knapp said AMRG has been called out about 40 times to help with SARs this past year. In 2006, volunteer search teams contributed to more than 13,500 hours of actual search time. This does not include time volunteers spend training.

A lot of extensive and repetitive training and planning is put into place beforehand in order for a search and rescue to be successful. And that planning

takes some practice.

The goal of December's annual avalanche training was to practice doing it the right way, not floundering or rushing things, but to take it slow, sometimes stopping and correcting actions.

"The concept is, everyone should be using these scenarios to practice good skills," said Paul Brusseau with the Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs. "When this



Planning Chief Scott Erickson, right, and Dean Knapp, incident commander for the avalanche training exercise in Hatcher Pass on Sunday, Dec. 16, go over information posted on a board at the Incident Command Post near the Hatcher Pass Lodge. The two were heading efforts to rescue subjects from four different avalanche scenarios.

**Alaska State Troopers' Helo 1, piloted by Mel Nading, comes in for a landing in the parking lot leading up to the Independence Mine. The helicopter is utilized virtually weekly for search and rescues both large and small.**

becomes a real event, it will be right from the get-go.”

Searchers included people from the Alaska State Parks, Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs, Nordic Ski Patrol, National Park Service, Alaska Avalanche School, Mat-Su SAR, Anchorage Fire Department, Mat-Su Emergency Services, North American Outdoor Institute, National Outdoor Leadership School Alaska (NOLS-Ak) and Backcountry Avalanche Awareness Response Team. Many of the people have been involved with numerous avalanche rescues within the Hatcher Pass area and used some of these experiences to illustrate a point when instructing others on things such as beacon searching and probing.

Many times, rescue missions are too dangerous to send in a person off the street. Within the various search and rescue organizations are people who have years of experience in mountaineering and wilderness travel, the right equipment and extensive additional training in search operations and technical rescue. Many hold some form of medical certification such as EMT or paramedic. Emergency room physician and AMRG member Herman Ellemberger was one of two who taught medical care for victims on Saturday. On Sunday, he manned the radio and relayed orders between field and command teams.

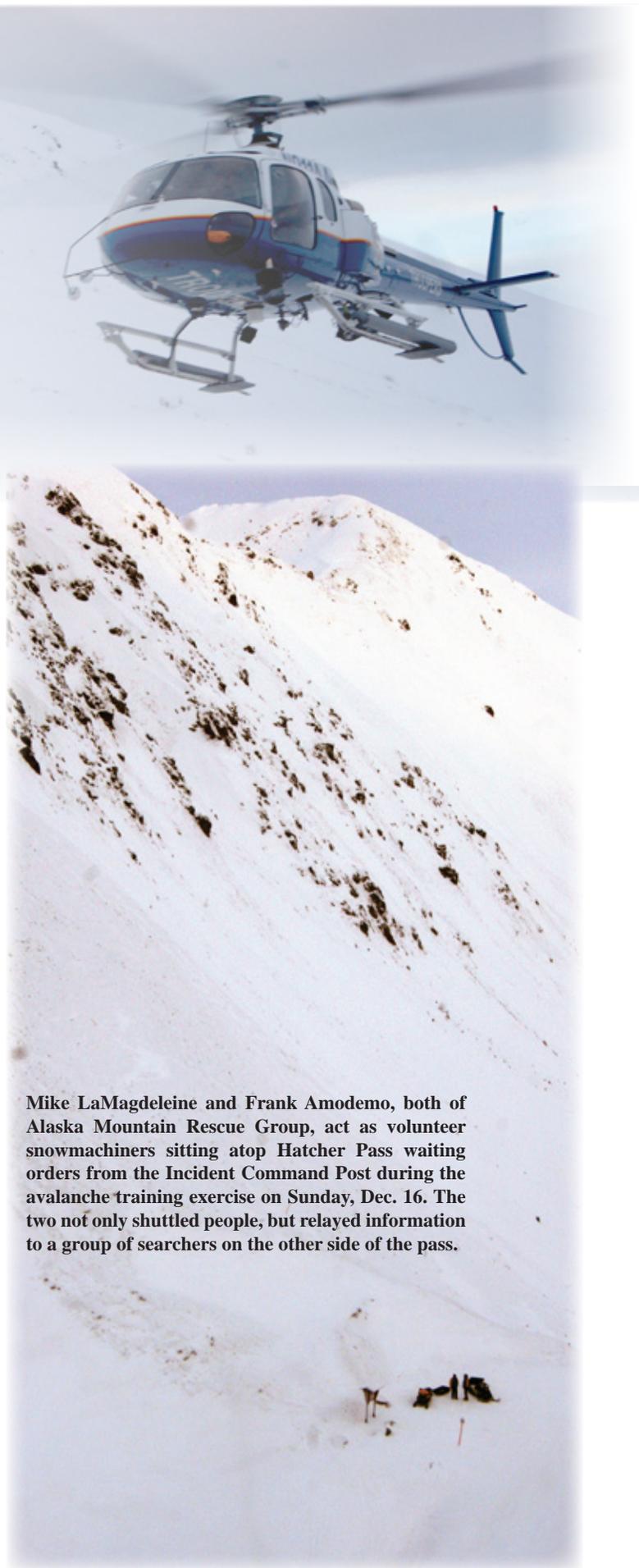
Unfortunately, sometimes a search and rescue can be for one of their own.

AMRG was tapped to look for the lost LifeGuard helicopter by searching the shorelines of Blackstone Bay near Whittier for signs of the helicopter and its lost crew.

On Sunday, those at the training observed a moment of silence for the lost LifeGuard medical helicopter crew. At noon, Knapp called for all rescuers working search dogs out on avalanche slopes and those shoulder to shoulder in probe pole lines to come to a stop.

Over the net, he called out “Rescuers down” and read the names of the crew and the patient who went down on a flight on Dec. 3.

After a pause, the activity started again with a message to be safe. ■



**Mike LaMagdeleine and Frank Amodemo, both of Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, act as volunteer snowmachiners sitting atop Hatcher Pass waiting orders from the Incident Command Post during the avalanche training exercise on Sunday, Dec. 16. The two not only shuttled people, but relayed information to a group of searchers on the other side of the pass.**