

The Denali Climb.....By Derek Kozlowski 05/2000

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares drop off like autumn leaves.

-John Muir

Denali, summit at far right.

"I couldn't help wondering as I waited for my flight to Anchorage, how many of the people waiting with me were "Alaskans". Strange to think that Alaska is so far removed from the rest of the States that the people themselves seem foreign. Who were these people that shunned the life we live in the lower 48 to brace the harsh winter nights that never fade? What made them stay?"

I waited patiently at the baggage carousel for what seemed an eternity. The cavernous bag that contained three months salary worth of gear should be coming out the hole in the wall soon, I thought. All of the training, the preparations, and the money, came down to this one moment in time: Would the bag appear? I noticed several other passengers going through the same scenario and somehow I was reassured that surely we all wouldn't be stuck in the airport bar, cursing baggage claim. Eventually, the baggage handlers sensed my pain and put my bag on the belt. Relief washed over me and I realized that my trip would finally begin. Now I could confront the mountain.

I gathered my gear and my thoughts and went off to meet the challenge waiting for me. I hailed a cab and quickly found myself deposited at the Spenard Hostel for the night (if you can call it night: the sun is nearly as high in the sky at midnight as it is at 5:00 p.m.!) The following morning, I would board a shuttle to take me to the infamous town of Talkeetna, just outside the southern edge of Denali National Park.

Talkeetna is a town with a great history, and a town that has seen thousands of climbers walk her dusty streets on their way to the stone giant on the horizon. Even today, there is only one real street, and the look of a deserted ghost town of the old west. Bearded men stand from the shadows of buildings watching every movement. You can feel their eyes sizing you up; drawing their own conclusions about you. It seems as though this is the place that the final judgement would be made, for surely if you are not worthy in the eyes of these men, the mountain would never yield to your assault.

I had arrived a day early for my climb so I could take in part of the culture of Alaska. I wandered the street of Talkeetna, and finally made my way down to the river at the West Side of town. The great glaciers to the north fed the river with run off, and it flowed cold and cloudy towards sea. I sat on a log and looked for the outline of Denali on the horizon. The mountain was seductively hidden behind a veil of clouds, keeping the mystery alive a little longer. For the

briefest moment, the clouds parted, and I glimpsed a fraction of her massif. Even this sliver, not even a partial silhouette, gave me a moments pause. Damn, it was big! She is there, she waits for me.

Rising the next morning, I quickly moved to town and then off to the airport to meet my guides and begin. We spent most of the morning and early afternoon sorting and inspecting gear, and gathering our individual lunch food for the trip. John Race and Bill McCormick would be our guides, and they both had the carefree, brazen look of weathered mountain men. After a quick briefing at the ranger station on frostbite, safety, and mountain sanitation, we boarded the planes for departure.

Denali expeditions leave mostly from Talkeetna Airport, and fly directly onto the lower Kahiltna Glacier. Single engine planes as big as flying outhouses serve as the main mode of transportation. Fitted with retractable skis, these are the only vehicles that can reliably (some question must be put into this statement after seeing the condition of these dusty relics!) land climbers and their hundreds of pounds of gear at the base of the mountain.

We were quickly aloft, and the foothills and glacier valleys dropped away beneath us. The mountains were stunning in their beauty. Huge rock peaks dotted the landscape, and dirty brown streaks marked areas that had broken away in avalanche under the incessant movement of the glaciers.

Half way through our flight, the pilot switched fuel tanks. As the transfer of the valve took place, the plane suddenly stalled and the engine quit! For what seemed an eternity, the plane began to sink towards the snow below. This was not exactly the ending I had planned for this trip, and I looked around to see if there were any parachutes or otherwise soft articles that I could use to break my fall. Fortunately, the pilot kicked the beast back to life, and we began to gain altitude again. I could tell by the white faces of my fellow climbers that I was not the only one wondering what had happened. The pilot, however, offered no explanation, and we were left to make up our own story!

Base camp, a ratty display of tents, bamboo marking wands, and wooden latrines, appeared below us. Tucked into a protective bowl with Mt. Francis directly to the rear, Mt. Hunter beside us, and Mt. Foraker poking through the clouds to right, base camp serves as the center of operations for most Denali expeditions. The landing strip on the glacier is nothing more than a strip of ice blown clear by the comings and goings of the small planes. There are two semi-permanent structures; a sturdy tent for “Base Camp Annie”, the woman who has marshaled this desolate outpost for the past ten years, and another for the ranger who weighs the trash of outgoing parties (The park service tries to keep track of the amount of trash leaving the mountain and the amount of food and supplies coming in. They hope to be able to provide better waste disposal policies through programs like this). In addition, there are as many as twenty different climbing teams either getting ready to depart on their journey, or returning from the mountain.

After getting all of the team members and equipment onto the glacier, we picked a deserted camp with pre-built snow walls and settle down. Tents are erected quickly, and the guides soon have the mountain elixir known as “hot drinks” ready for us.

With the severe cold and windy conditions encountered on Denali, or any mountain of this size, climbers have come to rely on the tradition of hot teas or cocoa before any meal. The secret to success on any mountain is to keep yourself well hydrated. The body uses copious amounts of water to adjust to changes in altitude and make up for the lack of oxygen in each breath. Because breathing is a much more important bodily function than keeping warm, the body will sacrifice warmth in the extremities to combat altitude. Climbers must always keep this in mind and force 5-7 quarts of water a day into their systems. This will also keep headaches from dehydration and altitude to a minimum. Severe frostbite or altitude related illnesses can often be linked directly to how much water a person had ingested prior to the onset of symptoms.

There were four other climbers on this trip, excluding the guides, and we slowly started to get to know each other while we ate. Megan Murphy, a newly graduated law student from Northwestern, Chris Nichols, another lawyer from Reno, Tim Lovelace, a freshly graduated doctor of English, and Evan Wang, a radiologist from Hong Kong, made up the rest of our small group. Each of us had our own questions about the climb ahead, but you could tell no one was going to crack this first night. We had all paid quite a bit of money to be on this climb. We may not make it to the top, but we sure weren't going to let anyone else know this! All in the group had some prior climbing experience or at least winter mountaineering in their dossier, and we were well prepared for base camp. After a brief discussion of what the next day would bring, we dispersed to our tents for the night.

The following morning we were up fairly early for breakfast and a refresher course in crevasse rescue. We had all recently been through formal training on this, so we covered it rapidly and prepared for our first carry of the climb. Bill and John made the decision that we would carry to 7800', and then return to base camp for the night. I am not completely sure, but I think it had something to do with all of our ice saws being back in Talkeetna. Whatever the reason, we roped up and were on our way.

Most routes on Denali are done expedition style, which is to say that you move higher on the mountain by moving all of your gear to successively higher camps. A carry is when you move all nonessential gear to a higher camp, bury it in a cache, and return to the lower camp. Then you either stay one more night at the lower camp, or pack it up and continue up the mountain. The amount of gear needed to withstand a -40°F night is astonishingly heavy. Then pile on all of the gear that is needed to spend three weeks on the mountain, and you have a load that would break the back of a pack horse! Most parties choose to pull sleds, in addition to backpacks, up the Kahiltna glacier. On this morning we were matched up with our fully loaded sleds, ready to take on the lower glacier.

The camp at 7800' is about 5.5 miles from base camp. The trail *descends* to about 6450' before going back up to 7800. This means we not only got to experience the joy of glacier sled hauling uphill, but down as well. It is the responsibility of the climber behind each person to keep the rope tight and prevent your sled from banging into you from behind as you go down hill. This can cause quite a bit of tension in the group as sleds are pulled downhill. Imagine you are walking downhill with a 50-pound pack, and you are trying to keep a 50-60 pound sled from hitting the climber in front of you. Each climber is joined on a rope (thus a rope team) with up to three other climbers. So as you are juggling your load and the sled from the climber in front of you, you are also trying to match the pace with the climber in front of you and the climber behind you. At times a rope team can look like a sick caterpillar doing the kickin' chicken! Roped glacier travel is trying on a friendship, at best.

I must point out what each person's *own* sled is doing. In a perfect world, it would float downhill smoothly, being braked by the person behind you. BUT. Ever seen a perfect world? Me neither. Usually your sled is either passing you going downhill, or it is careening square into your backside! And then, you got it, chain reaction! Here we have a group of (somewhat) normal people trying to adjust to being in Alaska, working with people they just met, and trying to deal with the hellacious load the travel brochures conveniently left out of the trip description. And WHAM! - A sled in the @#\$! Seven people on the glacier, and seven tight lipped, polite little smiles that one gives when they don't want to be rude to the person they just met. As you can imagine, this didn't last long. We were all *good* friends by the time we had completed this first downhill section of our trip. Amazing how fast you can loosen up to people in a pinch!

The uphill portion of our carry was easier in the respect that our sleds were now yanking down on us as we trudged up the grade to our objective. It is a little easier to travel on a rope uphill as well. Pretty soon we had all settled down into the mindless shuffle that usually identifies mountaineering. Being mid-May, the lower glacier had not melted out yet and there were relatively few exposed crevasses. These are nasty little glacier surprises that manifest themselves as deep cracks in the glacier surface, often as deep as 100' or more. Winter snow blowing over the surface of the glacier tends to bridge these deep voids with tenuous snow pathways. Usually you can see a crevasse as a depression or a slightly different shade of white in the surface of the glacier. Spring weather and the hot sun work to melt these snow bridges, and it is the unwary climber that gets caught on a shaky bridge.

We passed many ominous cracks and holes that let us know when we were going over the voids. We were able to pass each of them without incident and arrived safely at the cache site. It had only taken us 3-4 hours, but we were plenty tired from the exertion. We quickly dug a hole 6' deep, piled our gear in, covered and marked the spot, and readied to head back to base camp. Ravens frequent the camps on the glacier and have become amazingly adept at picking through even the toughest duffel to get to food and goodies. Thus the deep hole for our supplies.

The return to base camp was pretty grueling on all of us. The altitude wasn't as big a deal as the distance was. Double-plastic ice boots have one characteristic that endears them to the hearts of all climbers; they were designed for going up, not down. Blister city is usually the norm anytime you go a significant distance downhill, and we had 5.5 miles of it (minus the now *uphill* portion returning to base camp!) It was after 10:00 p.m. before we returned to camp. It had been a long day and there weren't too many smiling faces around camp that evening. We choked down some dinner and went to our tents to mumble under our breath about Bill and John. Around midnight we were done whining and caring for our blisters. Sleep came easy!

I awoke in the morning with sore feet but a pretty good outlook on the day. I knew we had to go back to our cache at 7800', but our packs would be light and the sleds nearly empty. I was looking forward to moving away from base camp and getting high! We quickly broke camp, and Bill laid out seven neat piles of group gear to be hauled to camp. Let me take a minute to explain 'group' gear. Kitchen supplies, stoves, trash, fuel, shovels, pickets, and occasionally (un) sanitary waste must be hauled to each camp. Each pile is supposedly divided up equally so no one person hauls the lion's share of the load. Invariably, though, someone forgets that they haven't picked up their pile, or a picket, shovel, etc., is overlooked and there is a call for volunteers. Now, there are three kinds of people- those who volunteer, those who don't, and those who say to @#\$% with it, I'll carry the damn thing! I happen to fall into the latter group and was soon carrying a monstrous pack (this trend would continue until we reached 14'000, at which time I was physically unable to carry the load I had amassed at that altitude). At any rate, we grabbed our group loads and quickly got to our new camp.

The weather on Denali can change quickly and fiercely. Camps are generally set up within snow walls that are built to keep the high winds from shredding the tents. It is not very hard to build the walls, but it does take quite a bit of energy. Any energy that is spent other than moving you up the mountain is energy wasted. Building camps is work! Luckily, whoever had been at the 7800' camp the night before had crafted a beautiful, three-tent unit with a great kitchen! We claimed squatter's rights and moved right in (this is another trend that we had amazing luck with - we didn't build a single camp our whole trip!). The only downfall to our new camp was the absence of a plywood outhouse (box). Bill smiled and said he would take care of it.

The weather up to this point had been mild, with daytime temps in the 30's. It dipped into the single digits at night. This may seem cold, but if you have a sleeping bag rated at -40, you really don't want the weather to be too warm. We were enjoying the weather and our good fortune at finding such a killer camp. John brewed up a great Mexican meal for dinner and there were plenty of hot drinks to go around.

After dinner, I decided it was time to ask Bill what he had fixed up for a latrine. He assured me that right around the corner from our camp was a small, snow-walled structure that would provide everything I needed. Now, Bill's a guide, and I trust my guides. So I innocently took him at his word and went to the snow shack. Ever have one of those mornings when the toilet seat seems just a little colder than it ought to be that early in morning? Bill's idea of a fix was to

carve a hole in the center of a bench cut in the ice and fix a plastic trash bag to it. You really haven't lived until you've sat on an ice commode in the middle of the Kahiltna glacier! It has a sh' feeling right down to your toes!

One interesting feature of our new camp was the imposing hill that started up about 100 yards away from our tents. We saw many climbers making their way down, and a few moving at a snails pace up the hill. It looked steep, and none of us were in a hurry to get started up it. We awoke the next morning to whiteout conditions on the glacier and were thus saved from starting immediately up the hill. We all retreated to our tents for some rest and gear repair.

Our group had settled into a routine that seemed to suit each of us. Meg, Chris, and myself were in one tent, Tim and Evan were in another, and Bill and John shared the third. We had quite a time making fun of the snoring crowd – for the sake of bruised egos I won't mention the fact that our tent sounded like a couple trumpeters playing a duet each night. The thinning air as we moved up wreaks havoc on sleep and really seems to enhance all the right muscles for truly melodious snoring! I was happy with our sleeping arrangements, though, and snoring was a very minor complaint. I was a little worried about being in a tent with two lawyers and was very conscious not to encroach on either of them for fear of litigation!

I had mistakenly put my gaiters (sleeves for your pant legs and boots so snow can't get in) on the wrong feet the day before and had ripped big, ugly gashes in the soft fabric that would normally be on the outside. There was quite a bit of powdered snow on the glacier as we traveled, and snow in the boots is not only uncomfortable, but dangerous as well. I had packed a needle and some dental floss for just such emergencies and made quick work of the gaiters. I did have to endure some jabs about my sewing prowess, but Mom would be proud of my handiwork. Additionally, I was now marked as Mr. Fixit. Needle, floss, and a good Leatherman tool are all you need to be a mobile repair shop on the glacier. Meg had some problems with her sleeping bag about this time and I was able to sew it up quickly, too. Of course, I did remind her of the mandatory beer in Talkeetna that would serve as payment for this service!

The weather finally began to clear at 4:00 p.m. and we packed up to move our cache to 10,000'. We roped up and began as quickly as possible for the higher camp. Immediately we began to ascend Ski Hill. The thinning atmosphere also began to show its effects, as our breathing became much more rapid during this exertion. Typical of the remaining sections of the mountain we would have to ascend, Ski Hill does not quit going up until you reach 10,000'. We would hike for an hour or more, and then pull to the side of the trail for a quick rest break. We didn't seem to be gaining any ground or running out of hill. Obviously this hill had been named for the great DOWNHILL skiing!

It took us about 4 hours to finally pull into 10,000'. This camp sits on a saddle between two high peaks, and narrows down to make a perfect isothermal zone on the mountain. This is the region in which warm air rushes up during the day and cold air rushes down at night with the

normal convection movement of air. The sun also dips behind the high peak to the west at night, making this one chilly spot to be in. I was wearing a pair of light nylon pants and a long sleeve T-shirt for the trip up the hill and was woefully unprepared for the arctic blast that greeted us as the sun sank behind the ridge.

At the last rest break I had sat on my pack to stay out of the snow. The pack was wet with perspiration and quickly soaked the back of my pants. I didn't think much of it until the cold air hit us, and by then we had buried our cache and were headed back down to 7800'. The wind made quick work of my wet behind, and it soon became clear to me that I might have to explain frostbite in a compromising position. I was not wearing long johns yet due to the heat we experienced during the day. By the time we reached camp, I was nipped front and back severely. The only way to recover from frost nip is to warm the affected areas by rubbing them and stimulating blood flow. It goes without saying that I was a sight to behold with both hands in my pants hoping for all the world that I could get the color to come back to my frozen parts without the help of the others. In my mind, I could imagine myself telling friends that I had to quit climbing because I froze my *&* off! No permanent damage was done, and I learned a lesson about the mountain – Denali is a hostile place, and it doesn't play.

Due to the late start, our day ended at roughly 1:00 am. We were cold, exhausted, and ready for bed when we returned. Some of us were also nursing altitude headaches from our first foray to 10,000'. The only remedy for this is to drink copious amounts of liquid. Unfortunately, drinking so much liquid right before bed meant we would be waking often to relieve ourselves during the night. I will say that men really have an advantage here over women. Mastering the side roll with a pee bottle is essential to glacier comfort, and we are built for it. There are other methods for women, but the risk to sleeping bags and other gear is significant! The long day and interrupted night left me feeling pretty weak the next morning and my headache lingered.

Our move the next day to 10,000' went fairly smoothly, although we had all over-dressed a little after being whipped so hard the night before. We stopped many times on the trail so layers could be shed. This can be a little frustrating if you are not the one who needs to shed layers. The secret to glacier travel is moisture management. You must start each leg of the journey cold, so that you only stay warm by moving. This ensures that you won't soak your clothing with sweat. The only sources of heat on the mountain are the sun and your own body. Wet clothes can mean disaster. I had dressed pretty light and quickly became chilled with the frequent stops. Being cold is a good way to get into a bad mood. I was glad when we finally made it to camp. I had done as much roped glacier travel as I cared to do for the day! An intense headache from the altitude did not make matters much better. I hoped a good night's rest would bring back my strength and lift my spirits a little.

Our plan for the following morning dictated that we pick up our cache, which was actually located at about 10,200', and continue on to 11,000' with all of our gear. This doesn't sound like a big move, but all of the elevation gain takes place in just over a mile. The trail to 11,000 was pretty grueling, and it felt like it was straight up! The actual camp lies around a corner;

otherwise you would be able to look down from 11,000' directly into the old camp. I struggled with my heavy pack and the thinning air as we climbed. The change in altitude by now was enough to make every movement a major cardiovascular workout. Even putting on our boots in the morning was enough to take our breath away and leave us heaving. We finally arrived at 11,000' and we were overjoyed to find another previously occupied camp that suited our needs. I felt like we were finally starting to get into the mountain itself. This was no longer a slog through the snowfields. It had begun take on all the aspects of a real alpine climb!

That night in our tent, Meg, Chris, and I talked about the climb and how each of us was handling the altitude. Headaches all around, and a definite shortage of O's (oxygen) left us each feeling a little weak. Chris, an ultra-marathoner (anything over 26 miles, generally in the 50-100 mile range) was handling the altitude better than either Meg or myself. He also lives at around 8000' elevation, which probably helped as well. Water was the main course of the night at this camp as well. Our nights seemed to be dotted with two hours sleep in between each trip to the latrine!

Our next move would be the hardest yet. We needed to move our cache to 13,500'. This portion of the climb goes around what is known as Windy Corner. Just below 13,000, the glacier takes a sharp turn to the left around the West Buttress (the route we were to climb). Winds here have been recorded at over 150 mph! Additionally, the turn in the glacier itself makes this area heavily crevassed. Not only would we have to deal with our biggest altitude gain yet, but we would also have to be extra alert for any weak snow bridges.

The morning brought high winds and zero visibility to the mountain. We would spend the day trying to rest and repair or dry any gear in need. I needed the break and welcomed the chance to lounge around the tent and read a book. Though the break was refreshing, we all worried that the weather may not clear. Storms on Denali can be fierce and last up to a week. Each of us knew how many days were built-in to the climb for bad weather. Trying to predict the weather, however, was about as useful as hoping Domino's would deliver to 11,000'; try as we might, it wasn't going to happen.

The skies had cleared considerably by morning. I readied myself for the climb feeling extremely weak and tired. I didn't really hurt muscle-wise, but my body just felt tired. I had also been fighting a headache all night. Sleeping is the activity that seems to bring on the most severe altitude headaches. Your normal sleep rhythm of breathing is slow and relaxed. This is fine if you are curled up in the Lazy Boy, but when you are trying to adjust to increasing altitude you can't bring in enough O's to sustain your body. You start to become hypoxic, and are usually awakened by an extreme headache. The only true remedy is to get up and move around a bit, thus stimulating a higher breathing rate. I awoke periodically throughout the night with headache pain and general body aches. I was ill prepared for our hardest day yet.

The total distance to 13,500' was just over two miles horizontally, The great gain in altitude and the physical exertion proved to be all but overwhelming. Our pace

was so slow that birds would easily be able to nest in our packs if they wished. On the bright side, the views from our now exposed ridge were spectacular. We had almost unlimited visibility to the northwest; we could easily pick out where the snowfields ended and pine forests grew thickly. It seemed strange to see green again, even if it was a good 15 miles towards the horizon. We stopped several times on the ridge and were able to take these views in all day. Even an altitude headache and a heavy load couldn't dampen the overwhelming beauty of our surroundings. We were each reminded anew why we had come here to climb.

Moving up on the final leg of our trek, Bill had wandered away from the trail several yards and continued following a rock band towards the Corner. I had roped up directly behind Bill, and I was a little aggravated that we were now post-holing through deep powdered snow. It seemed every step I took, the snow became deeper and deeper. Just when I thought it couldn't possibly get worse, I had the unnerving feeling that my feet were dangling over space! We had wandered over a snow bridge, and my weight was too much for it. I was stuck in a crevasse up to mid-chest. Usually it is tradition for climbers to designate a 'crevasse poodle' at the start of each trip. This would be the person who would test any suspect snow bridges and declare them safe. The idea being you wouldn't mind if a poodle were lost! I was by far the heaviest member of our team, and my habitually heavy pack didn't help matters at all. I had unknowingly become our designated poodle!

At first I was in shock. Generally, you would yell "Falling!" to alert the rope team of the danger. The bottom fell out on me so gradually that I didn't even think to do this. All that came to mind was "@#&@, I'm in a crevasse!" Bill turned to look at me as if I were joking but quickly summed up the situation. The fact that my feet were not touching anything made it difficult to move, let alone work myself out. My only recourse was to take my ice axe and probe in front of me for solid snow. Once I had reached out as far as I could, and plunged my axe in to the hilt, I had to wiggle and squirm my way out. Bill yarded on the rope as I made like a bull walrus and belly flopped my way to safety. I glanced behind me and saw the black hole in the snow and knew we had gotten lucky. It took about 10 minutes for me to catch my breath after the exertion before we were able to continue on the right trail (I hesitated whether to include the portion or not; Meg told me to quit crying and start walking after this episode, and I know this passage will again bring ridicule if she reads it!).

The cache location at 13,500' was really a forsaken place. Wind constantly howled around the Corner, and everywhere you looked there were depressions and cracks hinting at the crevasse danger that was ever present. The site was located only a few hundred yards away from the West Buttress and was easily within range of the seracs that hung from the ridge above. It was not a place that I would have felt cozy spending the night. We buried our supplies among the many other wanded sites, and made our way back to 11,000'. Before I had a chance to unload my pack (I had chosen not to use a sled on this day), Bill hefted it to his shoulder. Following a short discussion, it was agreed that I would not load down as heavy for the rest of the trip. My pack was considerably heavier than the rest of the group's, and much too heavy to succeed in this type of environment. This was mostly my fault as I generally carry a behemoth

pack for training purposes. I was accustomed to carrying heavy loads and didn't realize how disproportionately heavy mine had gotten. I would make adjustments to my load and make sure I wasn't burdened like this again.

As we lounged in the tent that night before sleeping, Chris and I discussed the days carry. He had also hauled a heavy load, without sled, on the carry. We both felt as if we had been whipped. Meg had an unusually weak day and she admitted that the altitude was finally starting to weigh on her as well. There were three tired campers in our tent that night!

Our succession up the mountain to 14,000' followed much the same routine. We moved into an established camp at 14,000', and returned the following day to 13,500' to pick up our cache. There are climbing rangers stationed at 14,000', and they have a weather station and radio for aiding in rescues. We learned that on our second night at 14,000' the mercury dipped to -40 F during the night. The mountain was really proving to be a formidable opponent! All of our moves from here on out would be on steep, technical terrain. The days of long slogs through the snowfields were long past, and we must now set about to climb the mountain.

We prepared for the days ahead by going through all of our gear, trying to make critical decisions regarding which items to cache at 14,000' to be picked up on our return, and what might be needed higher on the mountain. My most pressing concern, other than reducing my overall weight to a bare minimum, was my lunch food. Each of us had gone through bushels of junk food in Talkeetna trying to decide how much and what we wanted to carry up the mountain. I am a big eater, and I had a whopping 35 pounds of lunch food when we left for the glacier! I had now learned what I would and wouldn't eat during a normal day, so I could pair my lunch cache down considerably. I decided 4 candy bars a day, with assorted gummies and licorice, would sustain me for lunch. Lunch on the mountain starts as soon as breakfast is over and ends as dinner is served. Still, I had a lot of food! I also had to decide how many days extra food I would bring in the event that we were snowed in at a higher camp for a week. After I laid all of my food out, I made substitutions for the candy bars: 1 chunk of cheese and sausage = 1 candy bar, etc. I also ditched all of my extra socks, baby wipes, batteries, half the book I was reading, long john top, and various other items I deemed luxuries. I felt I now had my pack as light as it was going to get.

Camp 17,000' lies directly above 14,000' on the West Buttress. To gain access to the Buttress itself, we had to climb the headwall in front of our camp. A head wall is a section of ridge or buttress that allows access to the ridge. They are usually very steep, icy slopes not prone to avalanche (due to the extreme slope). The headwall we were to climb rises 2200' in less than a mile. A portion of this climb had fixed ropes along the way to aid in climbing. Generally, an ascender is placed on the line allowing you to 'jug' up the line. This sounds like it would be easy. NOT! We struggled for 4 hours to make it up the lines to the cache at 16,200'. Anything that could go wrong did. One pair of crampons broke in half, another pair wouldn't stay on the boot (although we had all been asked to check fit the night before) and the rest of it was just plain bad climbing. We were so exhausted and frustrated that there were very

few words exchanged when we reached the top. All I wanted to do was go back down, get in my tent, and forget the day ever happened. This was a sentiment that was shared by all. We felt worse knowing that we would have to climb this portion again the following day on our way to 17,000'. I could only hope the next day would go more smoothly.

It was at this point in the trip that I really began to feel the mountain working on me physically. There is no place to stop, let alone take a break on the fixed lines. Once you commit to the headwall, you don't stop until you reach the top. We had spent so much time on the lines that I had become extremely dehydrated. Add to this the exertion from the climb itself and a gain in elevation of 2200'. I felt pretty weak, and my head rang like a gong. I knew the only remedy would be to descend to 14,000', and drink lots of water. Most of mountain climbing is like this – you exert yourself until you can't stand the pain anymore, and then you try to appease your body with descent and hydration. If you ever decide you don't want to chug that next liter of water or that it is too much trouble to get out of your tent for dinner, you can be assured that you will succumb to altitude illness of one type or another. At the very least, you put yourself out of the running for a summit bid. Again, climbing is all about levels of comfort and deciding how little comfort you actually need.

The following day was declared a rest day by John and Bill. The group was asked for a collective decision, but it was clear the decision had already been made. I was thankful for the break, though for my own selfish reasons. I knew that I physically needed one more day at 14,000' to try to acclimate further before going on to high camp. We had routinely been checking our vitals with a device called a pulse oximeter. It measures your heart rate and your blood oxygen levels. A normal reading would be an 80-90 O count and somewhere in the 80-90 range for pulse. A low reading doesn't necessarily mean you are going to get sick, but it does tell let you know how you are acclimating. My pulse-ox had measured routinely in the corpse range, and today was no different. My O count was generally in the 60's, and on this particular day measured a mere 53. Evan, our resident medical expert, assured us this was not possible because it would mean I was dead. Well, I was still kicking, but I sure felt dead!

After a day of resting and hydrating, I felt much better. My pulse-ox even had an O reading of 72, a new personal high for me! As we packed up our camp and got ready to go to 17,000', I had some reservations about how I would handle the altitude above. The body no longer acclimates above 17-18,000'. Cellular structures of the body start to break down, and the body deteriorates. Going up in my condition would be touch and go if we got stuck for any length of time at high camp. I hoped for good weather and drank extra water to boost my system.

We ascended the fixed ropes much more smoothly this time, and had gained the ridge in less than two hours. The West Buttress becomes a sharp, knife edged ridge at about 16,500', with several thousand feet of exposure off either side. The route winds around boulders and rock outcroppings and is rather technically difficult. A fall here would result in certain death if not arrested quickly. We were acutely aware of this fact and climbed much more alertly and

efficiently than we had in the past. We arrived at 17,000' feeling tired, but otherwise in pretty good shape. I had a slight headache, but nothing compared to what it had been. The weather was as clear as a bell and a summit bid looked pretty feasible. We made camp, and had time left to lounge around and relax before dinner.

Denali can tear apart experienced and inexperienced climbers alike. If there is going to be a problem on the mountain, you can almost bet money that it is going to take place at 17,000' or higher. Sometime during the night, concerned climbers from another party woke Bill and John. Rising directly from camp is Denali Pass, atop another steep, 1000' headwall. Someone had noticed a climber stumbling down this wall for some time, and then stopped moving all together. After observing the climber for some time, it was apparent that they would have to assist the unknown climber. Bill and John were up the rest of the night ascending the ridge and then helping the injured climber down.

The climber was an Australian named Brett who had left his party to summit solo. He was returning from a 'successful' summit bid after 22 hours with extreme frostbite on his face, hands, and feet and was suffering from altitude induced edema. He needed immediate medical attention and rapid descent. Bill and John got him into a tent (his climbing partners had written him off and had already descended) and made sure he was warm and had plenty of liquids. This was about all that could be done at the time. Nearby, another climber we had met several times on the climb seemed to be suffering from pulmonary edema, a build-up of fluid in the lungs due to altitude. His partner was too weak to assist him to 14,000' and had requested help. Bill and John decided to start at dawn for 14,000' with both climbers. This was not their responsibility, and indeed put them in serious danger of an uncontrolled fall from the exposed Buttress. However, they knew these guys had to get down, and quick. The next day was declared a rest day to allow Bill and John to take the injured climbers down and return to high camp.

Upon their return, John explained what had happened, and let us know that both climbers seemed to be in much better shape upon descent. Brett could possibly lose some digits, but would otherwise recover. We were again reminded that we were playing a game with high stakes. Many people on the mountain would make wrong choices and ultimately pay the price for their mistakes. As for our summit bid, the weather was predicted to be beautiful, and we were pretty well rested and ready.

The following morning, we awoke to clear skies and just the hint of a lenticular cloud above the summit of Mt. Foraker. We would try for the summit! Nervous excitement seemed to vibrate through the entire camp at 17,000' as many parties began preparations to leave for the summit. I felt pretty strong, with only slight twinges of pain in the back of my head. I didn't worry too much, but I packed two extra quarts of water to be on the safe side. All we carried in our packs was some lunch food, water, and every stitch of clothing we had.

We left camp at 10:00 am, and immediately began our ascent of the headwall, affectionately known as the Autobahn, due to a previous accident involving German climbers. Denali Pass, at 18,500' was pretty windy when we topped out. We stopped long enough to take on some food and water, and adjust our layers. I felt pretty rushed at this rest break and wished for more time to tend to my physical needs. I shrugged it off and figured I would make it up the next stop. I was climbing on Bill's rope, and we were moving considerably slower than John's rope, climbing ahead of us. We rolled into the breaks 5-10 minutes behind them, yet we left at the same time. This put tremendous pressure on our rope to get things done quickly at the break.

Our next break on the mountain was just before 19,000'. The break seemed to fly by, and I noticed I was having a hard time with my coordination. At the last break, I had left 2 liters of water uncovered in my pack and they had frozen solid. I drank the rest of the water that I had left, and pulled on my down pants. The wind had picked up enough to slice through my Gore-Tex windpants. I struggled with my pants for several minutes before finally getting them over my crampons. When I finished, we pushed on.

We rounded a corner of the ridge just before an area known as the football field and noticed a pack on the wind scoured slope beneath us. There were no footprints leading to the pack, and it was far enough down the slope to eerily suggest how it had been left there. No one made a move to check it out, possibly because the reality was too grim to give thought to. We didn't need it, and whomever it belonged to no longer had a need for it either.

Shortly after passing the pack, we pulled up for what would be our last break before topping the summit ridge. We would not carry our packs to the summit. We put on our down jackets, and any other article of clothing we deemed necessary, and left our packs behind. The wind had picked up to 20-30 mph by now, and every layer we put on seemed amazingly thin. I remember thinking that everything had a surreal feel to it, as if I was watching the scene pass in a dream. Later I would realize that this was more altitude and dehydration than coherent thought. I was slipping into a daze without fully recognizing the signs. We had one more hill to climb, and we would be on the summit ridge of the highest mountain in North America.

Evan had been lagging for much of our summit bid, and was completely wasted on the ridge. The ridge was an extreme knife blade in shape, and quite literally dropped thousands of feet only inches from where we were to walk. It was not a place to be struggling, and John decided that Evan had reached his summit at this point. He was physically and mentally at the end of his limits. Evan did not dispute this, or, in my opinion, give any sign that he disagreed. He was pretty out of it. The rest of us took a quick break, and pushed for the summit while John stayed with Evan.

Bill led the summit ridge, and took pains to sew up every bit of rope with running belays. While this was the prudent thing to do, it slowed our progress down to an absolute standstill. Standing on the highest spot for 10,000 miles, with nothing even remotely high enough to break the wind,

we were wearing down quickly. It seemed to take forever, but we finally made the summit. I vaguely remember reaching the peak, and sitting down for a break. I was completely in a zone, my thoughts broken and barely coherent.

Bill snapped me out of my cloud after what seemed to be only moments on the summit. Yelling to be heard above the wind, Bill told me we needed to move out quickly. I stood up, and something in my manner must have startled him. He asked me specifically if I could walk, and could I make it back down the razor-backed ridge? The situation was serious. If I could not make it under my own power, there was a good chance I wouldn't make it down. The ridge was too narrow to for two people side by side, and there was no way to walk lower than the top of the ridge. I understood this even through my fog. If I wanted to live to tell about it, I had to pull it together.

I remember telling Bill I could traverse the ridge, but I didn't think I could lead it. Unfortunately, I was on the lead end of the rope! As I started back down the ridge, I fought for my equilibrium with every step. I kept telling myself to focus on the task; think of nothing else but placing one foot squarely in front of the other. Each step was a milestone, each a struggle. Finally, we made it to the end of the ridge. My intense concentration during our traverse had me sweating profusely. The front of my down coat was covered in a layer of ice from the moisture in my breath and my own perspiration. We took a brief rest at the end of the ridge to assess the situation.

I had begun to snap out of my daze at this point, but my physical condition had deteriorated to the point that I could barely stand up straight (I would be later teased that I looked like Cro-Magnum Man, dragging my knuckles in the snow!). Dehydration had brought me to a state of exhaustion, and we didn't have any more water readily available. We were still many hours from camp on a good day, and this would be anything but. Out of options, we started to descend with me setting the pace

It is a common misconception that traveling downhill is easier than going up. This might be true if your journey starts at the top of a hill, but after the exertion and fatigue of a long, uphill climb, the stabilizing muscles around the knees weaken. Balance and coordination become increasingly difficult to control. This was the case as I started down from the summit ridge and into the football fields. My legs were so weak that I decided to sit down and glissade down the ridge until my legs had rested. Meg, walking behind me on the rope, held back just enough to keep me from sliding uncontrollably. It took some time, but we reached our packs without too much trouble.

Our packs only contained food, clothing, and water for this part of the climb. Our water was mostly gone (or frozen solid) and we were wearing all of our clothing. Our packs were light, and I was able to carry mine on the descent (after I was relieved of all my items except a down parka. There is a certain irony in this as my pack had been the heaviest on many days of our climb). Bill and I discussed my general condition and the options that we had. I was still

standing, and therefore we did not have an emergency, yet. We could still safely make it back to camp as long as I was able to move under my own power. We were limited, however, because John had already descended to the lower camp with Evan. With only one guide, any further deterioration on my part could be costly to the entire group.

I knew I could walk almost indefinitely, but my balance was shot. Bill tied into the rope behind me and kept a 3' hand bop tied to my belt. This would allow me to continue taking steps as Bill made corrections to my course. Known as short roping, this technique is often used to assist weaker climbers up a mountain. The trick was to make it work while descending steep ice patches and technical rock sections. It had already taken several hours to reach the far end of the football field, and it looked like we were in for a long haul.

Reaching down occasionally to scoop snow to suck on, I continued walking in this manner for what seemed like weeks. Every time we would stop for a rest break, Bill forced me to eat what I could of my remaining candy bars. I could only manage a bite or two at a stretch because I had no saliva to help break the food down. My mouth would paste up after a bite, and I would spend the next 30 minutes trying to eat enough snow to wash it down. I knew food would help my situation, but it didn't feel very helpful. The rest of our descent to Denali Pass was on fairly straightforward terrain. One foot in front of the other, continuing to move forward. After literally hours of mindless travel, we reached Denali Pass.

The pass would be the most difficult and dangerous part of our descent. The headwall dropped 1000' on a 55-60 degree slope to the camp at 17,000'. One misstep on my part could cause the entire rope team to plummet to the glacier below. Most of the way would be icy and extremely narrow. The temperature had dropped quite low, and we were all concerned about the upcoming section. I asked Bill several times to allow me to stay on the ridge with the sleeping bag he carried for such emergencies. This way the rest of the team could safely get back to camp, and I would be ok on the ridge until morning. I felt the others had already suffered enough of the cold, and soon fatigue would be overtaking all of us. Bill decided if I thought I could make it, that we should move ahead together. It was midnight by this time, and the night was not going to get any warmer. If the wind picked up on the ridge, there was a good chance I would not survive the exposure. We rested briefly, and pushed for camp.

It took us a total of 5 hours to traverse the Autobahn and reach our camp. Every step of the way was filled with anxiety, frustration, and fear for all of us. Each time I lost my balance or stumbled, Bill would catch my fall with the short rope. We placed picket after picket to tie our team to the mountain should one of us fall. Each time we did this, we also slowed our progress. We could see our camp, yet we did not seem to be gaining any ground. We had met two other climbers earlier in the evening on their way down, and we sent a message to John indicating our situation and location. Half way down the headwall, we met John on his way up. Now, with two guides, we were able to increase our speed considerably. John would place pickets at the front of the line, Bill would yank me around on the rope, and the whole team would move exactly one picket before starting over again. Hours of this passed, and eventually, we were

again on level ground at 17,000'. Other climbers had heard of our plight and had prepared hot water and drinks for our arrival. I don't know why, but we made it.

It was 6:30 am before we were finally able to crawl into our tents for some much-needed rest. Our 19-hour summit bid had ended successfully, and is one we will surely always remember. Normally, a party would continue to descend immediately to 14,000'. We decided we had had enough excitement for one day, and rested. We would continue down the following morning. I was grateful for the rest, as my entire body ached. I slept fitfully for several hours, and then got up to begin the long road to hydration and refueling.

I awoke the next day feeling rested, but stiff. I had muscle cramps in every part of my body, including my hands. This was a direct result of the dehydration, I knew, and I immediately began to chug water in preparation for our descent. Our entire team was moving sluggishly, and it was well after noon before we had packed our camp up and were ready to head south.

Denali is a big mountain, but its community of climbers is small and tight-knit. It seemed everyone had heard of our epic and wanted to ask questions or throw a barb our way. My fifteen minutes of fame had not exactly gone as I had always thought it would! We would repeat our story over and over on our short descent. We managed to descend to 8000' by 10:00 p.m. We were close enough to the airstrip to push through, but no planes would be flying until mid-morning anyway. We laid our pads and bags on the glacier, and slept.

The sun shined gloriously in the morning, and we did not have much to pack before we were again underway. For the first time in weeks we could hear planes landing at base camp, and this was one climbing party that was looking forward to a cold beer! We were at base camp in no time, and soon we were back in Talkeetna. We had made it.

There are times in the mountains when you can't predict what is going to happen or who is going to blow. Altitude is different for everyone, and it can affect you even if you have never been susceptible to it in the past. Wrong day, bad weather, anything can spring up and change an ordinary trip into an epic. This was my turn to be down. I am thankful for the patience and strength of my teammates. We could have told a much different tale had we reacted differently. I got lucky to have had such a strong team with me to overcome my time of weakness. They were truly the heroes in this tale.

Part of the allure of climbing is the certainty that not everyone will make it to the top. Denali historically has had a 50% success rate. We climbed the mountain when the success rate was 33%. We had beautiful weather the whole trip, and a most enjoyable climb. I don't think any of us would have predicted that I would be the weak link on summit day (Bill did mention to me very early on in the trip that it is often those who are in the best shape that have the most problems. Their great strength and enthusiasm early on the mountain often has a profound effect as the climb goes higher). But, my number was up.

I think the mountains hold beauty and wisdom for those who choose to meet the challenge of their heights. I cannot equate the feeling I get when I climb anymore than I can truly explain why I must go. My experience on Denali did not lessen my desire to climb; rather it made me even more determined to return to Denali again. Climbing is all about pushing personal limits and seeing how solid they are. If one climbs only for the summit, then the goal is meaningless. The magic is not in summit, but in the journey. I thank my Lord for giving me the strength to test myself in the environment that I love, and for giving me the support I have always found in my family, friends, and especially those few I feel privileged to call climbing partners.