

MEMORANDUM OF INTERVIEW

Subject: Steve Meleski  
Address: 3270 S Rimrock Rd.  
Moab, Utah 84532  
Date of Interview: February 13, 1992  
Time: 3:00 P.M.  
Regarding: Accident: Gold Basin Avalanche

On the above date and time myself, U.S. Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer Evan K. Lowry and Forest Engineer Aaron Howe conducted an interview with Steve Meleski. The interview took place on the Geyser Pass road midway between the junction with the La Sal Loop road and the Geyser Pass parking lot and trailhead on the Moab Ranger District, Manti-La Sal National Forest.

Steve Meleski was one of six persons who were caught in an avalanche accident in the Gold Basin area of the Moab District on February 12, 1992.

Meleski stated that he had recently completed an avalanche course and that he had 17 years skiing experience.

Meleski described the events of February 12, 1992 and the avalanche accident that he and five other skiers were involved in. He said that he together with Mark Yates, Maribel Loveridge, Bill Turk, Jeremy Hopkins, and Craig Bigler left the trailhead on the Geyser Pass road at approximately 10:30 A.M. He said they left as a group and went up Laurel Ridge, which is a good observation area which is safe from avalanches. He stated that there was not much new snow and it seemed very stable. They skied into Gold Basin as Mark wanted to check conditions there. They skied up the basin to the base which forms a large bowl or arch. This area of the basin is quite large and flat with the sides being very steep and dangerous.

Meleski stated that they stopped and ate lunch at approximately 1:30 P.M. He said that they heard a large settle but felt they were still on a safe good area. He said they continued on for a few hundred yards when they stopped and discussed whether they should go on. Some of the group were uncomfortable with continuing. At this time they had a major settle. Meleski stated that this probably sent a shock wave through the snow. All of a sudden Craig said here it comes. He turned and could see a slide or slides above them. It appeared to still be a ways off. The slide was soon on them and he said at this point it was each man was on his own. Meleski said he was facing the opposite direction as the others who were to his left. He said he thought about trying to ski it out but he still had his skins on and was not able to. The avalanche hit him and buried him pushing him downslope. His skis came off and he floated

towards the top of the avalanche. He said the slide seemed to be slowing but before stopping he was hit by another blast which again buried him and pushed him down. He again floated to the top as the slide finally stopped with his face only a few inches under the snow.. He was able to look around and yelled for help but did not get any answer.

Meleski said it took him about 15 minutes to free himself. He then surveyed the scene and could not see anyone. He noticed a brown object up slope and ran up but it was only a rock. He then began a grid search and after approximately 15 minutes got a signal with his beacon. He dug and after approximately 15 minutes hit a ski which he recognized as Mark Yates'. He continued to dig and after another 15 minutes was able to uncover Mark enough to perform CPR. Mark was buried in about 5 feet of snow and was very cyanotic with no signs of life. He began CPR and continued for approximately 15 minutes. He then looked up out of the hole and noticed a shovel waving. He ran and found Craig Bigler who was trying to free himself. He assisted Craig and then ran back and continued CPR on Mark for another 15 minutes. Mark was still very purple and cyanotic and had no pulse. He then left Mark and helped Craig in a grid search with their beacons. They were successful in getting two beeps which were Maribel Loveridge and Jeremy Hopkins. Hopkins and Loveridge were tangled together. Meleski and Bigler initiated CPR and continued for one half to one hour but were unable to revive them. There was no pulse and they were very cyanotic with no signs of life.

Meleski then said they were cold and it was beginning to get dark. They knew they had to get out so they located some gear and skis and returned to the trailhead at approximately 7:30 p.m. They continued to Moab and the Sheriff's office and reported the accident at approximately 8:30 P.M.

In response to questions Meleski related that the accident site was on about 30 degree slopes with the slides releasing above them on slopes of 40 degrees or more. He stated that they thought the basin was wide enough to be safe. He estimated the size of the slides to be one with a crown of 3 to 4 feet with a breadth of about 30 yards. The second one was also about 20 to 30 yards. Another slide to the left appeared to be even larger. The weather was clear to partly cloudy with temperatures about freezing. He said he had skied with Mark about 6 other times. He said they had done some pole testing during the day but had not dug any pits. They felt that conditions above them were very dangerous but that they were safe where they were. He also said that at the time of the accident some of the group were beginning to get nervous about continuing any further.

Other vehicles were coming down the road and it was necessary to discontinue the interview at about 3:30 p.m.

EVAN K. LOWRY,  
Law Enforcement Officer

Steve Melenski interview February 13, 1992.

Steve Meleski was in a group of six people skiing in Gold Basin in the La Sal Mountains, Manti-La Sal National Forest, on February 12, 1992.

Steve recently completed an avalanche forecast course workshop. He has been cross country skiing for over 17 years and believes he has a good awareness of snow conditions. Steve has been on the mountain with Mark Yates about 6 times before.

The group left the Geyser Pass trailhead at approximately 10:30 AM. They proceeded up Laural Ridge, a safe access route to the top that provides a good view of the mountain. They observed a few small avalanches had occurred in Gold Basin area on north facing slopes, otherwise, there was little indication of slippage.

The group left Laural Ridge, skiing down hill onto a wide flat area in Gold Basin. This area of the basin is quite flat in the bottom, with each side being steep/very dangerous. They proceeded up canyon, slope gradually getting steeper, to get a closer look of conditions on the North facing slopes.

After the group had lunch, between 1:30 and 2:00 PM, they heard a big settlement noise just as they resumed a course up canyon. They continued up canyon on a gentle slope. They skied for a quarter mile, or more without hearing any more settlement noises. The group then stopped to discuss if they should stop and turn back; some members indicated they were not comfortable with continuing on. At that time a major (loud) settlement noise was heard.

This settlement sent a shock wave through the snow up slope and caused a series of failures on the steep (45 degree) slopes above their location, at about 3:00 PM. The failures occurred up and around in the Mt. Tuk cirque. The crown was about 3 feet high; 2 adjacent failures were 30 and 20 yards wide respectively, a third separate failure was some 40 yards wide. Craig Bigler said "Here it comes" just before the avalanche hit.

Steve had skins on so he headed out to the side; everyone else moved out to the left. Steve's skis popped off as the avalanche hit, the force of the snow carried him down canyon. Just as he nearly stopped, a second blast hit him, pushing him further down canyon. Steve landed with his face 2 to 3 inches below the surface with his body completely buried. He proceeded to dig himself out, taking about 15 minutes.

Once free of the snow, Steve looked for the others. Mistaking a large rock for a body, Steve scrambled up slope help. He then began a grid with his beacon to locate others. After about 10 minutes he located Mark's position. It took about 15 minutes of digging to locate a ski; it took another 15 minutes to uncover Mark's body. Mark was buried under about 5 feet of snow and showed no signs of life when uncovered. Steve initiated CPR after digging Mark out. After some 15 to 20 minutes, Steve noticed a shovel moving. He then left Mark to assist Craig. Steve then returned to Mark but could not revive him. Craig located Maribel Loveridge and Jeremy Hopkins. The two dug them out but could not revive them after some 30 minutes (plus) of attempt.

Steve and Craig left the victims as it started to get dark returning to the trailhead between 7 and 7:30 PM. They reported the incident to the Grand County sheriff between 8 and 8:30 PM.

Craig Bigler interview, February 13, 1992.

The group was out to observe snow conditions and compare with predictions. There had recently been a 31 day period without any snow, followed by 3/4 small storms dropping up to 9 inches of new snow between Friday and Tuesday.

They observed no cornices, or wind blown snow, was noted. The group felt the new snow would bond to the old and not trigger a slide.

The group left the trailhead at about 10:30 AM, went up the Laural highway and into Gold Basin. They stopped for lunch at 1:30 PM and headed into the Turk Mtn. cerque at about 2:30 PM. They were on 30 degree slopes when the failure occurred above them on 40 to 45 degree slopes.

Typically 1 day per week 4 to 5 people accompany Mark and/or Craig "just to ski".

Craig is Mark's assistant, regularly scheduled to work 1 day per week. Craig is paid for the scheduled day but regularly accompanies Mark on other days.

The group was stopped at the time the avalanche occurred, discussing if necessary to go any further. They did not anticipate any dangerous conditions; snow was fresh but conditions did not appear unusual.

The typical day for field observations meant skiing between 10:30 AM and 4:30 to 5:00 PM. The incident did not occur 'at the end of the day'.

Avalanche occurred on North or slightly West of North facing slope.

Conditions were sunny and still. Quite warm. There had been some southwesterly winds blowing but not into the basin.

Only evidence of a fresh slide seen that day was a small slip at Telle Gold (?) on Southeast facing slope in steep shoot.