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Local News

Mt. Tom avalanche kills 2 skiers

Bishop man, Montana woman perish in snowslide, another skier suffers a broken leg

By Jon Klusmire

By The Inyo Register News Staff

Wednesday, March 30, 2005 10:03 AM PST

Two backcountry skiers were killed Saturday in an avalanche on Mt. Tom north of Bishop.

Another skier attempting to reach the victims was caught in a second avalanche and suffered a broken leg.

Well-known Bishop climber, skier and mountaineer Will Crljenko, 52, and Christine Seashore, 56, of Darby, Mont., were swept about 1,500 feet down the east face of Mt. Tom by the avalanche and were buried about 10 feet below the surface.

The pair were skiing with five other experienced skiers, all of whom were properly equipped for the high-country outing with avalanche beacons, shovels and avalanche probes.

Seashore, buried under about eight feet of snow, was located and dug out by the surviving members of the party in about 20 minutes, after a beacon and pole search located her in the debris, it took 40 more minutes to locate and uncover Crljenko, who was buried under about 12 feet of snow, according to the Inyo County Sheriff's Department. Attempts to resuscitate the two victims were unsuccessful.

The deaths, the first avalanche fatalities in the Eastern Sierra in about 10 years, left a deep and painful impression on the local skiing and mountaineering community.

"We're all really stunned that our cautious and experienced partners got caught in an avalanche," said Andy Selters, a Bishop local and acclaimed mountaineer and author who was also a friend of the three Bishop skiers on the trip.

"It will make us ask questions harder every time we go skiing and boarding in the backcountry," Selters noted. "We'll all be learning a lot from the incident."

Selters added that "everyone will be thinking of Will's wife, Frances."

Crljenko had been skiing and climbing in the Eastern Sierra and the Bishop area since the late 1960s, and was acknowledged by friends and colleagues as "a local legend" for his backcountry skiing skill and knowledge. (See page A-2 for a full obituary.)

Selters talked with members of the group in the days after the tragic accident and provided the following account of Saturday's events on Mt. Tom.

The party of seven skiers, three from Bishop and four from Montana, had hiked up to about the 12,000 foot level, traveling up the Elederberry Canyon ski route onto the summit ridge of Mt. Tom. At about 1 p.m., one member of the party safely skied down the upper face. Then a second skier went about halfway down the slope and stopped. The third skier, Seashore, then proceeded

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downhill and also stopped before reaching the bottom. Crljenko then started his descent and apparently triggered the avalanche. The slide enveloped Crljenko and Seashore.

About three feet of heavy snow broke loose near the top of the ridge creating a large slide, which was described as "soft-slab avalanche," that swept the two to their deaths.

The three skiers still above the slide escaped from a second avalanche they triggered while were trying to descend quickly and locate the two buried skiers. One of the three skiers was able to ski out of the slide's path. A second skier was caught in the avalanche but escaped after a short distance and suffered a broken leg. The third skier was able to "ride" the moving snow, staying on top of the avalanche. He was carried about 1,000 feet downhill by the slide and was not seriously injured.

The four uninjured skiers reached the debris field and started the search for the two members of their party buried under the snow.

After locating the two victims, the injured skier and the four others eventually made their way safely down the mountain and called the Sheriff's Department at 5 p.m. Saturday.

On Sunday morning, the California Highway Patrol helicopter from Victorville was dispatched to the scene carrying a recovery team that included three volunteers from Inyo County Search and Rescue and Inyo County Sheriff's Department Sgt. Randy Nixon. The bodies of Seashore and Crljenko were flown off the mountain at noon, Sunday.

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