

This incident report has been long in coming. Out of respect for all those involved, I have hesitated from publishing my experience. With the safety of the community of recreationalists who travel in avalanche terrain as my intended reader, I hope that this report will speak to you and you will take from it what you need to have safer experiences in the snow.

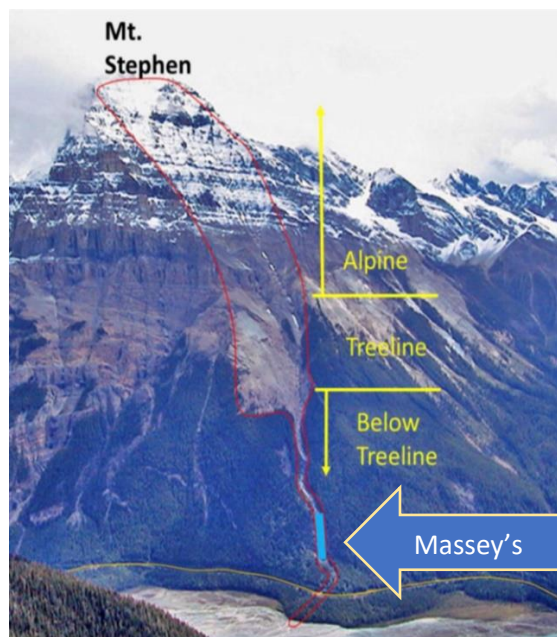
All information below has been shared with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, the guides involved in this incident and the clients who climbed Massey's. The ACMG has stated, in writing, it "is satisfied that it has a very clear understanding of what happened on the day in question. No substantial facts are in dispute." Here are those facts.

We pulled up to the Fireweed Hostel in Field, BC mid-afternoon on March 10, 2019 after a long day of ice climbing at Haffner Creek. This was the first day of a four-day climbing camp for nine clients, a camp manager and five guides. Sonja Johnson Findlater, the camp manager, asked me to help bring in the groceries from her car.

After dinner, ACMG guides Sarah Hueniken, Will Gadd and Merrie-Beth Board separate the women into three groups to discuss the next day's objectives. They explained that three guides would be joining the group the next morning, and Will would be leaving for a previously scheduled trip. With a storm forecasted for later that evening and the avalanche hazard increasing, there was a small window to climb in Field, and the guides seized the opportunity knowing they only had one day to climb the 'beer routes' the clients had hoped to climb. (Many of the women in the group were returning clients and had been unable to climb in Field in previous years due to the avalanche hazard; there was pressure - perceived or real - to climb in the area). Two groups, including one guide and two clients each, were to climb Massey's together. Merrie-Beth, who was to lead one of the groups on Massey's, explained to the four women that Benjamin Paradis would be arriving the next morning and leading the second group. Merrie-Beth discussed the approach - walking distance from the hostel, the grade and length of the climb - an easy forty-minute walk along the railway track, WI4 with four pitches and that we were to bring avalanche gear - transceiver, probe and shovel. There was no discussion of the Class rating of the climb (Class III, Black, Complex) as this time. Nor were we shown any photos of the route. There was also no discussion of mitigating risk while in avalanche terrain, safety briefing or companion rescue practice.



Massey's Waterfall Climb (Photo Credit: Dara Miles)



Terrain above Massey's (Photo Credit: Alpine Solutions)

Leaving the hostel at 7am on March 11, 2019, our group discussed how much warmer the air temperature was compared to the previous day at Haffner (-8C compared to -21C). The guides confirm that each client is wearing a transceiver and carrying a probe and shovel. The group leaves the hostel on foot along the railway tracks towards the climbing objective. The guides walked ahead, and the four clients walked behind, pacing themselves to the slowest client. As the group came together, Merrie-Beth stated, "I know we are wearing avalanche transceivers and carrying avalanche equipment, but if we had any concerns about avalanches, we wouldn't be here today." A few minutes later, Merrie-Beth repeats this statement. This led me to believe that the group has taken avalanche equipment in with them as 'ice-climbing good practice', rather than there being an overhead risk from an avalanche. A near fatal assumption on my part as I let my guard down. Avalanches were not mentioned again throughout the day.

As the group leaves the railway track, the group turns on their transceivers. At the base of Massey's, Merrie-Beth explains that each person is to dig out a small platform at the base of the climb, on which to place their pack and put on their climbing gear. The guides and clients spread out along the base of the waterfall to build their platforms. Once everyone is geared up, the extra gear and safety equipment – thermoses, shovels, probes and clothing - is left behind in a little cave behind a curtain of icicles.



The base of Massey's with the cave behind the icicles (Photo Credit: Dara Miles)

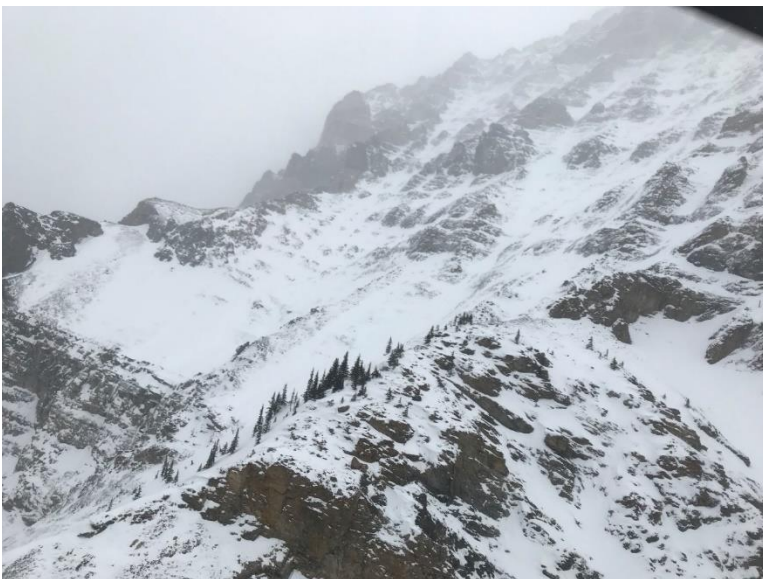
The guides lead up the first pitch together, one on the far left, one on the right. The clients of each group follow, one at time, side-by-side, with both groups arriving to two stations together. The guides then lead the second and third pitch and all four clients climb together, side-by-side, to avoid ice from falling on each other. This felt safe, social and expedient. On a flat section between one of the pitches, Dara's boot punches through the ice and her foot is soaked. She says she is ok, and the group continues climbing. Madeleine noted spindrift coming off Mt. Stephen, above and to climbers left of the group's position. It seemed substantial in size and duration, but insignificantly far away from where the group is climbing. I am unsure if the guides were aware of the spindrift.

Approaching the fourth and final pitch, the guides offer a client from each group an opportunity to lead. The guides set up a simulated 'sport-lead' scenario for the leaders – where 8-9 ice screws and draws were placed on a very short pitch. The 'leader' client led the pitch and the second client cleaned the route. This fourth pitch took up a significant amount of time. Sonja and I seconded this pitch, encouraging each other and having fun climbing side by side.

At the top of the route, around 1pm, the guides suggest an opportunity to set up a top rope for the clients to 'do laps' on the first pitch. All but one client is interested in this (because of her wet foot) and the offer is rescinded. There is a walk-off for this route through the trees, however, the guides choose to rappel the descent of the climb. The guides explain that the two groups will rappel the route together, one at a time, in two rappels. The apprentice guide descends first. At the end of the full rope length, Benjamin sets up an anchor of two screws for the group of six to anchor into. This hanging belay is awkward as six people are clipped into one focal point. Benjamin builds a V-thread anchor for the second rappel. As Benjamin moves from the main anchor to the V-thread rappel anchor, a client asks if the guide should back up the V-thread to the main anchor. The guide backs up the cordelette (not the rope) to the main anchor and continues to set up his rappel device and prussik. Being beside me, I mention to Ben to lock his carabiner (he forgot to do so when he was interrupted by the client's question about backing up a V-thread.) Instinctively, Benjamin squeezes the carabiner, confirms it's open, locks the carabiner and begins rappelling. Once the Benjamin reaches the base of the climb, each client descends one at a time, and Merrie-Beth cleans the station and rappels to the ground.

As Madeleine was rappelling, she mentioned that Sonja would like to practice building V-threads. Clients and guides begin to remove their harnesses, crampons and gear. Clients retrieve their stored equipment from the cave and put their belongings with their packs. They put on additional clothing, have something to drink and eat. Everyone leaves their packs and equipment on the platform they built for themselves at the beginning of the day. Dara, Madeleine, Michelle and the apprentice guide go to the waterfall and begin building V-threads. Benjamin demonstrates the strength of the V-thread by chipping away at the ice with his ice ax. Merrie-Beth is standing near the protection of the cave. Sonja is standing downslope and in clear view of Merrie-Beth, but meters away from the safety of the ice cave that the guide is standing.

Merrie-Beth takes a phone call and suddenly yells, 'EVERYONE....' and the group at the base of the climb instinctively leap towards the ice and crouches down. Snow begins pouring down, it is difficult to breath. I have my right hand on Dara's back; concerned that we will be buried from the feet up, I lift my head up slightly. The next moment I feel myself thrown backwards, tumbling rapidly downslope. I try to 'swim' and everything is black. It takes me a moment to realize I am in an avalanche. I pray that I don't hit a tree or rock. I remember learning that you can feel when the avalanche will stop and that is when you need to reach a hand to the surface and make an air pocket. I waited for it, and I felt there was a subtle but perceptible slow to the velocity around me and at that moment I put my right hand in front of my mouth to create an air pocket. I thrust my left forearm through the surface of the snow to create an airway just as the avalanche settled. I swept the snow from my mouth with my right hand. The snow settled around me like concrete. I cry out, "help me, help me, help me."



Starting zone of the avalanche; two bowls released (Photo Credit: Parks Canada)



The Base. Photo Credit: Parks Canada



The Runout. Photo Credit: Parks Canada



The V-thread. Photo Credit: Margo Talbot



Damaged Trees. Photo Credit: Jyoti Venne



Photos taken 3 weeks after the avalanche as I hoped this revisiting the site would provide closure for me

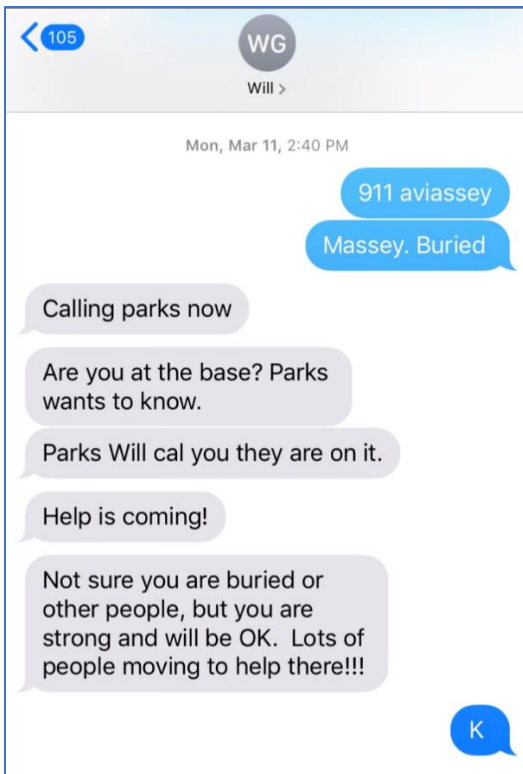
(Photo Credit: Margo Talbot)

I am told that once the avalanche stopped, a head count is taken, the guides notice two clients are missing. The group on the surface turns their transceivers to receive, Madeleine and Benjamin begin to search down the slope, Merrie-Beth begins digging in the snow around her feet for her pack with her safety equipment.

Benjamin finds me, fully buried, with only a hand waving above the snow. Benjamin pulls snow away from my face and neck. I confirm I am ok, that I have an airway and am uninjured. From further downslope, Madeleine yells out, "I have a signal, 1.8 meters." Benjamin leaves me and goes downslope towards Madeleine. They are now outside of my line of sight as the snow I am pushing away from me makes a wall preventing me from seeing anything below.

Merrie-Beth is screaming incoherently on the surface. I am unsure of who else is buried, but by the sound of the screaming I understand the situation is dire. I will come to learn that all the safety equipment has been blown away and buried in the avalanche. The group begins digging with crampons, helmets, an ice ax and sticks.

Merrie-Beth comes over to me. She is barehanded and needs gloves to dig out Sonja. I take off my gloves and give them to her. I am left bare-handed to dig myself out from the snow. I continue scraping the snow away from my body with my helmet. As I remove snow from my chest, I feel my cell phone in my jacket pocket and am surprised to have reception. I am able to get texts and calls out to the Sarah Hueniken, Will Gadd and Margo Talbot. I take a call from Sarah. I take a call from Parks Canada dispatch to confirm the avalanche and request assistance for multiple burials.



Texts with Will Gadd



Texts with Margo Talbot

Sarah arrives on site with a shovel and probe 20-25 minutes after the avalanche. She and her clients were driving back to the hostel from their climb when one of the clients in the vehicle pointed the avalanche out to Sarah. Sarah called Merrie-Beth to alert the group to the avalanche above, which gave Merrie-Beth just enough time to shout “EVERYONE...!” before the group was hit. Sarah called Parks Canada and the other guides in the area to request assistance for a rescue immediately after the avalanche hit.

As Madeleine had the last transceiver reading on the Sonja, she begins to probe. Madeleine has a strike and Sarah begins to dig frantically while the others clear that snow away. One of the clients from Sarah’s group arrives on site. The client is asked for her shovel. The client was told by the lead guide at the parking lot, “empty your pack of everything but your avalanche gear and follow me.” In the excitement, the client did not realize that the shovel and probe were part of the avalanche gear and those items were left behind at the car.

After 40 minutes, Sonja was dug out, her skin blue and not breathing. CPR begins. Scott McKay arrives on site and offers an OPA (oropharyngeal airway medical device) to assist in the CPR.

With Madeleine’s assistance, Michelle is extracted from the snow with the shovel. It has been almost an hour since the avalanche. Michelle, Dara and another client head down to the railway tracks.

Parks Canada sends in a rescue specialist on a long line to fly Sonja to the staging area. STARS is waiting nearby in Field, BC and flies the client to Calgary. Sonja’s brain is unresponsive to tests and she is declared brain dead the following day. Sonja was able to donate five organs because of the CPR she received.

I extend my continued sympathies to the family and friends of Sonja Johnson Findlater, she was loved by all. I am thankful for the efforts of my party to dig Sonja from the snow and to provide continuing CPR in the hopes of a full recovery. I am grateful for Parks Canada Rescue Specialists who risk their lives to assist others on what will likely become their worst day in the mountains. And above all I am indebted to those who have held me close in the worst days following the aftermath of the avalanche on Massey’s.

