

Preparing for the Worst

Photos and article by Megan A. Peters

Negative and single digit temperatures didn't deter 50-some search and rescue volunteers from Southcentral Alaska to gather during the morning on Dec. 14, 2008 at the popular Turnagain Pass recreation area. The occasion for the gathering wasn't even for an emergency — it was a planned large-scale training operation designed to test their gear, skill and ability to work as a cohesive group with a common goal. The day before, they all went through refresher training in avalanche search and rescue methods.

Agencies participating in the training exercise included Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs, the Nordic Ski Patrol, Matanuska Search and Rescue, Life Med Alaska, Anchorage Fire Department and Central Emergency Services. Alaska Mountain Rescue Group was instrumental in the collaborated effort to organized the training.

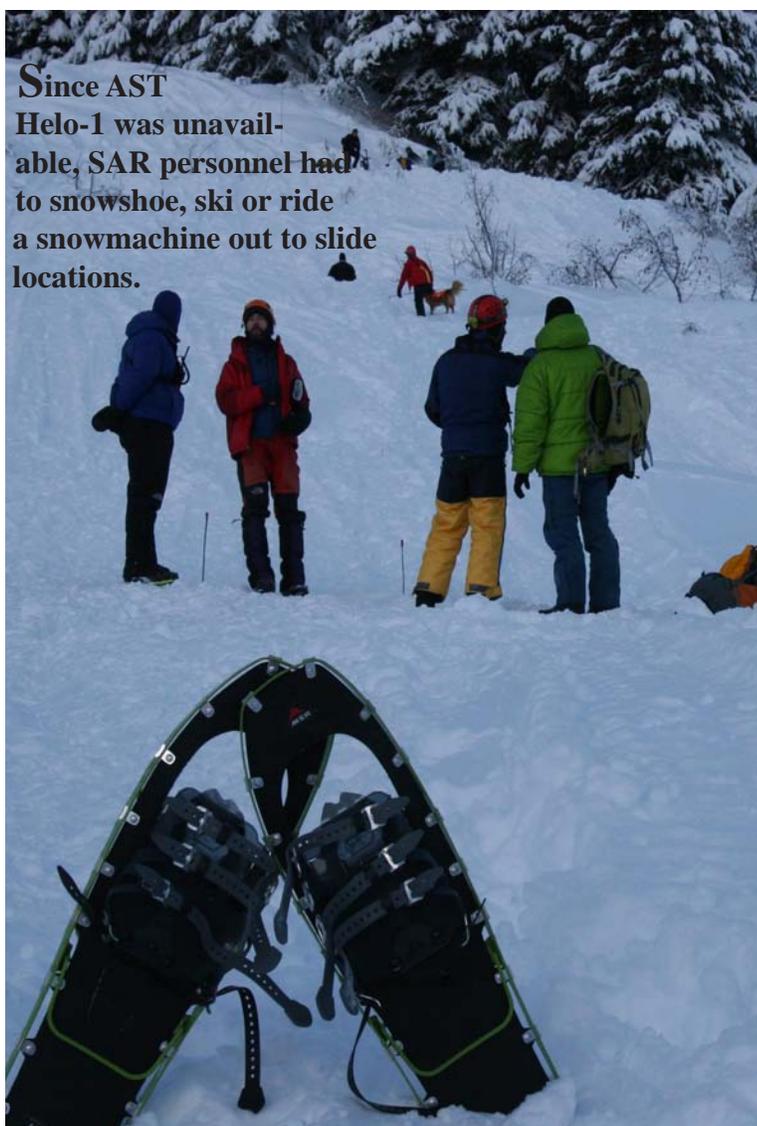
Before the sun came up the dozens of SAR volunteers were sorting through their gear, testing their safety beacons and adding a few more layers of clothing. They were preparing for a day of exhausting labor.

At 8:30 in the morning, the exercise began. Sgt. Bryan Barlow stood inside the Alaska State Troopers' mobilized command center briefing the incident commanders on a report of an avalanche with one person potentially buried.

About an hour before, a snowmachiner, who had been drinking, claimed to have triggered an avalanche and out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw someone in its path. When the slide stopped, he said he didn't see anyone around. Before leaving the avalanche site, the impaired snowmachiner marked his position on his GPS. Regardless of the sketchy information, the command staff determined that a group of SAR volunteers needed to be deployed.

During the course of the next few hours, three more scenarios were added. In all, the training encompassed four avalanches involving six victims. All incidents were located in an area two miles long and a mile wide.

"When events occur things are chaotic," said Corey





Aist, President of Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs and the acting Incident Commander for the mock events. “It is a logistical nightmare. You just have to work through it.”

AST’s Helo-1 was originally slated to participate in the exercise but poor weather conditions kept it in Anchorage. This meant all the SAR teams had to ski out to the various locations or be transported via snowmachines if any were available. Life Med Alaska, from Soldotna, was able to get its helicopter out to the staging area to participate in the training. To make the training as close to reality as possible, event organizers went out to the sites the day before and buried a snowmachine, duffle bags, clothing, avalanche beacons and dummies.

“Some had beacons, some did not. Some might have been found with our new RECCO units, some might not. Some had to be found the old fashion way with long sticks,” Aist said.

Rescuers had their work cut out for them. The scenario demanded that some rescue groups had to ski out to the area to search for the sites before they could search for the victims. It included climbing up steep terrain, probing and digging. They also had to cope with the cold. Once a dummy was located, its medical condition had to be assessed and arrangements for extraction had to be made. In two of the incidents, landing zones had to be established for Life Med Alaska’s Helo to come in. The dummies were carried to the landing zones and loaded into the awaiting chopper. Volunteers were both physically and mentally drained by the end of the day.



Volunteer SAR personnel and Trooper Josh Cook dig out a buried snowmachine and “victim” in Turnagain Pass. In the days leading up to the training, many items were buried in the backcountry to make the scenarios as real as possible.

“If you just do it as a table top you’re not cold, you’re not hungry — it’s not hard. You just don’t get the real life factors you get when you’re in the field,” Lt. Barry Wilson, Search and Rescue coordinator for the Alaska State Troopers said.

Speed and safety are always factors in avalanche-related search and rescues. The two often compete against each other—the length of time a victim is buried affects their survival rate but rescuers cannot go into an area that is still prone to avalanches. Also, rescuers cannot and will not go into the field until they have all their proper gear. This often includes safety beacons and radios.

Three real life incidents caused portions of the exercise to be put on hold. In one instance, a girl on a snowmachine crashed into a ditch. SAR personnel rushed to her aid. Medics treated her for a bloody nose and a mild concussion.

In a second incident, a snowmachiner going up a slick slope fell from his machine and slid down the mountain. The machine flipped head over tail and rolled over its rider. Once at the bottom of the hill, the rider got up and walked away. Volunteers that witnessed the event responded to make sure he didn’t need help. A while later rescuers returned to haul the unfortunate recreationist, his buddy and the snowmachine out. The machine refused to start after its tumble down the slope.

Finally, one of the exercise participants broke through some ice while out at one of the sites. His fellow searchers had to tend to his



-AVALANCHE FACTS-

The vast majority of avalanches involving injuries or fatalities are triggered by people either snowmachining, snowboarding or skiing.

Dry slab avalanches typically travel 60-80 miles per hour. They reach these speeds within about 5 seconds after they fracture. Wet avalanches usually travel much slower, around 20 miles per hour.

Natural avalanches occur because new or windblown snow overloads weak-layers or because of rapid warming, but there’s almost always obvious signs of instability by the time avalanches come down on their own.

-Colorado Avalanche Information Center

Before the sun was completely up dozens of SAR volunteers were already hiking into the backcountry of Turnagain Pass. Numerous Avalanches occur in this area through out the winter and spring months.





Volunteers leave an avalanche site after successfully locating and extracting an avalanche victim during the bi-annual multi-organizational training event.

“You will get cold. You will get tired. You will get hungry. Things will happen that are beyond your control. That’s why we train for the worst case scenario.”

-Lt. Barry Wilson,
Alaska State Troopers

needs immediately due to the frigid temperatures and the risk of hypothermia and frostbite. Once the partially-wet volunteer was extracted from the field, the group continued on with their scenario.

All of the avalanche victims were accounted for by 1:30 in the afternoon and all SAR volunteers, along with their gear, were out of the backcountry by 3 p.m. It was definitely a learning experience for all involved and areas of improvement were identified.

In all, the training was a success. The training brought together agencies that have to work together. It tested the preparedness of the volunteers and capabilities of the Southcentral SAR community as a whole.



SAR volunteers cleared a landing zone and set off red smoke to signal a nearby helicopter participating in the training.