BURIED in the aftermath

Part two of Buried in the Aftermath looks at how guides are also affected by critical incidents that occur in the backcountry. They can be buried, killed or injured; and when someone dies, they also experience the trauma of having lost a client.

TANYA FOUBERT

Complex terrain. Changing weather conditions. Group dynamics.

Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) members are skilled professionals, highly trained in the ways of the wilderness and delivering safe alpine experiences to their clients.

But they are also human beings who have to manage other human beings in dangerous situations – and when things go sideways, they have to deal with the consequences. It can be difficult to manage group dynamics at the best of times; the challenge for guides increases when clients are not fully engaged in their own safety and check-out because they hired an expert to keep them safe.

And the emotional devastation of traumatic events for guides can be as overwhelming and life changing for them as it can be for their clients. It is every guide's worst nightmare to lose a client.

Mountain guide Barry Blanchard knows firsthand the crippling effect of losing people he was guiding. In 1986, two of the four clients he was guiding in the mountains died.

"An investigation of the accident was conducted by Parks Canada, actually," he said. "The person who did the investigation is a mountain guide and was a public safety warden at the time, and they shared the information with the guides association."

The examination of the incident led to changes. Blanchard had used a specific type of boot-axe belay combination; however, the amount of weight on the rope was more than he could control with that type of anchoring system.

The anchor failed and Blanchard describes it as one of the blackest days of his life. He credits seeking out an excellent psychiatrist in Calgary as helping pull himself out of that dark place while processing his trauma and healing in the aftermath.

"When I think back to the period of time after the accident … I cannot overstate how much help I was given by that therapy," he said.

Blanchard has been guiding since 1983 and has been a mountain guide – the highest level of certification from the ACMG – since 1996. In 2020, he was part of a group of mountain guides (Sarah Hueniken, Toddy Guyn, and Kevin Hjertaas) that established the Mountain Muskox peer support pilot project. Led by psychologist Janet Mcleod and supported by facilitators, Mountain Muskox officially began meeting with its first cohort on April 14.

Designed to provide assistance and healing through a peer support circle, the program aims to establish a template that can be used in other mountain communities to help with the trauma that is experienced in the aftermath of critical alpine incidents and fatalities.

The pilot project recognizes there is a lack of support for this kind of trauma, although it is geared more towards the guiding community, as the industry does not have a standardized response to address the mental health effects experienced by those involved in a critical incident.

With the ACMG contracting Alpine Specialists to conduct a review of its post-critical incident process and make recommendations for improvement, Blanchard is looking forward to seeing the results. He said the industry needs to improve when it comes to this issue.

"I want to see the document," he said. "I think we need it and I think we need a plan for when members are involved in fatalities.

"We need a plan for what happens when fatalities are happening with ACMG-guided experiences."

Blanchard noted the guides too are at risk of dying when critical incidents occur, and regardless of the circumstances, seeking professional counselling is key to recovering from these traumatic experiences. With counselling and peer support, he said ideally over time there is a restorative process where instead of a need to find blame in the aftermath of critical incidents, there is acceptance and forgiveness found.

"I believe the Mountain Muskox mentorship is the next step after personal counselling," he said. "Mountain Muskox is a peer support group for people who have suffered tragedy and loss in the mountains."

Ken Wylie knows what it is like to suffer tragedy and loss as a mountain guide. He was buried in an avalanche in 2003 that killed seven people; it took him a decade to begin to understand the part he played that day and process the trauma he experienced.

However, sharing the lessons he learned healing from this traumatic experience has not been universally welcomed by the guiding community. Wylie has challenged the industry to change, and it has been controversial.

"We need to grow up and mature enough that we can actually look at our decisions much more objectively and part of the problem is we self-identify with the activities of our careers as who we are," he said. "And we are not moun-

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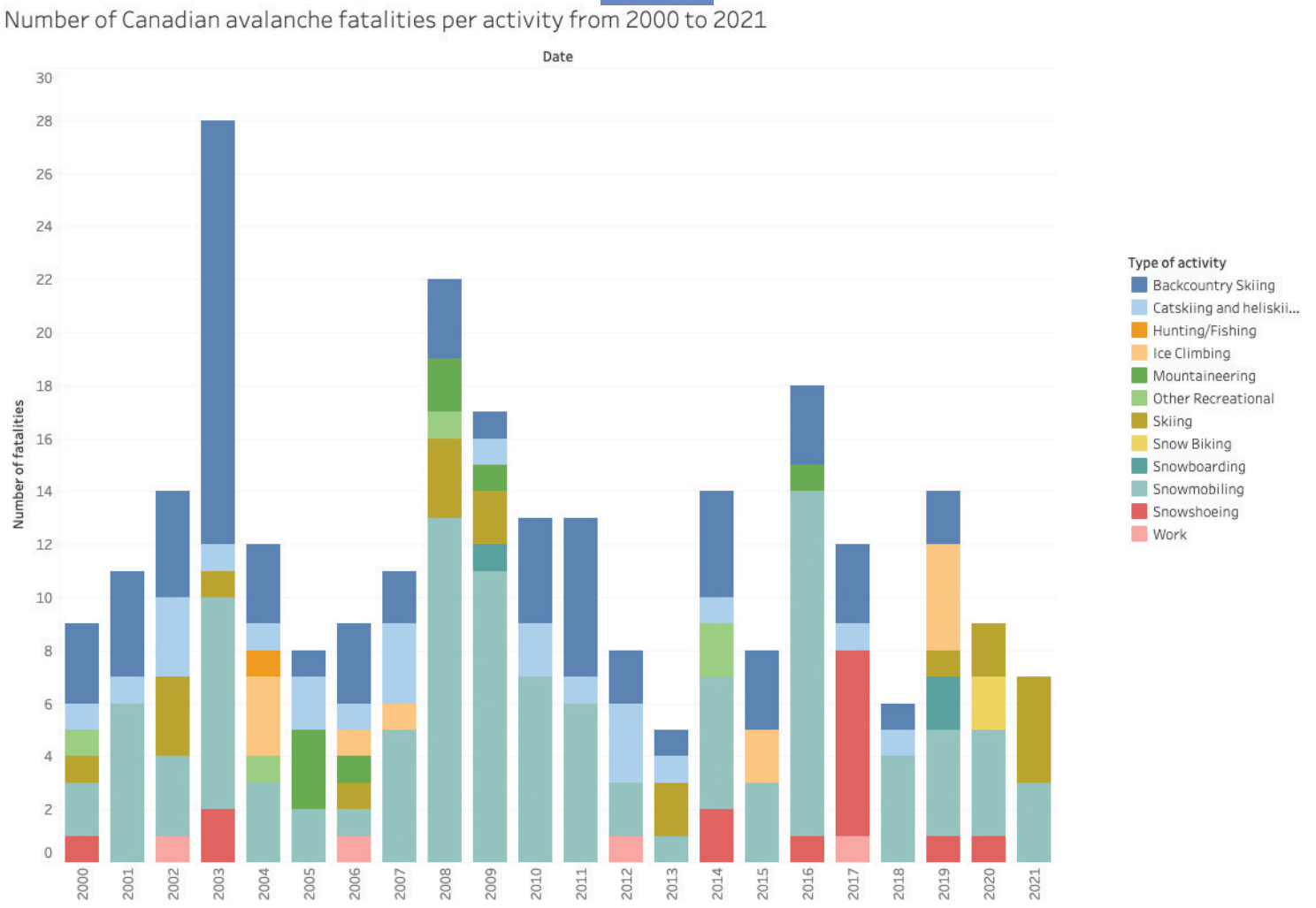
Mountain guide Barry Blanchard is working with others in his field and clinical psychologist Janet McLeod to create a peer support model for those who experience trauma in alpine settings. SUBMITTED PHOTO

FEATURE



A graph representing the number of Canadian avalanche fatalities by activity from 2000-21. The data comes from Avalanche Canada; however, neither that organization, nor the ACMG track the number of incidents that occur on guided trips. In part four of Buried in the Aftermath, the *Outlook* will take a deeper look at the data. GREG COLGAN RMO GRAPH

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tain guides. We are people who work as mountain guides.

"If any error feels like a personal attack, that is a fundamentally flawed way of operating in the world."

In his book *Buried*, re-released by Rocky Mountain Books last year, he recounts the situations that led to the deadly avalanche fatalities at La Traviata, near Tumbledown Mountain in the Selkirk Range near Golden, B.C. 18 years ago.

Wylie was working for Selkirk Mountain Expeditions as an assistant guide under its owner and mountain guide Ruedi Beglinger. Beglinger declined a request from the *Outlook* to be interviewed for this story.

On the morning of Jan. 20, they set out from the Durand Glacier Chalet for a day of ski touring. Wylie and Beglinger each had a group of six skiers under their supervision that day as they headed out for their objective.

Wylie was uncomfortable with the route, the objective and the conditions.

A persistent weak layer from November was underneath the snowpack, there were people in his group he was concerned did not have the ability to keep up with the others and the conditions were deteriorating. But the young assistant guide did not speak up to voice his concerns.

In his book, Wylie delves deep to understand the role he played and why he didn't say anything, or turn around. In his accounting, he touches upon the cultural and systemic influences within the guiding community that had affected him and taught him to follow the lead guide's directions without question.

Buried is not about pointing fingers. On the contrary, Wylie comes to terms with an event that was chalked up to an unfortunate and unavoidable accident by investigators. He unflinchingly details how multiple factors came into play that day suddenly on the side of a mountain.

"Post incident, things were fine for me if I continued to subscribe to the same narrative," he said. "But over the years I have drifted from that narrative and so I have also drifted from the [guiding] community as I delved into my growth and development.

"Now my narrative is very different from that within the community and it is not one shared by the community, therefore I am outside the muskox circle."

Wylie was fully buried in the avalanche, but was located in time to save his life. Seven others were not. They were David Finnerty, Naomi Heffler, Craig Kelly, Kathleeen Kesller, Vern Lunsford, Jean-Luc Schwendener and Dennis Yates.

After *Buried* was originally released in 2014, Wylie travelled to Truckee, California, to give a talk, which included Kesller's family and friends in the audience. Afterwards he was struck by their response – they were grateful that finally after 12 years they fully understood what happened to their daughter, sister, and wife.

Just over 10 days after La Traviata, in Glacier National Park near Mount Cheops, seven students from Strathcona Tweedsmuir School would die in an avalanche as well.

While the group of 17 people was led by teachers from the school, not certified guides, the two incidents were handled very differently in the aftermath.

What happened at Connaught Creek was investigated and a report by Bhudak Constultants Ltd. made recommendations for change.

There were changes to how custodial groups are taken into outdoor settings, and the avalanche terrain exposure scale was created – distinguishing between simple, challenging and complex types of terrain in the backcountry. The Outdoor Council of Canada was formed to train leaders of custodial, or school groups and the teachers lost their jobs.

With La Traviata, however, nature was to blame.

It is a response of the guiding industry to fatalities that Wylie does not put much stock into anymore. It brought him comfort in the aftermath of the avalanche, but after taking the time and effort to look at all the complex decision-making processes that led to that moment, on that slope – Wylie knows now it was not that simple.

"One of the things that drives me crazy about the guiding industry is when we fail, we blame the mountains; the mountains are dangerous," he said, adding when mountaineers reach their objective, they celebrate and take credit in the accomplishment.

When Wylie takes clients on a guided trip, he goes over the waiver of liability in a way that respects the lessons he has already learned in the mountains. He said he believes the industry has to do a better job of communicating risk, not just indemnifying itself through a waiver.

"When you buy a mutual fund, there is a questionnaire about your risk tolerance. We do not do that with our clients," he said.

He is honest about how he can make a mistake and he needs everyone with him to stay aware of their surroundings. He encourages his clients to speak out and to bring his attention to things that may be happening on the landscape around them – including if they think he is making a mistake.

"Truth protects trust, time and time again," Wylie said. "The ethics of that is really important, because if people can speak up about their comfort at any point, then they can say 'this isn't for me' and we want that."

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Mountain guides affected by post-traumatic stress after critical incidents in the backcountry

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"How many clients in the current system just follow us because they do not think they can speak up and they have these kinds of days that are stressful," Wylie said.

Blanchard agrees that everyone in the mountains on a guided trip needs to be aware of the risk, but also be part of the solution for detecting and mitigating it. He said it is important to empower clients to be able to speak up and make observations, because a guide isn't all knowing and all seeing.

Five years ago, Blanchard was guiding a group across the Balfour High Col in the crux of the Wapta traverse in challenging conditions, when one of his clients pointed out that a wind slab had been naturally triggered nearby.

"That is such an important piece of information for me to have and I would have been naive to it had she not had the confidence to say, 'wow, look there is an avalanche,' and not just assume I am omniscient," he said.

With the natural evolution of the industry with younger people entering the profession, and a more diverse representation, Blanchard said the culture is becoming more reflective of being Canadian and welcoming different perspectives and voices around the table.

"People entering the profession who are Millennials have a lot of different approaches to decision making," he said. "It is brilliant ... within a guiding team, if there is gender diversity, ethnic diversity and ... if there is just diversity, you will make safer decisions.

"To have that would make us a stronger and safer association and, quite frankly, if the world does not adopt that model of decision-making, we are not going to make it."

The need for a comprehensive post-critical incident review process for the industry to learn from the lessons gleaned through it is something Wylie has advocated for.

He has lived through the trauma of being buried alive and surviving while others died on the same slope as him, and he has lived through the reckoning that comes with it. While the vast majority of guided experiences occur without incident, when they do happen, he feels there is a responsibility of the industry to take stock of the circumstances and adjust accordingly.

Wylie sees it as a multi-faceted problem. The first part is the industry is more than happy to talk about technical aspects of decision-making in alpine environments, but reticent to do the inner work to understand the human aspects around decision-making.

"And there is this flawed compassion; we do not want to hurt the guide's feelings," he said. "It is a flawed compassion because we do not see the larger picture is there are way more people involved in this than just the guiding community."

When a critical incident occurs, clients and family members of those involved may have questions around the circumstances. Some may want to know that the factors that resulted in the death of a loved one are understood and brought into the awareness of the industry to prevent similar circumstances from occurring.

While the ACMG does not mandate that its certified guides must submit a report to its incident reporting system after a critical incident – either a near miss or a fatality – it does have a conduct review process. It is one way some survivors have sought to find accountability after a traumatic incident.

Blanchard has been a member of the committee that participates in and oversees that process since the early 2000s.

The committee is essentially a pool of guides and members of the public willing and able to review a complaint.

Ken Wylie was buried in an avalanche in 2003 when he was an assistant guide. Seven others lost their life that day and in the aftermath it took Wylie more than a decade to come to understand the role he played that day. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Blanchard said the process looks at complaints about guides, from the public or other ACMG guides, in relation to the organization's code of conduct. Currently the code of conduct has 10 sections, but it has grown over the years to incorporate new sections as the association has worked to improve this process.

When a complaint is submitted, the chair of the committee reviews the initial complaint to determine if there is a means to find a solution by working with the guide that is the subject of the conduct review, according to Blanchard.

"A lot of the complaints are dealt with at that level," Blanchard said. "A lot of them are just education, that a guide was working outside their terrain guidelines [for

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example].

"Anything not resolved at that level goes onto a preliminary review committee, which is at least one fully certified mountain guide, another ACMG member and a member of the public."

If a mutually agreeable solution is reached between the guide and the committee, the complainant is informed of the outcome, but has no say in the resolution. If a solution is not reached, a more formal examination can occur through a conduct review hearing.

"We do not have the authority to investigate anything other than the code of conduct and we are an administrative review," Blanchard said, acknowledging there can be a wider scope of issues that someone is concerned with that does not fall under the code of conduct.

Only two complaints have technically made it to the hearing stage. One of which was filed under protected grounds; while the other was Sheila Churchill's complaint after the death of her husband Doug in 2016.

The protocols for the hearing at the time set out that the complainant is responsible for prosecuting their complaint. It was problematic and the process changed after Churchill's complaint was ultimately dismissed through an application to the Court of Queen's Bench by the ACMG due to the amount of time it was taking for disclosure.

Now, if a complaint goes to a hearing, the ACMG is tasked with finding a suitable and unbiased person to act on the behalf of the complainant.

The conduct review process does not deal with complaints of negligence or criminal allegations, and it does not provide a post-critical incident review of the circumstances.

At the moment, the procedures for a conduct review are not available on the ACMG's website and there is no way for the public to search past complaints or decisions made by the conduct review committee with respect to its members. The results are published in the association's bi-annual journal, The Arete, and they will be posted on the website in the future once as the site has undergone a full revision.

Mental Health Supports

Mountain Muscox: www.mountainmuscox.com
Mental Health Helpline – 1-877-303-2642
Addiction Helpline – 1-866-332-2322
HealthLink – 811
Urgent mental health walk-in services are available at the Canmore General Hospital and Banff Mineral Springs Hospital seven days a week 2-9 p.m.
211 Alberta
Bow Valley Addiction and Mental Health 403-678-4696

CORRECTION: *In part one of Buried in the Aftermath, it was reported the Backcountry Safe group had hired two ACMG certified guides. One was referred to as a "tail" guide, and they were not a certified member of the ACMG at the time. It was reported that the lead guide did not respond to the Outlook's request for an interview; however, they did end up declining the request. It was also reported that Sheila Churchill sought $1 in compensation in her lawsuit against the association and the guides involved. While there was no value related to compensation contained in the statement of claim, Churchill's lawyers communicated to the ACMG the intent was not to seek a financial resolution.*

PART THREE OF BURIED IN THE AFTERMATH EXPLORES THE 2019 AVALANCHE AT MASSEY'S WATERFALL NEAR FIELD, B.C. THAT KILLED ONE ICE CLIMBER AND PARTIALLY BURIED ANOTHER.

THIS INCIDENT HAS RESULTED IN CONSIDERABLE TRAUMA FOR ALL INVOLVED. WOULD A BETTER POST-CRITICAL INCIDENT PROCESS HAVE PREVENTED CONFLICT BETWEEN THE GUIDES AND ONE OF THE SURVIVORS?