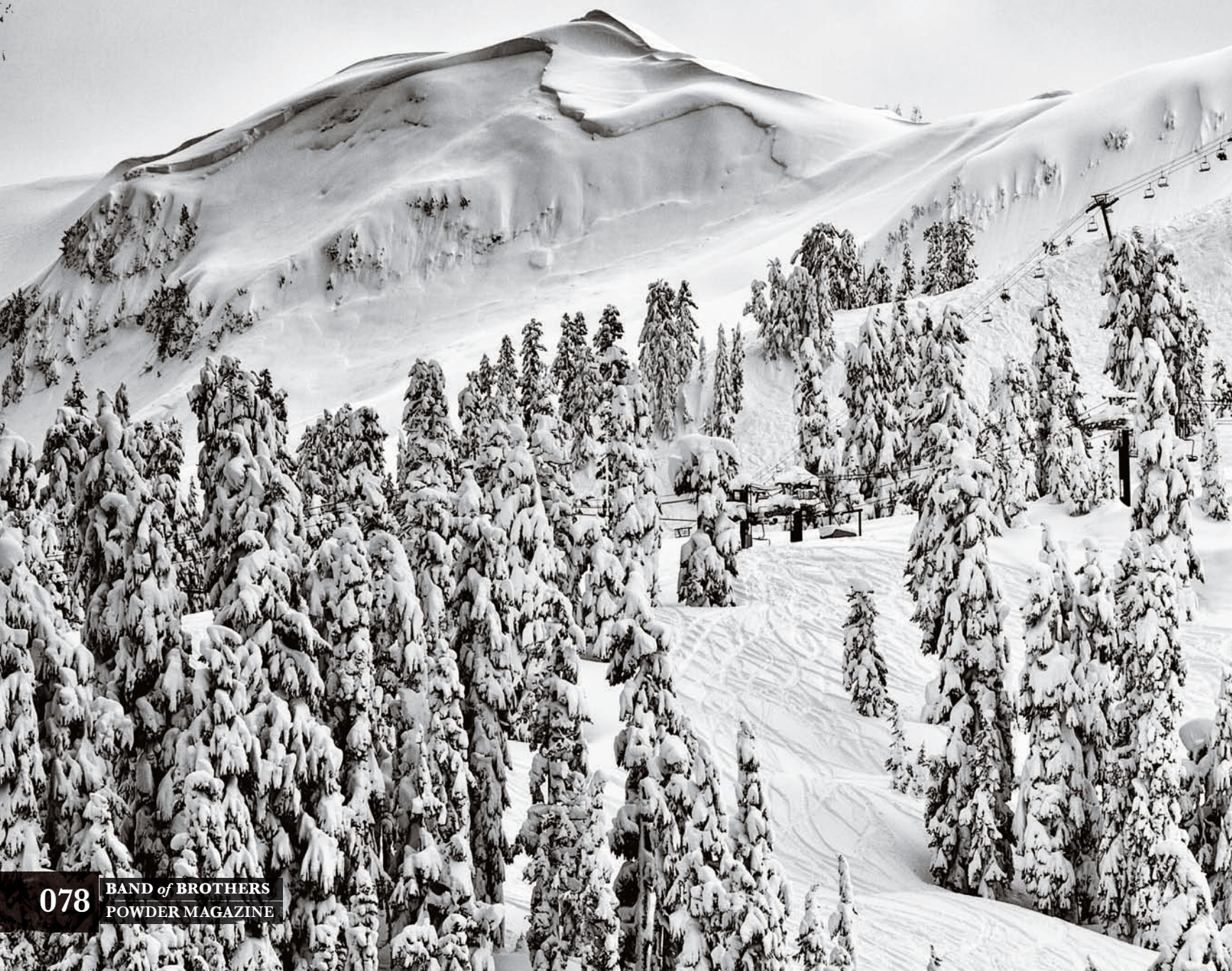
BAND *of* BROTHERS

THE WEST'S **YOUNGEST SKI PATROL** BATTLES ITS SNOWIEST MOUNTAIN

By Dan Kostrzewski /// Photos by Grant Gunderson

Thick flakes flew sideways as the coastal howl gusted to 80 mph, nearly blowing us off the chairlift. Mount Baker's seven other chairs were done for the day, effectively shutting down access to Pan Dome from the White Salmon lodge below. But Chair Six was still spinning, delivering the few remaining skiers to fresh laps in the trees of North Face and Canuck's Deluxe in yet another La Niña storm. By closing day, the 2010-11 winter would measure up as the deepest at Baker in a decade, with 857 inches of total snowfall. For now, we were still at the center of the storm in what had been a daily battle for the Mount Baker Ski Patrol to keep the ski area open and the public safe.



I'd been charging storm laps with Sam Llobet, Baker's ski patrol director, who was still in uniform and still on the clock. Short, staccato bursts from Sam's patrol radio blurted out dire predictions of four feet of snow, triple-digit winds and a near biblical meteorological catastrophe about to slam into the North Cascades. At this family area with world-famous terrain, the general manager on the other end of the radio had the ultimate power to shut it down, but Llobet's calm, terse replies kept the area open for now. Maybe because the skiing was so good, maybe because, at 30 years old, he was one of the younger patrol directors in the West and maybe just because Mount Baker operates in its own vortex.

Since Llobet made the leap from parking lot crew to ski patrol at age 21, he has been part of the core group of hard-charging, hard-working skiers that keep careful watch over an area that received 565 feet of snow and logged more than 1.5 million skier days the last decade. It's a massive job for the 14 skiers on the Mount Baker Ski Patrol, and creates a close bond between them—as they eat, work, drink, and ski together all season long. The lifestyle seems ideal, but the reality is that it takes a heavy toll—both mentally and physically—with success being measured in life and death.

I chased Llobet's track under the danger zone rope to a semi-secret, rooted entrance. Llobet paused, rolled over the log then pointed it straight, sticking the landing in his orange patrol coat then accelerating into a powder cloud. Back on the chair, the wind picked up and General Manager Duncan Howat made the official radio call to close the area, which is a letdown for the few diehards left but not out of character for a winter marked by repeated weather shutdowns. We waited until the skiers cleared off the hill, then swept through a closed, drifted trail looking for a lost ski. The run ended back in dispatch checking the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center (NWAC) forecast. The big unknown—which not even the forecast could answer—was will everyone survive until closing day.

Andy Sahlfeld shares ski patrol leadership duties with Llobet, albeit more on weekdays.

From parking lot crew to ski patrol director, Sam Llobet holds the keys.

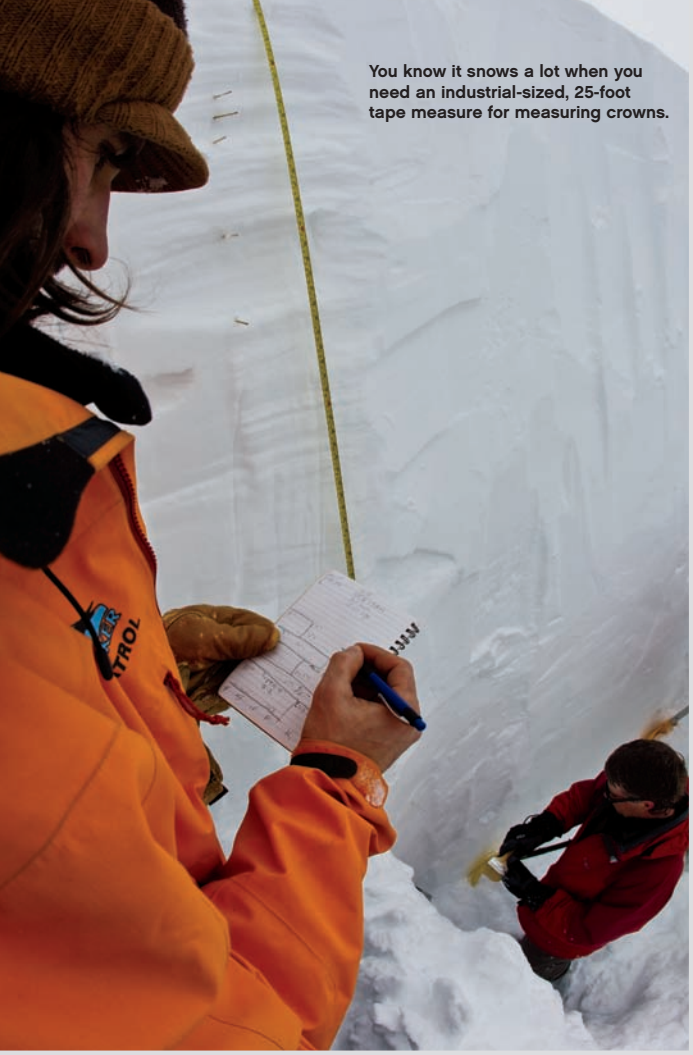
Llobet ensuring Baker's snowpack is safe... and soft and deep.

Avalung ready, Dustin Geesamen earns his $11 an hour.

LLOBET PAUSED, ROLLED OVER THE LOG THEN POINTED IT STRAIGHT,

STICKING THE LANDING IN HIS ORANGE PATROL COAT

THEN ACCELERATING INTO A POWDER CLOUD.



You know it snows a lot when you need an industrial-sized, 25-foot tape measure for measuring crowns.

THIS MACABRE KNOWLEDGE OF CATASTROPHE AND SURVIVAL IS PASSED DOWN THROUGH THE PATROL GENERATIONS AS A TEACHING TOOL,

BUT ALSO AS A **WARNING OF THE RISK** THAT THEY WORK TO MITIGATE.

So much for being old and crusty. Zack Barrett shirks the patroller stereotype.

Some Baker patrollers work in commercial fishing during the off season.

"Looks like someone has a case of the Mondays. Now, who brought beer?"

Baker is legendary for intense storms, but my rookie weekend with the ski patrol was during a light one that stopped at ten inches. That afternoon, the lifts closed and skiers went home. We kept rolling—slugging Canadian whiskey with patrol in a half-buried A-frame on the margins of Heather Meadows. Shuksan loomed overhead, its 9,131-foot peak just beyond the wilderness area boundary. The bright, moonlit sky illuminated its rock-peppered face. The storm had passed to the east and the crew was off the hook for morning avalanche control, which was why the party was escalating toward familial bullshitting and broken furniture.

We started after sweep, draining pitchers in the taproom, then caught a six-person snowmobile ride to the employee cafeteria before ending up back in what serves as the patrol's clubhouse, meeting room and crash pad. Empty boots and empty cases sat by the doorway. The room was filled with a mix of skiers, half who found their way here from Montana, Alaska, Oregon, Vermont, California and Colorado and half who grew up skiing Washington's Cascades and never saw a reason to leave.

Llobet is no exception. He migrated to Mount Baker from Washington's tiny Olympic peninsula ski area of Hurricane Ridge in 1999 and, like many, got sucked into the snowfall vortex. "I started in the parking lot," he says. "The first week we got over 100 inches, and that's kind of how the story goes from there."

On the clock, Llobet is both professional and cynical, with quick radio replies orchestrating patrol response and a running off-air commentary for anyone within earshot. Like much of the current crew, he was recruited from within. He took charge four years later, when the patrol director left unexpectedly mid-season. Howat, who has run the ski area since 1968, tapped him to take over. "We hire good skiers and intelligent guys who just need some direction," Howat explains. "And they're already up here all the time, anyway."

In a few short seasons, Llobet grew into a role that involves directing 168 volunteer patrollers—who donate a day every other weekend—and keeping his full-time patrol team both motivated and ready to respond quickly to any emergency. His read on safety, weather or snow stability usually holds sway in the ongoing discussion with Howat or Howat's daughter, Gwyn, the operations manager, yet he projects a presence of just another hired hand on the job.

That night after clocking out, he instigated like a big brother, encouraging the patrol to barricade midweek patrol director Andy Sahlfeld's bedroom door with skis. Llobet shares the leadership role with Sahlfeld, who started on ski patrol in the world record year of '98-99. It's a mutual backup situation that Sahlfeld explains as, "Some days Sam is in charge, some days I'm in charge. It works out well."

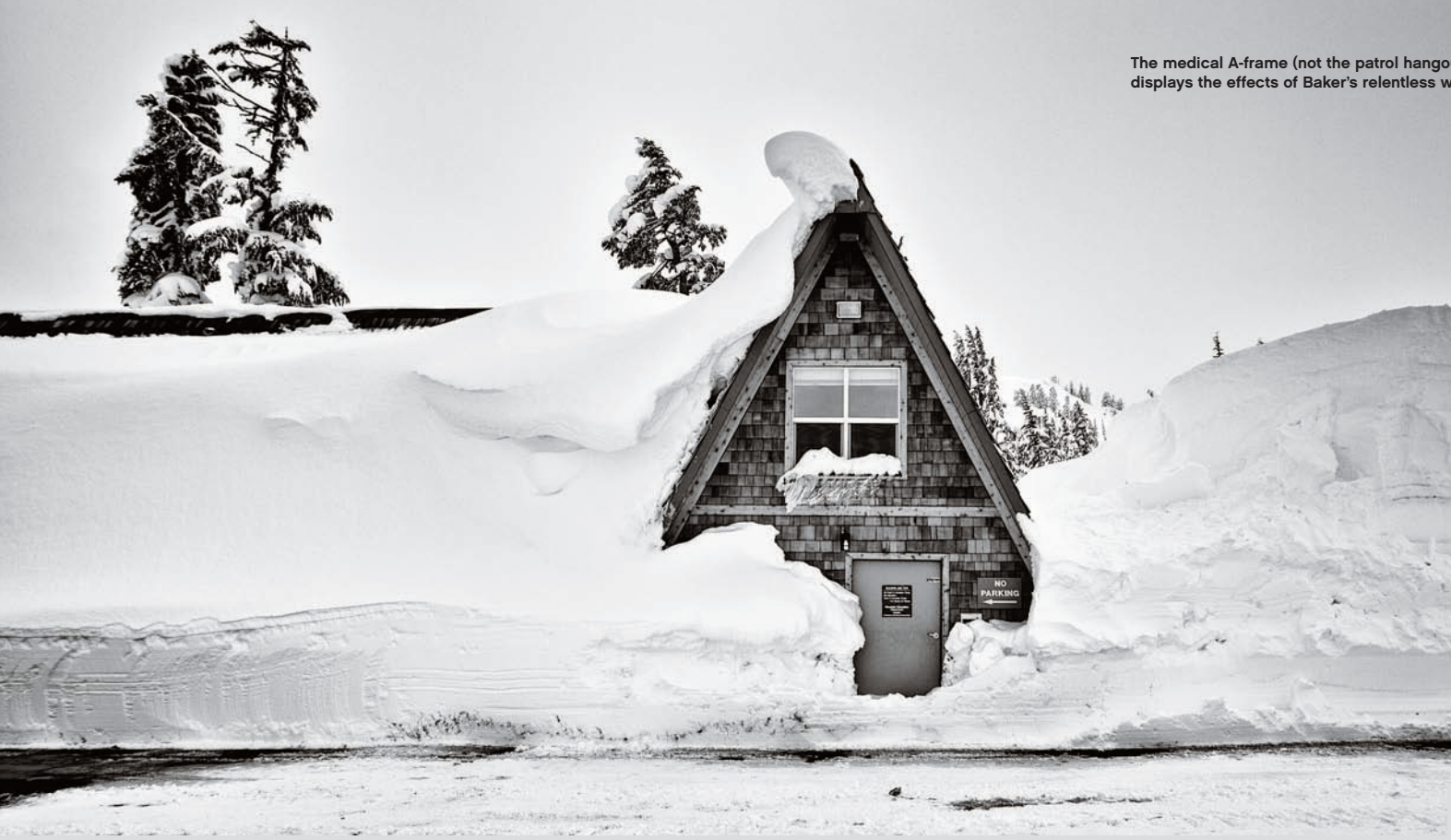
The patrol isn't all pitchers and whiskey, though. The work involves life-or-death decisions and high-risk situations, where success and failure both become part of a mental log. On any lift ride, Llobet or Sahlfeld can point out a cliff where they pulled a rider from serious exposure, a slope that once slid a female patroller from the Elbow to the Canyon floor, or the 125-foot cliff that claimed a life of a skier. It's a strange trail map, one that is marked not just by unofficial run names but also potential hazards most skiers don't see.

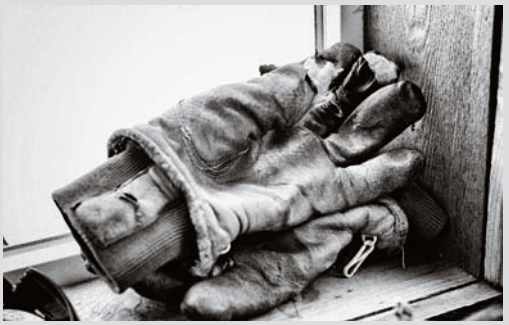
This macabre knowledge of catastrophe and survival is passed down through the patrol generations as a teaching tool, but also as a warning of the risk that they work to mitigate. It is a sober reminder of the danger of a profession where many everyday injuries go unreported, daily wear stacks up through the seasons and fatalities in the line of duty have hit home during the last five years at western ski areas such as Mammoth, Squaw Valley, Wolf Creek, Mountain High and Jackson Hole.

My first weekend was tame by Baker patrol standards—no cliffside rope rescues, no medevac helicopters and no climax slides. The next time I showed up, the mood was different. Avy hazard had spiked and the storm cycle of the decade was bearing down from the coast.

Mount Shuksan, one of two peaks that bookend the Baker powder vortex.

The medical A-frame (not the patrol hangout) displays the effects of Baker's relentless weather.





The A-frame is dark and an early curfew is in effect when I return in February. It's only halfway through Baker's six-month season and the area has already weathered 276 inches of snow. Just after New Year's Day, a Pineapple Express from the South Pacific poured six inches of rain in 48 hours, the avy danger jumped to high and the skiing turned to shit. Tragedy hadn't struck, but the mountain was now reloading on an already weak snowpack that concerned the crew.

The plan was to meet Llobet at breakfast, so I parked beside two buried Subarus in the employee lot and marched through the snow. Baker's 1,000 inbound acres are tucked into a notch between Mount Baker and Mount Shuksan at the rugged edge of the North Cascades Wilderness. The isolated location averages 30 to 50 percent more snow than neighboring ski areas at similar elevations.

But snow is not the only reason skiers migrate to the area. Baker has long been a holdout when it comes to ropeline policy, allowing aggressive skiers to duck into extreme danger zones that would be permanently closed at most other ski areas. As a result, the area has attracted high-level skiers that patrol must control in addition to the snow. Uncontrolled terrain on Shuksan Arm and Table Mountain now gets skied regularly, with far less caution, even during raging storms. Like most ski areas with serious terrain in-and-outside the boundary, it's a charged dynamic and one that has claimed at least 12 lives in the greater Mount Baker area since the world record season, which brought both fame and fatalities.

The Employee Lodge door was so drifted it wouldn't shut. I continued inside, just past the wax room, where patrol was scratching in breakfast orders and sitting down at faux-wood tables. Suited up with radio harnesses and work-worn ski pants, they fuel up on eggs, bacon, biscuits and pancakes and caffeinate with constantly brewing coffee.

The mood is light but their back-and-forth serves as a release valve for frustration and fatigue. With such a small group, it's all hands on deck every morning after a measureable dump. Even if you're not on the schedule, 6 a.m. attendance is mandatory. During the next month, patrol will start 25 days of control with E-lodge breakfasts and personal interaction. When the student loan company tracks someone down, someone's wife or girlfriend is pissed or one of the crew winds up on the injured reserve, like Pete Durr who is out with a busted shoulder until summer, everyone hears the unvarnished story.

Some mornings, Howat will drop in from his upstairs apartment to strategize, or a liftie will stroll through in a bathrobe and slippers. But for now, the morning conversation bounces from the price of used boots, to Howat's upcoming hip surgery, to Sahlfeld's inability to get time off for a Revelstoke trip, even after covering a week for Llobet while he was in Japan. While the rest of the crew is still waking up, Sahlfeld is animated and bothered he can't go to Revy or get to town to replace ski boots, which are so worn they have a huge hole in the sole. But this storm is only the beginning of a grind in a season where it won't stop snowing—or sliding—until late April.

Storm days blur together at Baker, but the Monday afternoon meeting is a standard. The entire patrol gathers in the A-frame to recap the week and officially air grievances. In the past, the Baker patrol was more of a bitch-or-bear-it existence. Llobet added the meeting to clear the air. He runs the show; Sahlfeld sits second chair and the full staff fills the couches after sweep. Llobet starts the session with, "Did anyone bring beer?"

The main topic on the agenda, sandwiched between a friendly warning not to borrow Duncan Howat's snowmobile and a discussion of dates for a spring ski trip to Whistler, is a 33-minute analysis of why 43-year old Paul McLean got caught in a small avalanche on Pan Dome. McLean guided for 10 years in Valdez, Alaska, and has the Polaroids of Meteorite to prove it. All last season, 28-year-old patroller Dustin Geesamen lived in his spare utility room, and the two often ran control routes as a team, with knowledge flowing from wise veteran to keen young gun. But this group analysis is meant to educate everyone.

Demographically, the patrol staff is divided into two camps. In addition to McLean and the two directors, the veterans include 39-year old Marc Flexer, a former Baker patrol director who commutes from Seattle on long weekends, 35-year old Mike Trowbridge, who has outlasted four patrol directors, and 37-year old Jeff Hambelton, Baker's mountain education director. Hambelton makes regular guest appearances on snow control, sometimes with the additional horsepower of his own snowmobile. Keeping the old guard on control is critical—not only because the extra hands are needed, but also because new recruits usually start out green with no patrol experience.

Two who caught on fast and are now part of the core group of eight foot soldiers—ranging in age from 24 to 29—are Geesamen and Zack Barrett. Geesamen, who seems to have his Avalung permanently attached, spent his whole first winter on patrol living in the A-frame and getting fed in the Employee Lodge with an odd mix of cooks, lifties, techs and janitors. It was a step up from his previous setup; he lived in a school bus before moving to a rickety cabin on Czech Road. His longtime ski partner, Zach Barrett, is also part of the young, bearded crew, arriving via Alpental then Squaw and rising from terrain park crew to ski patrol in 2006. After years of struggling to be a ski movie star while shaping transitions in the park, he decided this profession was a better deal.

Nationally, the average age of a professional patroller is 36. These two started a decade sooner and are hitting full stride at 28 and 29. When I bootpacked out Shuksan Arm with them a few weeks earlier, it was an exercise in Rasta-like patience, waiting for a cloud to lift before ripping at redline speed down a heli-caliber spine they'd slayed or hucked hundreds of times.

But with the February avy danger trending toward skull-and-crossbones, most of Baker's patrollers were now steering clear of Shuksan Arm. So instead I caught up with Geesamen, Barrett and their weekday boss Sahlfeld in the A-frame, a few weeks later, after control work was done. The area was tracked out and the beer I brought was gone, but all they wanted to do was keep skiing, so I followed them into the forest and navigated a maze of timber, traverses and pillow stacks into their private reserve.

Geesamen and Barrett slid into a cliffy line with a hidden entrance, but I followed Sahlfeld's lead through an open patch, down an exposed rock face and into a choked, brushy gully that exited to the road. Sahlfeld had called into dispatch for a pickup, and his 4Runner was waiting at the pullout with a ticket office girl eager to drive us back up the road for another lap. Like most powder days with fiercely local crews, we landed back in the taproom. But unlike their peers, this trio was booted up by 6:15 the next morning and ready to roll.

FOUR WORDS SCRAWLED ABOVE THE BENCH KEPT HIM FOCUSED ON LEARNING THE JOB:

"F*CK UP, YOU DIE."

For everyone but the directors, patrol is a seasonal job at hourly ski area wages that start low and average in the $11 an hour range. They work off-season jobs when the lifts shut down. McLean heads to Alaska to fish commercially. Geesamen trims trees, and others find work in construction, fisheries, forest work, firefighting or whatever they can line up until it snows again.

"None of us want to move on and get a better job somewhere because none of us know what that would be," Barrett says. "This life is what we were trying to make it to the whole time, whether we knew it or not."

Patroller Pete Durr opens 'em and closes 'em."

Baker's ski patrol is hard chargin'. Dan Rose tossin' TNT.

The makeup room—location classified—is where patrol begins the daily battle against snow. Sahlfeld's old studded tires are stored in the corner. Nearby, the crew primes their own charges by delicately poking a hole in each one. Then, while keeping up a running dialogue about the speed of DPS skis, the PBR price of getting Marker Dukes mounted and the radness of Tanner Hall's new movie, they each grab a handful of igniters and load five or more of the yellow dynamite-like sticks into their packs. Llobet assigns the snowmobile route to Jeff Hambelton and Brian Kennedy and minutes later they kick off the explosions with a radioed warning.

"*Fire in the Hole, Home Run*!"

Llobet is in charge today. Sahlfeld sits shotgun on a metal footlocker listening to the weather. His first year, 1,140 inches fell from the sky and Baker became the snowiest ski area on the planet. Back then, the daily crew was half the size and Baker ran things a bit more cowboy. Four words scrawled above the bench kept him focused on learning the job. Simply stated, "Fuck up, you die."

The words above the bench are now gone, but the message remains the same. Although Baker does not employ a snow safety director for forecasting, it does throw more explosives than areas of much larger acreage. While other areas rely on forecasting to direct control efforts, Baker simply runs every route every morning there is significant snowfall—which means throwing a boatload of TNT.

Llobet's morning resupply includes three boxes of charges, twelve Avalauncher rounds, two milk jugs filled with an explosive mixture for the snowmobile route and a fifty-pound bag of ANFO explosive. For extra ammo, Sahlfeld also tapes together a triple shot to pop into Gunner's Bowl.

Llobet assigns the routes to teams of two at the top of Chair One, and I follow him and P.J. Moran, a bearded 26-year-old just back from a Montana gelande-jumping contest, under the danger rope. We traverse a route across Dolphy's, a run named after Baker's first snow control ranger who survived a death-defying slide to the flats below. With years of experience in this chute, Llobet expects it to go big and knows exactly where to stand to stay safe. He prepares the charge, clips the fuse and—after checking with P.J. on the size of the cornice—pulls the igniter.

I've been warned to open my mouth if I cover my ears, and I do, standing safely back as the charge pops. The crown breaks and a slide runs through the trees below. The obsession ski patrollers have with avalanches is a bit like the link between firefighters and arson. A big one gets their heart rate racing.

They finish with three hand charges above Gunsights and traverse a line of ski cuts, then we rip uncut powder through The Chute back to midstation for a second lap. While Llobet keeps the routes running, we cycle to the next in three teams of two, moving carefully to blast or ski cut every start zone above a bowl feature until it is safe.

The backcountry is a whole different story and, without control, a month of layers and heavy load are getting dangerous. Even though it's outside the boundary, Howat, Llobet and Sahlfeld are so concerned about a slide from Shuksan Arm overrunning the area that the patrol builds a third gun tower to start shooting Avaluncher rounds at it from the top of Chair Eight.

When I return three weeks later, the storms still have not stopped, dropping 15 feet in 14 days. In six weeks, the ski area has received more snow than most Colorado resorts average in an entire season. The base depth tops 240 inches, with snow banks burying two-story buildings and dwarfing DOT snowplows. And it's only March.

As I shadow another early morning of control routes on Pan Dome, the Chair One lines have become almost unrecognizable. Cliffs have disappeared, features have flattened and mandatory airs are now simple straightlines. Before the area opens, I watch Barrett air what is normally a hero cliff, see Llobet speed through a line named Superman and rip cleanup runs with Sahlfeld that even he doesn't seem to recognize. The snow is so deep that when Llobet gifts me first line down the Austin bowl, I can barely see through the whiteout or keep my speed to the cat track.

The strain of winter and stress of a sketchy snowpack has patrol on edge the next morning. To add to the frustration, a cranky DOT driver blocks the road and won't let them pass. The situation almost comes to blows before they finally make it through. A morning lift is delayed by a sleep-deprived groomer. Llobet is not happy, passing word about the delay back to Howat.

On control routes, there is tension. I track Sahlfeld, barely moving downhill through thigh-deep snow and watching as ski cuts and hand charges fracture Pan Face, sending a massive slide all the way to the cat track. His radio crackles with reports of full path avalanches on multiple routes. The big gun gets results on Hemispheres with an eerie sound of a slide in a whiteout as the only confirmation that it slid.

It's a high-hazard day and photographer Grant Gunderson and I are sequestered inside the sixties-era Pan Dome patrol hut while the explosives battle rages outside. A major warm up is on the horizon and it's unlikely the Pan side of the ski area will stay open for long. We are let loose for a clean-up run with patrol, my first pre-public run down Canuck's Deluxe, and it's one of the deepest of my life.

The weather warms drastically and later that day, while drying gloves in the aid room dryer, I find Llobet sitting on a hospital cot, discussing a full-area closure for Sunday with the Howats. All season

they've debated openings and shut downs, with the patrol taking flak when lifts don't spin. But Llobet is again standing by, waiting to implement whatever decision gets handed down.

We get official word in the taproom that the area will be closed on Sunday and join a mass exodus before the patrol blows the Galena slide path, effectively cutting off all highway access to the ski area. The next morning we wake at Sahlfeld's house in Glacier. He is already gone, running routes on Pan Dome and tracking temperatures in the light rain while locals wander aimlessly around town.

There is no big slide on Sunday. The 10-year, class-five, 16-foot fracture on Shuksan Arm comes the following day. It tears down over 1,000 vertical feet, filling Rumble Gully with 100 feet of debris, and covering fresh tracks from the morning. It is the largest slide Llobet or Sahlfeld have ever seen at Baker and it leaves everyone shaken.

Thankfully no one is killed. The consensus is that it was a very close call, avoided due to a combination of luck, policy and a timely, safe opening of Chair One that pulled the public away from the boundary. For Llobet, Sahlfeld and the Mount Baker Ski Patrol, it's as close as they come to tragedy during this massive season. But they are still a long way from finished.

The collective sigh of relief will not come until the ceremonial bonfires, Metalmucil concert and ski patrol banquet on closing weekend 48 days later. But the fracture remains visible from Chair Eight as a reminder of both the danger and the debt this community owes to 14 skiers, who devote their winters to keeping the skiing public safe. It is a brotherhood unified by both responsibility and commitment—and it is why they wake and boot up before dawn and go to work.

THE 10-YEAR, CLASS-FIVE, 16-FOOT FRACTURE ON SHUKSAN ARM COMES THE FOLLOWING DAY,

TEARING DOWN OVER 1,000 VERTICAL FEET

Molly Baker harvests the fruits of patrol's labor, including 25 days of avalanche control in one month alone. PHOTO: GARRETT GROVE