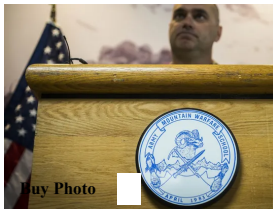


National Guard avalanche: Overconfidence played role in March incident

Jess Aloe, Burlington Free Press

Published 11:45 a.m. ET Sept. 19, 2018 | Updated 7:00 p.m. ET Sept. 19, 2018



(Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

Overconfidence and a flawed risk assessment approach all may have led National Guard troops into the path of an avalanche in the Green Mountains last spring, according to a nearly-200 page accident report released by the U.S. Army.

Six soldiers were climbing in an area of Smugglers Notch in Jeffersonville known as Easy Gully while training with the Army Mountain Warfare School in March. One soldier was able to swim to the side. The other five were swept about 900 feet.

The report, released in response to a Burlington Free Press Freedom of Information request, is heavily redacted. But the released sections paint a picture of a flawed decision-making process.

One instructor told investigators that he would have turned back if he had been climbing Easy Gully on a day off.

The instructor said he believed the soldiers underestimated the overall avalanche risk and overestimated their ability to mitigate conditions.

Another soldier, identified as the Advanced Mountaineering Course non-commissioned officer in charge, said he held an advanced rating in avalanche safety.

The sergeant first class "shared his belief that the decision to be training in Easy Gully was his job and responsibility and this accident rested fully on his shoulders," according to the report. "He felt his being overconfident in his avalanche mitigation contributed to the accident."

Risk guides, both military and civilian, warn that overconfidence is often a significant contributing factor when people are injured in avalanches.

The commanding officer told investigators he received no information that day indicating the high avalanche risk that day.

Buy Photo



Vermont National Guard soldiers on a training exercise load up gear at the gate to a closed section on Vermont 108 in Cambridge, Vt., just below Smugglers Notch on Wednesday night, March 14, 2018, after six soldiers were swept approximately 900 meters by an avalanche. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

But at least one soldier did worry: Expect to see an avalanche, he told a student as they drove to Smugglers Notch through the snow. He called the conditions "some of the most classic avalanche conditions he had ever seen."

Unseasonably warm weather, followed by days of intense snowfall, had created ideal avalanche conditions in Easy Gully.

Avalanche risk was not on the deliberate risk assessment worksheet because "we haven't had those conditions in recent memory," according to an interview with the school's commander included in the report.

The executive officer told investigators that he had only a brief conversation with the commander about avalanche risk after the students and instructors had left for the training exercise.

He said he had signed the risk assessment paperwork for the course after the commander was delayed in returning to Vermont because of weather. He later learned he lacked that authority, the report said.

Buy Photo



Vermont National Guard soldiers on a training exercise emerge from a closed section on Vermont 108 in Cambridge, Vt., just below Smugglers Notch on Wednesday night, March 14, 2018, after six soldiers were swept approximately 300 meters by an avalanche. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

The commander had identified problems with the school's Advanced Military Mountaineer Course and Basic Military Mountaineer Course's course risk assessments in January, months before the avalanche.

Some changes were implemented, but the officers "met with resistance from the AMWS cadre to make more significant changes," according to the report.

More:

- [Vermont avalanche: National Guard soldiers were checking slope's safety when snow tumbled \(/story/news/2018/03/16/vermont-avalanche-national-guard-review-accident-injured-six/430566002/\)](#).
- [Vermont avalanche: Army mountaineering guide warns of dangers amid snowstorms \(/story/news/2018/03/15/three-soldiers-remain-hospitalized-after-smugglers-notch-avalanche/429006002/\)](#).
- [Avalanche risk in the Green Mountains: What you need to know \(/story/news/local/2018/03/15/according-alert-areas-where-avalanches-may-greater-risk-orleans-lamoille-washington-eastern-fran/427399002/\)](#).

The Army released the report six months after last March's slide. An entire section titled "Findings and Recommendations" was redacted from the report, as were sections detailing what mistakes were made. Investigators made six findings and six recommendations. The "Analysis" section was likewise redacted.

VIDEO: [VT Guard questioned about avalanche at Smugglers Notch \(/videos/news/2018/03/16/vt-guard-questioned-avalanche-smugglers-notch/32993963/\)](#).

"U.S. Army accident reports are closely protected and controlled in order to increase the effectiveness of the Army Accident Prevention Program," wrote Brig. Gen. Timothy Daugherty in a letter explaining the redactions.

Also included in the report:

- Mountain school officials skipped a standard morning meeting where safety would be discussed because some of the personnel involved in the training exercise were running late.
- No one in the squad was carrying a beacon, shovel or probe -- the safety tools experts recommend mountaineers carry while in avalanche-prone territory.

Read the report:

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF. At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

Contact Jess Aloe at 802-660-1874 or jaloe@freepressmedia.com Follow her on Twitter [@jess_aloe](https://twitter.com/jess_aloe)

Read or Share this story: <https://bfpne.ws/2PQdi0l>