

Santos Expedition Uno



Denali National Park & Preserve

2007

Permit Number 138



Gabe Powers (Top), Greg Huey, Marty Hensley, Travis Hudson

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Leader: Gregory Huey		Leader: Gregory Huey	
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“Physical discomfort is important only when the mood is wrong.”

Robert Pirsig

Reflecting on this trip, our attitude was one of physical endurance and the camaraderie of the adventure. There were days when facets of the journey were tedious and there were days when situations were downright shitty. Food was monotonous. Weather was disagreeable. Feet stunk and underwear...well, yeah. In a place and time where these issues were a constant feature of our existence, it's impossible to completely ignore reality. For us this was an adventure in many ways, and between Travis & I, we feel newly educated on numerous fronts, some expected and some utterly unforeseen. Four of us began this epic almost a year prior to our arrival in Alaska, and the relationships within our team followed that same trajectory, some developments were anticipated and some were surprising to us as they emerged.

Together we brought a variety of experiences and attitudes to the climb. Marty & Gabe met years ago in Arizona and have an abundance of alpine climbs under their belts, ranging from the Sierra Nevada to the Rockies. My first and only glacial experience came 10 years ago in the Bugaboo Provincial Park of British Columbia, and even then we traversed the foot of the glacier en route to rock climbs, rather than looking for trouble on the glacier itself. Travis had traveled to the highest altitude, reaching 18,000' in central Mexico several years ago. Each of us felt confident enough in our experiences to adapt to unknown conditions, and believed that, while not previously trained in traveling crevassed glaciers, our mountaineering experience and rock training in the lower 48 could be tailored to suit the situation. In short, we didn't know what we were doing, but we embraced that ignorance, approaching the climb humbly and with open minds.

In 2005, 1340 climbers attempted to summit Denali. Of those, 93% used the airstrip approach from the south and went up and back down the Kahiltna/West Buttress route. Our goal, derived from Dick's experiences on the mountain years ago, was to approach by pontoon plane and follow that popular southern route to the summit. From there, we would depart the pilgrim's route, carrying all of our gear to Denali Pass at 18,000 feet and exiting on the north side, down the Harper and Muldrow glaciers to McGonagall pass. Then we would leave the moraine at the foot of the glacier, travel down a sharp valley and negotiate 18 miles of tundra, effectively “rediscovering chlorophyll,” as Greene poetically described it to us in the early stages of our planning. We would have 100 pounds of gear and provisions on our backs in these later stages, single hauling everything needed to survive on our own for up to a week. 4 teams attempted this feat two years ago, 0.7% of the overall population on the mountain that season. The traverse is unique in that it prevents any caching of supplies behind the team for use on the way out, and we would need to be self contained throughout the entire 21 day expedition (what would eventually grow to 28 with scrounged provisions).

The first pages of my notebook contain typical notes and lists pertaining to the trip. On May 14 we still needed to acquire a variety of goods, ranging from groceries to rechargeable batteries, supported by the packable solar panel Gabe discovered as we geared up in New Mexico. On page two there's an outline of a “Z-line” pulley system, boldly demonstrating our naivety and potential overconfidence in our glacier rescue capabilities. We'd all studied it in theory and believed we could put it into practice, but nobody had actually set one up and made it work. Hence the sketch. Following this is a route description of the Muldrow and Harper glaciers. Again, we'd studied these in guide books and carried a topo, but notes and a sketch couldn't hurt, right? There's a bit on weather patterns and gps coordinates for the Wonder Lake Airstrip-if we actually need gps coordinates to find a lake in the middle of a “flat” tundra, we must be in trouble. But they were available, & who knows what may befall us in the coming weeks. I follow with a quote concerning the West Buttress route, “Although the route is a slog up to 15,000 feet,

above Genet Basin it becomes aesthetic.” Apparently that’s all I felt I needed to know about the populous southern portion of the route.

Writing on May 21, the first entry proceeds as follows:

They gave us a screw cap tub, a clean mountain canister (CMC)-the Oscar. We got on the mountain 2 days ago and just emptied it for the first time. HOLY CRAP! 4 guys can shit a lot-a lot like fill up the 2 gal Oscar in 2 days. (I could shy away from excessive talk on the subject, but it would be cheating to leave out direct writing from the book. I wrote what was on our minds, and poop creation and disposal was on our minds, a lot. You can’t just dig a hole in the glacier & go, because as the surface melts through the season the hole disappears, & where do the next guys get their snow for drinking? The Oscar is lined with a biodegradable garbage bag & you drop that in the nearest crevasse whenever it needs replaced.) Marty & I roped up and climbed to the nearest hole to huck in 10 lbs. of mud, and we were never so happy to see it leave our possession.

Day 1. May 19

Oh man. You know, it wasn’t really our fault. Being late, I mean. Yesterday the planes hadn’t flown for 3 days due to the weather over the mountain. And we had everything sorted, and loosely packed back at the hostel. So what harm if we went to the bar last night? And stayed. For a long time. Who would have thought we’d be getting on board so early? Not us. Unable to locate Marty and I the next morning at the campground where we’d finally crashed on the north side of town, Gabe and Travis organized all the gear at the storage bin, loaded it into the shuttle, and tramped off to the airstrip. When we caught up to them shortly after 0800 I knew I was in trouble. It takes a lot to get Gabe excited, and by the tone of his voice, this was a lot. We apologized & went about getting our act together. Double check last minute items. Change out of anything with even a trace of cotton and store it at the airstrip shed. Flip a coin: do I carry sneakers for 95% of the voyage for the luxury of wearing them across the tundra? Doesn’t matter, I realize, because I threw them in the garbage at the gear bin. We hang around the strip watching planes come and go, until finally Gabe says, “hey, we should go get a coke before we leave.” A coke?! BRILLIANT! That’ll help manage this hangover. Off we go, and I collect my sneakers out of the garbage (this was meant to be their last hurrah, so when I decided to leave them, the garbage seemed a logical place.) Then to the corner market for a soda, except in his enthusiasm Gabe forgot his wallet (should I have been more suspicious of his motives?). The kind lady gave us fountain drinks anyway.



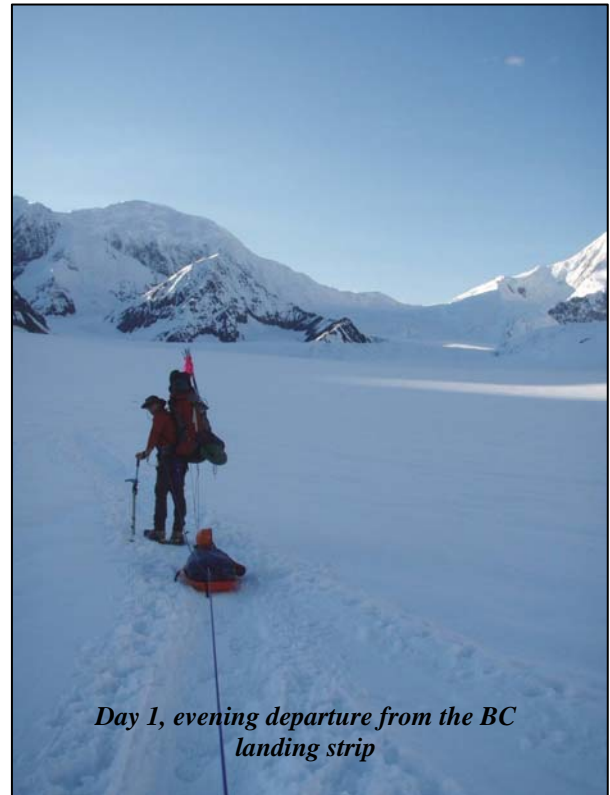
Soon we were loading the plane. I had noticed 3 of our haul bags were marked the same weight (weighed for weight on the airplane) of 68 lbs a piece-that’s pretty good food sorting. But then they’re loading the plane and mine weighs 78, so I guess I misread earlier. That sucks. 78 lbs in the haul bag and 45 lbs in the pack.

There’s a scurrilous looking kid named Christian with sandy dreadlocks and bright blue eyes holding a box of cheese Danish at the back of the plane with a

twinkle in his eye. “This guy must really be happy about his Danish,” I think to myself as I nod in passing. I mean, what else could be so amusing, as we depart for a frozen wilderness with no chance of resupply for the duration. Some people pack a year’s supply of Winstons, some people horde a freight of coffee beans, and this guy packs a Wonder Truck full of pastries on the plane with him. To each his own, I suppose. I’m sure I’ll be crying for a cheese Danish myself in a week or two.

We landed at basecamp (BC) on the glacier about 1400. Our first job upon arrival was to load two body bags back onto the plane. Occupied body bags. Two climbers fell 1,000 feet from Denali Pass the day before. They were evacuated by Llama Helicopter to the BC where the pontoon planes fly them the rest of the way out. If we weren’t focused before, this helped. Climbers dying on the same route we were approaching sobered us to the task we’d constructed.

Recovering from this encounter, we drug gear to the side of the air strip, claimed sleds from the giant pile at basecamp, collected 6 gallons of fuel from the stock tent, and then headed up the hill looking for a crevasse to fall into. For a refresher, we each repelled into it and then ascended back out. We practiced setting up haul lines, placing anchors, padding edges and the like. What we learned was that we could get up ourselves up okay, but if we had to improvise for an injured climber or extraordinary load we needed more practice. This took a while to learn and we got back to the BC at 1900. Still anxious to get started, we loaded up and headed for camp 1-down the Kahiltna fork and the first leg up the main Kahiltna glacier, a 5 mile trip with 0 feet net gain. It got pretty cold around 2000 when the sun went behind the west ridge. Learning to move while roped together and controlling sleds on the downhill leg had been challenging, and by midnight we were wearing down and getting cold. Nonetheless, after months and months of planning, to finally be underway was exciting-standing on the broad glacier in the northern sunset, ¼ moon and a few faint stars peering through the dusk; the novelty of the entire situation fueled our enthusiasm while Travis & I joked together atop a short ridge, layering our insulation and doing pushups to stay warm while the other two caught up. We climbed a sharp slope to the first camp around 0100, and found about 10 tents clustered together adjacent to the road. It felt eerie in the midnight dusk, quiet and empty like a ghost town, a ramshackle Colonia on the edge of a waste, like a chapter out of *The Gunslinger*. We finished the haul and by 0200 were passed out in a tent pad built for one, gear strung all over the place and too tired to care.



Day 1, evening departure from the BC landing strip

Day 2. May 20

Slept in until 1000 and awoke to the hum of a busy camp. Still a border town, but bustling with the activity of eager prospectors at the start of a day’s labor. We take time to repack some gear. Then the whole story comes out: “Hey Huey, how was that soda yesterday? You should watch this video we made while you and Gabe were gone!” Yup. It never gets old. There they are, emptying the blue pig and stuffing the biggest river rocks they can find in the bottom of it. For kicks, there goes another in the

backpack. There were over 15 pounds of stone, and I was so relieved to see my lightening load that I couldn't be angry. And now I know what Christian was grinning about. We left camp at 1400, overconfident, still learning differences between a typical hike and climbing a glacier with 120 pounds of gear. It's only 2,000' gain to the next camp. Only 9,200' elevation. Should be a piece of cake. Warm and sunny on the reflective surface, we're dressed in T-shirts and soft shell pants with sunhats and glasses mandatory; constantly applying sunscreen as it sweats into our eyes and mouths. We single hauled everything again and it was steep. Steep like TC in Idaho. Steep like get off the bike and walk. Steep like, "Hey Travis, slow down up there cuz you're running me into the ground!"

Still adjusting to traveling roped; it's trying, matching each other step for step. When the leader crests a dune and wants to speed up, he imposes on the trailer to speed up at the crux of the hill. When the trailer needs to adjust a strap or blow his nose, he gets out of step, jerking the leader by the waist. And Travis is having a strong day, while I'm none too happy about this heavy sled tugging at my hips, pulling me down with every step. Travis slows his pace to let me catch up, but when he does I just slow more, or take a break altogether. It's a lengthy trip and we're working on communication across the Barney (the rope was purple). I got frustrated often at the work required to move so much weight uphill and continually antagonized Travis with my slow pace and frequent stops. Becoming aggravated, I'd lag on the rope, suddenly jerking him off pace and bringing a reprimand, "Hey, let me know if you're gonna stop." It was hard enough work without being continuously pulled off balance by a lagging partner, and I commend him for his patience and persistence getting us to camp on those early working days.

Somewhere near the midpoint of the day we were astounded and amused to see a sled approaching us from above. Perched on top of his gear sat a tousled climber, propelling the craft with his knuckles like an ape on parade, laughing and yelling all the while, "I got Hape, I got Hape, gotta get downhill quick, I got the Hape!" (High Altitude Pulmonary Edema) Talking to the bemused team that soon followed, traveling on foot and properly roped, we learned that the group had reached the 11,000' camp when their teammate from



What? No continental breakfast?!
Gabe dishing Gorp at Camp 1

Anchorage began experiencing difficulty breathing and occasional heart palpitations. The standard care is to hydrate and descend, which he chose to do as rapidly as possible. Buoyed by this break in routine, we pushed upward, finally cresting a steep grade to reach camp 2 late in the evening. Nestled in a terrace on the valley floor and enclosed by the ever-present granite slopes, the camp sits on a vista overlooking the *Valley of the Mountain Gods*, as the lower Kahiltna has come to be known. We doggedly setup gear and kitchen in an old tent pad and stomped new ones beside it for our tents. There were 4 or 5 camps already in place, and people were still mulling about, making our arrival a little less surreal than the night before.

Day 3. May 21

We started breaking down camp 2 around 1000. I'm packing up but Gabe's still in the tent, so I strip the fly and pull all the pegs so we can put it up once he gets out. I walk back to the *kitchen* and busy myself loading my pack. 10 minutes later I look up, "*Gabe, what the Hell?!*" The tent just walked 40' from its pad and is billowing in the wind, sitting atop hardened glacial snow, poised to make a break. Stomping through knee deep snow, I'm three steps away and pause for a breath, thinking I've got it made. This is funny, right? We're all laughing and jeering and the tent's right here. No problem. Then the wind gusts and off it goes...and goes and goes and goes. This is not funny anymore. Should've dived. The tent coasts naked across a barren snowfield. No contours, no obstructions to slow its escape. It's 300 yards away and gaining ground. Waddle back to camp-need proper gear for the pursuit. This has become a potentially climb-ending development. Gabe and Marty are already suited up and depart up the trail to crest a ridge and attempt to spot the escapee. Two climbers pass camp, they're sympathetic. "Hey guys, if we spot that tent we'll let you know." *Yah, fat chance of that*, I'm thinking as Travis and I rapidly batten down the camp. What else could they say? "*Hey Jackasses, nice move!*" At least they were sympathetic.

We crest a plateau and see it, ½ mile across the field, posted on a wall of the valley containing the Kahiltna. Stranded, wind driven into the wall. It looks foreign, like a horse in the desert, and I spot our teammates as specs on the white expanse breaking trail in that direction. We followed their steps across untracked glacier in the event they should go through the surface. The shelter was retrieved without further incident and we returned to camp together by noon.

A debate ensued. Things feel ragtag: hurriedly buying provisions the day before departure, a long day working on crevasse rescue, leaving BC late, and now this. A backbone of trust and camaraderie has yet to develop through the team, and while Marty and Gabe have a long history, the rest of us haven't gotten to know each other really well-we play ball together; we drink and eat and travel together. But we don't know one another in mountaineering terms, and we're showing a lack of professionalism that we had expected to spontaneously arise and overcome that unfamiliarity. There's a lack of basic communication that is being overlooked. We finally opt for a rest day to regroup.

That evening two familiar climbers arrive at the camp: Christian and his partner William. We chatted a bit, they camped nearby, and at this early juncture we had no concept of how much this chance timing would influence the middle period of our climb. It feels insulting now, looking back, that we had ever camped separately, dined alone, or held informal small talk in the middle of the street. There must be a proverb someplace about strangers existing as friends we have yet to meet. These two fit the bill.



Day 2, Camp 2 "Kitchen"

Day 4. May 22

Cold breakfast, break camp and depart by 0900 for the 11,000' camp 3. We eventually calculated that a minimum of two hours was required to melt water for warm food, hydrate ourselves and store 2 liters per person to carry, and it takes such a long time just to settle logistics when breaking camp that we opted to forego breakfast until we'd made some ground. Clear day but chilly in our hard-shells. After a few hours, we stopped to make water in an abandoned walled pad as the wind picked up. William and Christian caught up to us and huddled down in the snow fort for a rest. Turns out William, a physicist turned real estate broker, is actually Christian's dad and the paternal figure for their team of 6: these two plus Joby from Colorado (the son of William's childhood friend) and three climbers from Guadalajara. Pirro, a stout scuba instructor with a boyish grin, summited here a few years ago and is climbing with Joby up the West Buttress. The other team, a young pair of recent engineering grads-Pedro & Diego-are attempting Cassin's Ridge, a sharp spine to the southeast of the West Buttress requiring five days of exposed, isolated, technical climbing.

We finished our break and roped, moving with William and Christian as the trail steepened and disappeared over a bluff. The last ¼ mile is a 40° backbreaker to a camp at the foot of *The Ski Hill*, around 11K. The increasing altitude was having some physical implications, and with the sled pulling at my waist, digging the pack into my hips and shoulders, the wind howling in my face, and the ominous slope looming above, I vividly remember dialing my ipod to *The Highwayman* and happily settling into the task, matching Travis step for step to keep us in rhythm. As we crested, I was reaching an emotional apex, overwhelmed by



physical exertion, riding a surge of endorphins and focusing mentally on the scale of our expedition, the probabilities of our success and the sheer beauty the situation. When we finally stopped, I stood panting, with a cockeyed grin and the hint of an emotional tear reflecting off my flushed face. A shantytown in varying degrees of decay was sprawled about the cirque before us, with 30-40 tents dug in, hastily built ice walls protecting each individually, ramshackle pit latrines scattered seemingly at random, with Oscars firmly planted as if to lay claim, and pee holes boring into the icy mantle adjacent. "Urban sprawl at its greatest," I think as I scout the area for a likely pad to reclaim. Travis & I resign ourselves to digging a new pad in what real estate we can locate, the equivalence of that empty lot downtown by the tracks, when we see Christian waving his arms and jiggling like that *Happy Feet* penguin. "Apparently he's on to something," winks Travis. "Can't be worse than this," I replied, grabbing the shovel & heading uphill toward the suburbs. Soon Marty & Gabe arrived, while Pirro and Joby joined us from their adjacent site and an all out work detail was formed. We labored to downcut the existing pad two feet into the ice and used the new blocks to rebuild the decaying walls. Soon we had 3 tents settled securely within, and Gabe claimed for us the nearest latrine when he completely missed the Oscar. Although a convenient mishap, he was still charged with its care to the next camp for the *faux pas*.

Day 5. May 23

We're getting along well with our new campmates, eating and socializing around the same central site, and they may even take our sleds down for us from here so we don't have to carry them over the pass and out the tundra. The morning starts with Gabe's ritualistic call to arms: "Gorp! Gorp here! Everybody

getcher gorp! Two handfuls a day here people!” He’s determined to get rid of that gallon ziplock before he has to carry it higher. For Day 5, we moved a cache up to 13K. So nice to have only a pack, moving freely without a sled pulling me back downhill at every step, and I’m feeling enthusiastic as we approach our first goal of settling in at the 14,000 ft Advanced Base Camp (ABC)-Dick’s former office. It’s a steep climb with lots of exposed, slick ice, and I’m surprised to see most teams still traveling with ski poles in their hands, axes strapped inaccessibly on the pack. We devised a makeshift whippet to overcome this problem, fixing the axe to the ski pole using short elastic bungees to keep it securely in place. We topped the 50° *Skihill* to a spectacular view from an exposed vista. The wind here is ferocious and I’m doing my best to protect my sunburnt, wind chapped nose, but when I pull up the merino balaclava to cover my nose, glasses and goggles fog up terribly & vision is impaired. In the end, I chose to care for the snout and pushed my goggles up over my hat. It’s a constant battle to preserve our exposed faces, with sun beaming from every direction, reflecting straight up from the snow & burning our exposed nostrils from the underside. Wind, cold, snot. Gabe’s nose is raw from wiping with his glove. Not just red but RAW. Road rash raw. My best solution has become the nylon balaclava velcroed loosely across the nose with goggles and the sun hat fastened securely above. But for this day I devised the solution too late and the damage was done. Dry, itchy, painful eyes. Constantly watering. This is worse than anything I ever did to it when working with pipeline welders.

We cached around 13,000’, just below another ridge crest to *Windy Corner*. Why go up there if it’s already this windy down here? We make an easy descent to camp and get back in the early evening. Leisurely dinner with cards and chess, but it clouds up and snows several inches overnight. Everybody’s ipods are dead and the charger won’t hold a current in the low light—really roughing it now man.

Day 6. May 24

This morning my eyes feel better but are still irritated. The nose hurts to touch even though I’m constantly layering it with some sort of goo. I’ve found the best thing for my nose and lips is spf 30 Chapstick®, & I constantly have a stick of it up my nose. Feet feel fine & these boots are working really well for all of us. Muscles, joints, neck and shoulder are all good, though I traumatized my tongue yesterday when I held a cold tent peg in my mouth and the skin stuck to it. Panicked, I promptly pulled it out, skin and all, rather than waiting for the metal to warm and release. Dumb.



You guys MUST be locals!
William de Schweinitz above 14K

The morning wind was calm and we excitedly packed for our move to ABC at 14K. At the onset, our goal as a team was to reach that camp as quickly as possible—we’ve all been to that altitude often enough this year and know we operate well that high-living and training at altitude gives us some advantage in that respect. So, to finally be moving there was an exciting milestone in our ascent. William and Christian were taking our sleds back down for us, and we stacked them and lashed the pile together so they’d move like a single sled when loaded. Looking back, if those guys hadn’t helped us out, the sleds would’ve been a hassle for the remainder of the trip. To plan

this traverse again, I'd recommend not bringing them at all and double carrying each stage from the beginning, rather than depending on the kindness of another team to take them down for us. The 3,000' climb took us about 7 hours. Travis and I made good time on the lower end of the grade, stopping for a brief rest at the exposed Windy Corner, which filled all the expectations conjured by the name. As we wound around the corner and worked our way uphill toward the landing, we started feeling the effects of a hard pace and the high altitude. Finally, I yelled up to Travis to break for a late lunch: "You're showing all the signs buddy. We need to regroup." *The signs* being obvious indicators of fatigue and dehydration-he's resting more often than usual and panting for breath when I pull up to talk with him. We pick a spot to the side of the trail & recline against our packs, promptly distributing cream cheese packets and bottles of water. Obtained from the last deli we visited, the cream cheese had been a good snack up until then, but apparently it was been warm enough in the afternoons for the single serving packets to curdle, and I quickly spit chunky, white clumps of rotten cheese across the snow adjacent to the trail. Settling instead for cereal bars and chocolate, we finished our meal and took great joy in cheering Christian and William up the slope below us.

Soon after restarting, we realized that the camp was much nearer than we thought, and we'd been sitting on the slope immediately below the camp landing. But it was still about ½ mile of steep climbing to get to the top of the grade, and no one was bothered that we'd paused to rest. ABC is situated much like the 11K camp, but bigger. In the shadow of a stark, rocky ridge to the West and North, the pad offers a perfect mezzanine of Foraker and Hunter peaks to the south. To the east is a 1,000' drop to a wide, steep valley-the *Edge of the World* on a clear day. The camp itself is a boomtown, with what seemed hundreds of tents (there were actually about 150 people at our busiest time) built around a central artery running west to east. There were two outhouse latrines at the west end of Main Street, and a Park Service encampment was situated apart from the sprawling shanty, near the south west rim. Outfitted with a mess tent, communication shelter, medical center, helicopter pad and a variety of receiving and transmitting antennae, the center is staffed by 4 rangers on a monthly rotation that involves scouting the



Christian de Schweinitz below *Windy Corner*

route up the Kahiltna, manning the ABC, and touring the 17K camp before returning to Talkeetna by plane from the BC. Ranger duties involve everything from high altitude rescue (such as the two unfortunate climbers that we loaded the week before) to oversight of latrine excavation (another task with which we eventually assisted). They provide a daily weather board posted outside the communications tent and supply essential medical care for climbers coming and going from the ABC.



Arriving at the ABC around 1800, Pirro pointed us toward a large pad next to his and Joby's. We set about clearing the loose snow and fortifying the walls as first the Christian/William team arrived, followed closely by Marty and Gabe. As we raised camp, we were surprised to learn that Christian and William had carried only provisions to cache and were preparing to head back down to 11K for the night. Departing at 2000 for the long descent, we goaded the two on their way out, "Hey, you guys must be locals!" This had become the mantra embodying this team: their grit, good humor, positive attitude and "interesting" style. Who else would make duct tape nose guards, sew their own mittens, sport a polyester overcoat patched with more stitches than a homesteader's socks, climb in navy blue Dockers, and leave 14K at eight o'clock at night in the plummeting temperatures of the subarctic sunset? You guys MUST be locals! (While William is the most guilty culprit for the cotton garments, Christian is charged by association, as there was never any doubting his locality!)

Excited to have realized the first major goal of our climb, we settled in for the night with a contented sense of achievement and slept well through the temperate night, with clear skies and an overnight low around 10°F.

Day 7. May 25

Sunny and “warm”, a llama helicopter dropped in this morning and evacuated a guy with advanced HAPE. We’re resting, caring for sun and wind burned skin, drying out our feet and boots. There’s no swelling in our hands; the two nights at 11K must have done us some good. Nice weather’s predicted here for the next two days and we’re digging in and acclimating to the high altitude. They say we may get bogged down after that, but how reliable is a forecast anyway? The general rule is to spend 4 days at this altitude before moving quickly to 17K and summiting at the first opportunity. So this afternoon we’ll retrieve our cache from below the Windy Corner. Then, over the next few days, we’ll work on moving a cache to 17K-climb high and sleep low while we acclimate so it’s not too much of a shock when we finally move up.

We left to get the cache around 1300 and got back down in about 45 minutes, no problem. Apparently, the garbage bags we used to store the food weren’t buried deep enough, and an audacious raven dug it up and ravaged our collection. We learned later that William and Christian found it spilled out the night before and tucked most of it back in the original hole, but sorting through the pile, it was obvious that the bird had his fill. We duct taped the ripped packages back together, sorted the waste and joked about how could a bird eat so much salami in such a short time, all the while watching the culprit scouting the hillside above for his next score.



Gabe started taking stock of our fuel cans: 1 empty left with our sleds at 11K, 2 full cached, 1 empty and 1 full at ABC. Where’s the full #6? Still at 11K. I’ve already carried two full gallons this far, and the blame fell to Travis, as did my aggravation at having to accompany him all the way back down to retrieve it. Red with frustration, I blatantly accused him of shirking his load by not actively seeking out a can to carry. In the end, this was a simple oversight, but at the time, it just sucked to have to go back down and I told him so. Travis was gracious in his explanation of how the can was misplaced, but the whole team could’ve done without my finger pointing.

The two of us started down to get #6 while Marty & Gabe started back uphill to camp. After descending about 500’, we found Christian and William coming up, full fuel canister in tow. “Hey, you guys missing something?!” We traveled up together, and found that little raven trying to pull our whole backpacks out of the cache hole this time, spotting the black bags we used for pack covers. He’s really got the game figured out, and his resourcefulness reminded me of an Osprey on Lover’s Key in west Florida: he’d sit in a tall sand pine watching anglers in the surf, then poach the stunned fish as they were released back into the waves. Climbing back to camp, we encountered Pedro & Diego caching their extra weight en route to ABC, just below where Travis & I stopped for lunch the day before. We took one of their fuel cans for them and encouraged them to bring all their gear the rest of the way up. I’m sure they were thinking, “Yah, easy for them to say now that they’re all moved in.” Jovial night with everyone moved into camp, and lots of food shared throughout. Provided opportunity to apologize for my bad attitude earlier in the day. Marty & Gabe are really pushing for a summit run from this camp a few days from now, rather than establishing a camp at 17K, and we debate the pros and cons of this strategy for a while. If we have to carry the gear up there anyway, why the risk of a long day far from our camp? But if we travel light to the summit, we won’t be distracted by it once we start moving over the pass. This goes back and forth and is left open when we bed down. Looking back, I wonder if we weren’t experiencing some priority shift in this discussion, shifting the summit forward in place of the Traverse, but it’s a moot point now.

Anything you don't want frozen in the morning has to go in the sleeping bag at night: boot liners, cold, wet gloves, water bottles, pee bottle, ipod, moisturizer, batteries, et cetera. It gets crowded in there.

Day 8. May 26

2nd morning at ABC. Our plan in preparation for the traverse was for the four of us to move a food cache up as far as possible: 17K camp if possible, but at least to the top of the fixed lines at 16,200'. After much enthusiasm the previous evening for quick ascents and early starts, Marty and Gabe are slow to get moving out of camp. It's a steep hike from camp to 15,500', where the fixed lines begin, and dark clouds had carried snow flurries overhead by the time we arrived there. Marty and Gabe mounted the lines first but balked once they started moving up. The unfamiliarity of the procedure, deteriorating weather, and added pack weight on steep, slick terrain all became overwhelming and they started to come down. At the same time, Travis & I were poised to move up and another group was arriving just below us. *Just go goddammit!* I yell at the descending pair. "If you'd gotten up when I told you then you'd already be there. *GO!*" This didn't sit well with Marty and he immediately lost his temper, yelling back down at me "What does it say on every piece of climbing equipment produced?" *Hellifiknow. What's that got to do with this?* I think, as we retreat to continue our argument on more level terrain. Apparently, on every piece of equipment it says somewhere that one should not climb in bad weather, and even if it doesn't, Marty wasn't having any of it. We finally found clarity enough to agree to continue the argument back at camp, then cached below the fixed lines. Their team stomped down our backtrail, leaving Travis & I wondering how best to spend the remainder of the day. We agree that the weather was fair and holding and decided to ascend the fixed lines after all, to familiarize ourselves with the procedure.

These lines consist of two sets of dynamic ropes fixed with pickets at roughly 20 meter intervals: one for going up and one for going down. When going up, the idea is to use an ascender fixed to the harness and held in the right hand to guide you and lend support on the steep, icy slope. This is backed up with a carabiner that will arrest a fall at the last picket passed should the ascender fail. The carabiner rests above the ascender and is pushed ahead of it by the device. Axe in the other hand lends balance and support and we advanced with the fixed line between our legs. The grade here is roughly 60°, and at each anchor point we stop, move the protection past the anchor, check on the other climber and move on. Lots of communication as one or the other of us periodically reaches a picket. We're grateful that there are only two of us on the Barney as we watch a guided team of 6 descending on the same rope with continuous stopping and starting. 1/3 of the way up there's a crevasse in the uphill route requiring some ice climbing skills, and we've been watching all day as traffic jams build up while inexperienced groups switch to ascend the uncrevassed descent line, backing up the downhill caravans. 4' wide and 7' tall, to simply pull the ascender and scoot up the face brings 6' of dynamic slack & puts the climber back on the downhill lip. So, the climber needs to use the axe for uphill purchase, then kick steps in the face and slide the ascender for support as the crack is



Fixed lines at 16K

mounted. For our first attempt, we cheated with a prussic as a foot ascender, pulling the dynamic slack out of the line, thus allowing more use of the hand ascender to pull our weight upwards.

When we reached the top, the weather was clear and inviting, so we sat on the ridge admiring the scenery & chatting about procedures for moving up and down the lines. In due course we prepared to descend the parallel downward line. To control the downclimb, an armbar is used to create resistance, with the left hand wrapped over and under the line. With the hand extended, friction is reduced and the climber is able to slide down the line and sidestep down the slope. To halt movement, the left hand is brought close to the body, putting a bite on the rope. The downhill climber has the carabiner as a lifeline, and the uphill, anchor climber uses the carabiner and supports the team with an ascender mounted on the line and thumbed open with the left hand. In the event of a fall, the thumb will release and the ascender will bite the line, arresting the fall of the entire team. We quickly streamline this process and move down the line comfortably and swiftly. So comfortably & swiftly that at a picket near the midpoint I managed to wrap my axe leash around the handle several times without noticing, effectively shortening the leash to a few inches. Attached to my wrist, as I drove the pick into the ice, released it, and quickly reached upward with my axe hand to move my lifeline past the picket, the shortened leash acted like a sling, yanking the axe out of the ice and straight into my forehead. "Real smooth buddy," laughing, as images of Tom&Jerry paraded through my mind. "They say nothing bleeds like a scalp wound," I think, attempting to wipe the blood out of my eyes & apply pressure to the laceration. We continue down at the same pace and stop at the bottom to recap. *Whatthellhappenedtoyou?!* Travis is a little concerned at my scarlet coating, but laughs when he hears the story and sees for himself that it's a small cut after all. As ruggers, it's hard to get any sympathy from the front row guys, especially for self inflicted flesh wounds. We're in high spirits after our trip on the ropes and enjoy the hike down.

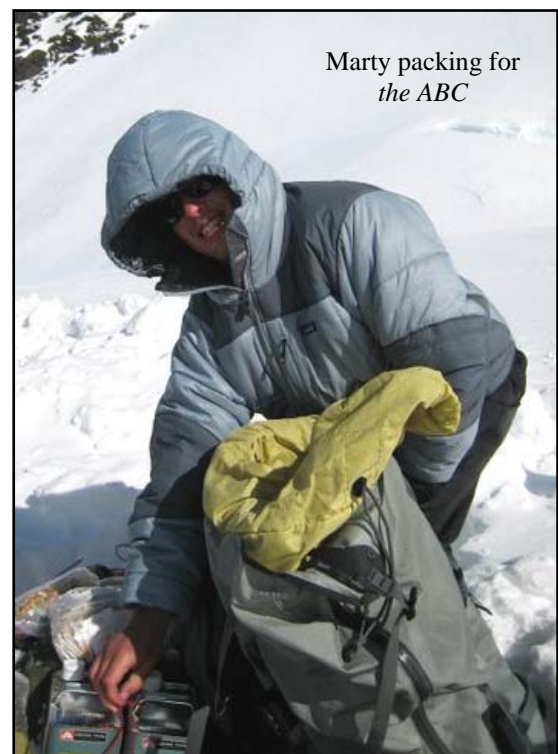
That evening we reconcile with our better half. Marty feels that, as expedition leader, I haven't taken enough of a management role, the trip is lacking a solid action plan, and situations are haywire as a result. "All we've ever had as a plan was an itinerary that Travis printed from some guide service online. We didn't plan our food, and look at that. There's so much excess we'll never get rid of it all." My reply is simple, and I'm reminded of an account written by Stephen Venables on an expedition to Tierra del Fuego. When asked by Venables why he didn't "get a grip and tell (them) all what to do," team leader Jim Wickwire replied "I wouldn't dream of telling you lot what to do." And he was right, because in a small group of equals, consensus works. We had a plan: get to 14K as quickly as possible, acclimate and move loads upward for 4 days, then watch the weather and get moving at the first opportunity. Our primary goal was the traverse and our secondary goal was the summit. On a mountain like this, when the weather is the biggest adversary, there is no point in micromanaging, because situations change on a daily basis. At the same time, you can't sit around waiting for good weather-if any good weather does come it probably only lasts a day, and you have to be up there on the mountain, ready to go. (Ironically, this day was the best summit day of the early climbing season, and up to 25 people reached the top. We wouldn't see these conditions again for over a week.) As for the food: Travis planned his own food and he was metered out to the exact meal. Each of the rest of us had the option to do the same and instead went to Safeway at the last minute. I wasn't worried about it-either we'll eat it or we'll give it away. We concluded as a team that we needed to have regular briefings to ensure that we're all on the same page. Looking back now, there was no time that I should have pressed any decisions to go differently. When Marty wanted a rest day after the tent blew away, we took one, and when he didn't want to climb the fixed lines, we cached below them. As a team leader, I conceded to the needs of the team rather than pushing my agenda. Where I should have stepped up was in communicating and encouraging everyone more positively. The stress of the expedition showed when I

lost my temper with Travis and when I tried to aggressively push Marty up the fixed lines. Had we been talking amongst ourselves more often, those conflicts wouldn't have occurred.

After this reconciliation, we determined to actively consume some extra food we'd carried this far, as to avoid hauling it any further, and a social extravaganza ensued. Extravaganza in the sense that only depraved, malnourished mountaineers can appreciate. Like when the kids from Gunnison gave us that gallon of microbrew after a week in the Gila, or when Alex found a pouch of Drum tobacco in the Alberta park outhouse. Small niceties make a big difference. So, when Travis started deep frying salted corn tortillas in canola & serving them up with tapatillo and cheddar, people took notice. The Zia flag over camp became a beacon, and climbers congregated from far & wide. In addition to our immediate group, we found Bo from Serbia, Alex the naked skier & Tom with the wet sleeping bag, some of the CO summer school class (they were actually getting 9 credit hours for climbing the mountain), and eventually another Cassin team on their way down from the summit. A group of 3 from the UK, they packed meager rations for 5 days and the climb took them every bit of 6. Working on day 6, having consumed only black tea and some gorp, they reached the summit ridge from the Cassin & said "forget it." Their goal was to finish the Cassin & the summit was icing on the cake-expendable icing when you haven't eaten for 24 hours. They arrived haggard but cheerful, and hot food was a welcome sight after such an endeavor. Pedro & Diego soaked up all the beta they could intake, and our party wound to a close in the wee hours when we started getting hushed from the tents across the street.

Day 9. May 27

We're all up and moving early the next morning, and Marty & Gabe make a quick trip down to get a small cache they left near our lunch spot below the plateau. At their return, we have a big breakfast & start up to continue moving our 15K cache up to the 17K camp. Travis & I feel good after the workout the day before & move quickly up the slope to the previous stores, where we repack our rucksacks & wait for a team we believe to be Marty & Gabe ascending below us. 30 minutes later we realize that we're waiting on a different crew. Where'd the other two go? We decide to move on, shoulder our packs & repeat the process from yesterday. Carrying a load slows us down, and the rhythm becomes step, breathe, axe, breathe, ascender, breathe... I once read a short by Chris Bonington in the Himalaya describing our position: "Climbing on ice at altitude is an exhausting business. You are poised on the points of your crampons, each swing of your ice tool takes several pants, and yet the fatigue is hardly noticed in the tension of the moment..." We got to the top of the lines, 16,200', around 1900 and the weather was clear, but it's late in the day for the 2 hour trip to the 17K camp, so we cached above the lines, content to have moved it this far & confident we could carry it the rest of the way tomorrow and still be on schedule. The descent is uneventful and we hurry back to camp to check on the other guys.



Marty packing for
the ABC

Marty & Gabe are resting safely at camp and they explain their disappearance. They feel spent, mentally and physically. Marty's lower lip is a sunburned, oozing crust that won't heal. Gabe's nose is still raw and he isn't sleeping well or recuperating from the exhausting haul to ABC and the ensuing labor

involved with moving up. Notorious for light, Alpine ascents in the lower 48, they're both of slighter build than Travis or I, and the heavy loads at this altitude are wearing them down. They're not sure if they can single carry the load across the tundra. On the walk back down today, both agreed on an altruistic solution to their condition, and they offer to support our traverse by taking all excess gear and supplies back down the Kahiltna and flying out from the BC, thus lightening our loads and ensuring team success. It's a sad moment, but there's no use in debating. Their minds are made up and to push them further would be insulting.

Day 10. May 28

Pirro and Joby are moving to 17K. Bo, have I mentioned BO? Bojan Peric. He's up here alone, on a quest to solo the 7 summits. Soloing crevassed glaciers. Even we, 4 crazy, inexperienced ruggers from New Mexico, never considered anything like that. And they called us halfwits. Have you ever seen the animated version of *Watership Down*? Remember the Austrian seagull that's always yelling about the "Beeeeeeg Vaterrr!?"? Imagine that seagull with a stubbly crew cut and crampons. "Yah, yah. Yaystarday beeeeg veeeends aap deer!"

Bo, Travis, Christian, William and I all packed and departed for the move throughout the day. TH and I said an optimistic farewell to our teammates and got moving around 1300. We made pretty good time up the slope to the ropes, where the wind was gusting and cold. Joking about our "last time on these stupid ropes," we took what we thought to be a final look down at the ABC. Cresting the icy ridge, a maelstrom met us square in the face-40 mph winds, blinding snow and frigid temperatures. There was practically zero visibility as we huddled behind a drift, adding layers to compensate for the rapid change in weather. Struggling over to the cache we'd stored the day before, we debated our options and decided to push on rather than retreat, knowing 3 of our friends had gone on before us in similar conditions. Unpacking the cache in bulky mittens and frosty goggles, yelling through icy balaclavas, we debated whether to carry everything or come back tomorrow for some of it. "What's the use in returning for so few items? We lose a potential climbing day on the return trip," I argue. Travis rightly believes the extra

bulk will cause trouble on the exposed ridge ahead in the high winds.



Undecided, the conversation shifted to who would carry the blue pig (the big, blue dry bag I'd lifted out of Greene's rafting supplies for just such a cache). I was pleading pitifully with Travis to buckle it on the outside of his pack, as I couldn't take off my mittens to tie the rigging necessary to lash it to the outside of my overstuffed bag. Then we saw Bo descending with only a garbage bag strapped to his back. Travis & I looked at each other surprisedly. "UhOH!"

If you've never heard a pissed off Austrian seagull venting through a wailing blizzard about a misguided weather lady and the end of the world, well, that was worth the entire trip. Apparently he got to within 200 meters of the camp, where an especially exposed section of the ridge became too hazardous in the gusting winds. There he dropped his pack, strapped the ever essential sleeping bag to his back, and hightailed it back down to where we met him, hot on the heels of a team of Norwegians who had gone up just ahead of us and were also retreating. TH and I immediately shifted our debate to what we needed to take back down with us. He wanted to leave most everything and depend on the tents left vacant at ABC by William's team, while I was adamant that for the time being we should carry at least our camp and sufficient provisions back down. Travis conceded and we carried most of our gear back down to the head of the ropes.

My head was whirling. The Norwegians had a lady on their team that we'd seen struggling on the way up, so we wouldn't have been concerned at seeing their retreat and been confident enough in our own strength to move upwards. It took Bo's tirade to convince us to turn around, or we'd have been on our way to a dead end, or worse. As I went over the details of the situation in my mind, William and Christian appeared at the top of the lines, as surprised as we were at the change in weather. "Wow. That Bo is really worked up!" Christian winked in a confident tone, struggling into his mittens. We talked briefly and William encouraged us to leave our camp there and bring only the essentials down to the ABC. Struggling back to the cache site, we dropped our gear in the hole, loaded the pig, and started repacking. Christian was still sorting his pack, but William, wearing his patched softshell jacket and gloves, was looking pretty cold, though he'd never admit to such a thing. He and I roped up and headed for the lines while TH and Christian repacked the cache. William, the lighter of us, went first and, for expediency, I forewent the ascender backup (virtually impossible to maintain in the giant mittens anyway), trusting the armbars to hold us in a fall. We moved swiftly and I anchored with a tight belay, watching for signs of hypothermia in William as we descended. I remember thinking, "This guy is really really tough," watching him move efficiently and precisely, despite the shivering he was experiencing just moments before. The activity and moderate weather below the ridge warmed us, and we reached the foot of the lines without incident.

We regrouped and arrived back at camp around 2300. Time doesn't really exist here: there's always daylight and we're always moving and time just slips by. We'd been going for 12 hours with barely a rest or nourishment, and even now we felt tired but healthy. We'd become so hardy, and adrenaline was such a factor in so much of what we were doing, that days like this were becoming routine.

Day 11. May 29

Joby & Pirro left their 2 man tent at ABC, hauling William's 4 person up to Camp 5; so that night Travis & BO squatted in their camp and I moved in with Christian and William in their 3 person. Weather was clear at the ABC but windy and cold above. We assumed that Joby and Pirro were settled at the high camp, and while they might be missing the Oscar can, they had sufficient supplies for 6 days up there. We took a day off.

For the rest afternoon we took on an altogether different task. The weather board read "Time to dig a new outhouse. Free hotdog for every foot of hole dug."



Bo & I found the NPS staff staking out a new pad and joined them with shovels. Within the hour there were 10 of us sitting around a growing pit, alternating turns at boring to 15 feet. Our goal was 20, but the snow was icy. Hotdog party in the NPS tent with whole wheat and grey poupon was a welcome variation to our routine meals, sitting on benches and asking 20 questions of the staff.

William was going on that day about if you buy a Subaru in the Lower 48 for 6K you can turn it in AK for 12K-even more coveted than a local car because it's been driven in the milder climate. We could definitely fund a trip back up next year that way.

BO: Always upbeat and outgoing, looking for a smoke from the Italians or jesting with a local about his profession "back home." A few days ago he came over and said "Hay yoo guays, Jobie sayyys to ask yoo far some... cranola."

"Cranola? You mean canola?" Thinking he meant the bottle of oil we brought up. Bo took it over there and we could hear Joby exclaim, "*What the hell is this?*" Apparently, he wanted the GRANOLA. So, today I said, "Hey, did you guys have much condensation in your tent last night?"

"Aus? Vast nayght? Nooo, wee didn't have aynay convayrsation. Vee sayd gooodnyght un dat vas awl." Then he went off to search the camp for a spare cigarette, but couldn't find one because the Spaniards, "Dey smowke averyting dey gawt. Da cigarettes. Da marijuana. Dey got nowthing!"

Day 12. May 30

BO left at 0400 for the high camp when the skies cleared. We slept late, did some yard work enlarging the pit in the vestibule, cut a counter outside for the stove, and stretched the guy lines on the tent. Two NPS rangers passed by & asked "Hey, do you guys know where, um...Christian is?" They relayed a message from Joby & Pirro, "Bring us the Oscar can or the staff up here is gonna make us come down." Crap. We replied, "Just tell 'em to come back down." Weather forecast was worsening for the next three days, with 50 mph winds above 14K. Who could summit in that? We're thinking of staying 4 more days down here unless the forecast improves, and when the front passes, to move quickly and keep moving until we get over the pass. Our plan is to get all of our gear up to camp 5 in one day, summit on the second day from the south, then move to the north side on the third day and work our way down the Harper glacier as quickly as we can. Once we're below Karsten's ridge, at 11K on the north, we should be in the clear from any debilitating weather. Ironic though, we worried about having too much food to deal with, and then, once Marty & Gabe left and we committed to waiting out the weather front, we started looking for extra food from teams going back down. As I sat in camp writing about that very issue, Christian showed up with a whole trash bag full of Mountain House® and a gallon of fuel. We're all excited: blueberry cheesecake mix and chicken stew, donated from the college class from Gunnison. A nice variation in diet, which we've been watching out of concern over how long we'll be sitting here. When our teammates went down, Travis & I streamlined every thing we didn't absolutely need-coffee, tea, sugar, excess snacks, lemonade mix, powdered milk, that giant hunk of cheese, tortillas, peanut butter... We gave them nonessential clothing, ipods, surplus medkit items, spare sunglasses and extra batteries. Now, dug in for a siege, we were missing some of our niceties, and had to keep reminding each other that the hardest work was yet to come. But, I was soon to learn, with Christian on the watch about the massive camp we would never go without. After this big score, he was continually showing up with some new item, rummaged from a yard sale at the head of Main Street. Once I found a tiny Folgers coffee packet in the booty & hopped out of the tent, holding it greedily aloft, anticipating the hot, acidic treat & wondering where I might find some milk. Travis, also in a neglected state, was quick to lay

claim, “Oh no you don’t! I already called that one!” Reluctantly, I offered up the prize, but to this day neither of us knows where that packet finally went to.

Day 13. May 31

We’re sandwiched between two weather plateaus-at 17K winds are at 40 mph. Two guys went back down to 11K for a cache & returned covered in ice. This camp is relatively calm in comparison. William heard that 25 people attempted the summit today. The guy that told him made it to Denali Pass and turned around due to wind & ice & cold & snow. I wonder, is everybody okay up there today? Got two new guys next door-Evan from Gunnison and John from West Virginia. Acclimating before attempting Cassin Ridge. Then there’s the Ukranian they met on the way up. Apparently, he works at Microsoft and came up with a team from the corporation. The rest of the team split back down with the tent, but left him with all the food. Sounds like we could swing a deal to put him up in exchange for some grub. John & Evan talked with him on the way up. The Soviets had an elite mountaineering school back in the day, & Andre is a graduate of the program, holding the title “Master of Sport”. Travis recognizes this from something he read recently & the designation seems to hold some weight with him. So, the as yet unmet Andre hosts some notoriety among the troop already.



TH & I went up to the 16K cache & got the tent and some other gear, then grabbed what was left of Marty & Gabe’s grub below the ropes. Breezy & cold up there, but not insane as the day we cached. It was our 4th time up the ropes & we had it down pat. A guide with a team retreating from high camp shouted, “Wow, you guys are fast!” as we climbed upwards in tandem. Repeated trips up have kept us fit, and we’re adapting well to the high altitude. We have problems with our gloves in cold weather though. Midweight OR ski gloves, rather than the insulated model with removable liners required for these conditions, they readily ice up on the leather lined fingers and we spend a lot of time with our fists balled up inside the cuffs when dexterity requires we use them in place of our mittens. We sleep with them in our bags at night to thaw the digits and dry them out, making for a cold bedmate.

Day 14. June 1

The Korean guy across the fence just said something about high winds through Monday! (This was now Friday) We may have to rethink our waiting strategy. If people were attempting the summit yesterday, I guess we could make the pass and head for the Muldrow, foregoing the summit if need be. We gotta go check out the forecast this morning. Can’t sit around here forever. The clock is starting to tick. For the agenda today: Bobsled Racing on the hill.

Confirmed: 60 mph winds on Monday. Feeling some anxiety to get out of here, but TH is right, better to wait it out while we can afford to.

Holy Crap! At 1700 Joby and Pirro came skipping down the mountain. They stayed at 17K for...4 nights? And when food ran low they went for the summit yesterday with 25 other people. 5 made it to the top in total whiteout conditions. Pirro was crawling on the ridge, feeling for the edge with either hand, Joby trailing behind, following a rope stretching into a snowy void. They snapped a photo of the USGS pin and scurried down. 9 hour round trip. Dangerous in those conditions. Makes me anxious to move though. June 1st. Thought we'd be on our way out by now. When we left for this trip, my gut feeling was that the only thing, aside from a freak accident, that could keep us from meeting our goals would be hostile weather. I hope that doesn't prove true.

That was a tumultuous day, sitting in camp, anxious to do something, fretting about the weather, playing cards & losing at chess, eating and sleeping and reading the message board, restlessly pacing up and down Main Street. The weather was worsening above & there were some doubts about staying this long and not moving up to meet the other guys. Team chemistry was holding well and everyone was getting along splendidly, but Christian was perturbed that we hadn't actually moved up yet and I was starting to worry that he was right. That night Evan's name shows up ½ way through the hearts scorecard, as he and John started to integrate themselves into the camp. We were happy to learn that Bo arrived to camp 5 alive, though somewhat frazzled. Apparently, he showed up around 0900, shivering and disoriented, diving into Joby & Pirro's tent & burying himself between them. He'd crossed the exposed ridge, only to abandon his pack again while searching for the tent among the series of walled cells. The guys last saw him up there preparing for a summit bid as they were descending to ABC.



Joby, back from High Camp

We were talking a few nights ago (Christian, William, Travis & I) about what we're doing up here, and how it's impossible to explain to those that don't get it. We're still mulling over the details of Marty and Gabe's departure, and wonder that it's as much mental as physical. That's hard to grasp. Before this trip, they would have described themselves as "mountaineers", while Travis and I thought of ourselves simply as "outdoorsmen". William came up at breakfast the next day and said, "You know, I thought about how you guys describe yourselves, and it occurred to me, we're not mountaineers or outdoorsmen, we're just ALASKANS!"

I'm reminded again about Seth's warning-"if you guys go out there you'll never come back to the lower 48."

Day 15. June 2

Left camp at 1120 to cache at camp 5. Just took my boots off at 0000.

That was a long day. Joby & Pirro started down the mountain looking for a cheeseburger, while Pedro & Diego, tired of waiting for weather to improve on the Cassin, tried for the summit on the West Buttress directly from ABC. We followed them up the slope, watching Evan & John zip past us at breakneck speeds on an “acclimatization stroll”, retrieved our cache at 16,200’ and moved it on to camp 5. Weather was breezy and cold up there, and the ridge was all we expected after Bo’s heroics. Excited to be moving upward, we took our time working across with our loads and had no trouble. A surreal moonscape, exposed on either side, mixed snow with grey granite and black basalt and not so much as a lichen growing on the frozen surface. Moving slowly, maintaining our breathing and watching each other for any signs of altitude sickness, we felt tired by the time we arrived, but not ill. Wrapping around a knobby hillside, the ridge opened to a flat basin, shadowed by Denali Pass and the Archdeacon’s tower to the North. We still couldn’t see the peak itself, obstructed by the bluff, but it was tantalizingly close. A trail of footsteps wound through the freshly blown snow from camp up toward the pass, disappearing in the haze, and we could just make out two figures (Pedro & Diego?) moving downward in the direction of camp. Making our way across the basin, we passed several cubicles sheltering an array of destitute encampments, finally finding Joby & Pirro’s tent on a far corner, adjacent to several additional walled sites. A few people were milling about, but for the most part the stage was in quiet contrast to the busy ABC below. We found Andre hanging out up there, having moved up earlier with several Poles. When asked how long he would wait on the weather, he simply replied, “I don’t know. I have to summit.” Soon Pedro & Diego arrived. Exhausted & dehydrated, they had reached the summit ridge but turned back below the peak from high winds, poor visibility and bitter cold. That they could get so close only to return empty handed reinforced the decision we had made to wait, but it would serve as the final blow to the morale of their young team. Discouraged, they huddled in the tent with us, recuperating, rehydrating and restoring their depleted energy reserves. Impressed at their mettle through such an attempt, we encouraged the two and did our best to boost their spirits before the long trip down.

We split our crews on the down climb. Lighter than us, Christian and William led with Travis & I anchoring in the event of a fall. Hampered by the altitude, we force-fed water and power bars into the coastal locals and started on our way around 2000-the time of day when the temperatures typically



On the ridge to High Camp

started to plummet. The trip across the ridge was cold but uneventful and we slid down the fixed lines without a hitch. There, Travis & Christian mounted a sled they'd drug up for just this moment & disappeared over a bluff in a cloud of powder. William & I followed a Japanese couple that had summited the day before with Bo, who we had passed on his way down earlier in the day. Whiteout conditions, howling winds and frigid temperatures had left her face frostbitten, and they were both struggling down the slope with overloaded packs. When their attempt at glissading with the weight failed, we pulled up alongside and I offered to take her pack down for her. She peered up, face haggard but eyes bright, and replied, "No. No thank you. This is MY task," and began to lazily barrel roll down the hill. Her partner just smiled and asked, "Are you a guide?" This struck a prideful cord but left me puzzled. "No, why? Do I look like one?" Was it that I had offered to help them on the way down, or was I harboring some protective attitude over William in our descent? Whatever reason, Travis and I were constantly evaluating our performance and discussing ways to improve. The occasional compliment from other teams was encouraging for us and helped to boost our confidence before we struck off on our own across the northern glaciers.

Day 16. June 3

Talking over breakfast about yesterday's trip up, Evan was telling us that you don't feel dehydrated until you're already 3% low, but at 2% your productivity decreases. All of us felt that decrease on the trip up, and we committed to taking better care of ourselves. Simply put, it's a hassle to stop everything to make water, and we're limited to departing camp with 2 liters a piece. The rule of thumb is 5 liters per day per climber, and we've been drinking a lot prior to leaving camp, using our two liters throughout the day, and then catching up at night. However, in situations like the day before, where we gained so much altitude and started our descent at 8 o'clock, we needed to take in more earlier in the day.

Bo left early that morning. There's quite a free market economy in effect up here. Evan bought Joby's solar sheet from him before he and Pirro went down. Just handed over his Visa number and said, "yeah, call my girlfriend if you have any problems with it." Christian just wrote a note to his girlfriend, Bronwyn: *Please give this guy Bojan \$300 and take him for a hot meal*, in exchange for Bo's tent, jacket and trekking poles. Apparently, Bo's scheme is that he gains sponsorship, shows up with all this new gear, completes the climb, and then sells it at the end of the trip for travel money. He then repeats the process for the next expedition. He headed down this morning, note in hand, ready for a hot meal and a soft bed. Initially, he was going to hang out & wait for Christian & William to descend, but he's having some sort of kidney problems & elected to head for lower elevation and rest.

Lisa from Estes Park showed up with her team of 3 & claimed Joby & Pirro's camp. Enthusiastic, with chess board in hand, she quickly assimilated herself into the neighborhood & made a welcome addition to the party. The next biggest development from June 3 was when Christian and I wandered into the Italian's encampment at the west end of town-a walled pad with 4 tents surrounding a small, snow block A-frame capped with a grey tarp. Peeking inside, we found 8 people lining the walls on excavated benches while a grandfatherly chap doled out small cups of after dinner coffee from a chiseled kitchenette. I was especially excited about this development as they ushered us into the shelter amidst a welcoming cacophony of Italian and English. They're in high spirits, a mix of ages ranging from climbers in their mid-20's to the cook, another Pirro, who just turned 69. For the most part, they spoke limited *Ingles*, but Nicholas has a basic grasp of it and between that and our poor Spanish, well, we didn't make a lot of sense when everyone was talking at once, but it was a lot of fun nonetheless. Their hospitality was top rate and we committed to visiting often for coffee and company.

Day 17. June 4

Woke up to a light snowfall and several fresh inches on the ground. Yesterday a lot of people (all?) came down from camp 5, including Andre, who had yet to summit. No point in staying up there with the weather continually deteriorating. With camp 5 empty and a continuous stream arriving from below, the ABC had swollen to a metropolis, with ~150 people staying there to wait out the weather. This was Monday, and the next favorable forecast wasn't until Thursday. Good thing we already dug the new outhouse.

Inspired by the Italian's A-frame, we busied ourselves building a kitchenette in the corner by Evan and John's camp. That kept us moving for several hours, and we had a secure shelter with our 6x8' emergency tarp for a sloped roof. We shoved everybody in there for lunch & determined the crowded capacity at 7.

Last week the NPS crew moved up to camp 5 and a new staff took over at the ABC. This afternoon a ranger came by, honing in our Zia flag. "Are you guys expedition 138?" *Uhoh, why?* We thought we were in trouble for leaving our tent and cache at camp 5 occupying a tent site (as if there were anyone up there to use it right now.). Really he was looking for us to see if we were still alive. The crew on top had seen our tag on a wand next to the tent, and when no one showed up for a few days they worried that we'd gone for the summit and not come back. An aging Welshman named John Evans, he sat for a while chatting about the mountain and gave us some good notes on the northern route, from navigating the glaciers to finding our way across the tundra. Apparently, it's really important to find the trail to Wonder Lake after crossing the McKinley River, or we'd end up wandering in a swampy forest for eternity. Through the course of the conversation, he noticed Travis's Santos cap & holy crap he used to be a hooker for the Aardvarks, so we threatened to drag him out and beat him senseless with our bedrolls. Having trained at Kirtland AFB 20 years ago, he played a season in Albuquerque before moving back north. Now he spends the climbing season on Denali and flies back to Wales for the offseason.



Christian overlooking the
Edge of the World

Day 18. June 5

All the days run together here after 12 days at the same camp. We amuse ourselves with games and projects at camp, visit the "edge of the world", hang out in the Italians' casita, cook, melt water, read books, visit the weather board, share the map, tour all the new forts and igloos... Today is Tuesday:

Thursday >14K wind 30-50 mph

Friday >14K wind 30-50 mph

Saturday >14K wind 25-45 mph

We're moving up to 17K Thursday. Might even move a cache to 18K that day, weather and energies permitting. Summit attempt Friday. Head out Saturday. Out to Wonder Lake Wednesday at the latest, June 12. After this lackadaisical routine, 72 hours of mass movement is going to be...taxing.

Day 19. June 6

What are we doing up here? How to explain it without lifting some canned speech from an alpinist journal?

For the journey, not the destination. To meet William and Christian and chill in an isolated camp miles from civilization, and come to know each other and depend on each other through trials and hardships so we'll never take friendship for granted. To eat monotonous meals so when we get back to a market we'll never take variety for granted. To sleep with cold feet and frosty breath so we never forget the comfort of a warm bed. To feel alive in every cell as we traverse a windy ridge, carefully choosing our path and our every step. To breathe deep at the head of the climb, looking back & feeling good for a job well done.

We are a physical animal, evolving a brain as the reward for a good diet, earned from hard work. We think, reason, ponder; but still, that physical beast exists, unsuited to a monotonous life behind a steering wheel or a desk, and that beast needs to be exercised. We're not here for a higher good. There's no greater purpose. We come here simply because it is here, existing behind the morning commute and the timeclock. We come here selfishly to challenge not the mountain, but ourselves. I ask not to conquer the peak but only that I'm allowed to hang out for just a little while, testing that inner animal, stretching its limbs for the sole purpose of doing so. We climb because it's exhilarating. Because when we're on that face, nothing else exists-no global warming, no nuclear proliferation, famine or war, exotic species or loss of diversity. There are no broken relationships or failures of the past or tasks of the future to worry our minds. There is only me and a slab of rock and gravity. Focus and concentration and the moment. "Physical discomfort is important only when the mood is wrong." Embrace that discomfort and remember it when sitting in that dark cubicle, remember the howling wind and frozen fingers, sore back and aching feet. Remember the simplicity of life in its most raw form and endure the mundane circus. I climb because I can. Because I'm alive and it's my duty to live that life to the fullest extent.

Davis Breashears said of Everest, "Climbing Everest is about the deprivations, the challenge, the sheer physical beauty, the movement and rhythm, and it's partly about the risk. You learn about yourself, about what happens when you abandon comfort and warmth and a daily routine, the tyranny of the urgent. You learn how you perform and how you handle a situation that may be life threatening. There's a reward for your effort and a lot of fatigue too, but I even like the fatigue. I like to wake up in the morning feeling stronger than I was the day before."

Day 20. June 7

Big, fat, wet snow all morning.

John Evans from Wales attempted the traverse 5 times before succeeding. We go today (Thursday) or we sit here until Monday, then get our cache, and tuck our tails for the taxi. We're gonna take a nap right now and see if it breaks this afternoon. If we get a chance later today, we'll go and keep going as long as we can. If not, well, we've waited too long. They all told us early on, "Get over the pass and commit to the traverse, then see about the summit." We sat here thinking we'd have a good 2-3 day window if we

waited. Good company and a secure camp made us conservative. Inexperience has made us cautious. Now we're faced with a difficult position. Hopefully this breaks tonight...

(1800) After all this waiting we go in an hour! If clear at 17K we'll keep on going. Full of life and strength and sense of adventure, tuning that engine keeping us alive!

And off we went, and I didn't write in the book again for 4 days. With camp broken down, our packs were heavier than expected, and the trek up took several hours. We got to the ropes at 2000, when the weather turned cold. In our icy, underweight gloves, our hands were freezing, and ½ way up Travis exclaimed, "Hey man, my hands are really really cold." I replied, "Yah, mine too! Can you keep going?" Wanting to switch to his mittens in the middle of the roped ascent, he conceded and carried on in the frozen gloves. At the top of the fixed lines we stopped to layer our clothing and TH examined his fingers. The tip of each digit was pearly white from contact with the axe and ascender. Frost-nipped, they were painfully cold and throbbing, but not permanently frozen. Pulling on mittens, we regained some feeling and got underway.

The weather was clear on the ridge and we reached camp 5 around 2300. This time, the load and elevation took a toll on me and, although excited about finally moving, when I dropped the heavy pack at the high camp I was spent. We mutually agreed that the buried trail to Denali Pass would be too difficult to forge with full loads that night, and started looking for a suitable camp near William and Christian's tent. Michael and "Hey Marty" (as in, every time Michael talked to Marty he started, "Hey Marty"), a Cassin team that, like Pedro & Diego, had opted for the West Buttress due to the harsh conditions on that route, were mulling about and they offered us a spot within their camp walls. We gratefully accepted, happy to have a predug pad rather than excavate one of the deteriorated camps. Travis, with nipped fingers still throbbing, was feeling tired but still running on all cylinders, and he started excavating William and Christian's tent, which was all but completely buried under several feet of fresh snow. In the meantime, it took what felt like hours for me just to unroll the bedrolls and unpack our rucksacks. I stretched one bedroll, then laid on it for several minutes, just wanting to sleep but knowing there was still too much work to do. Panting and continuously stopping to force deep breaths, I finally got everything sorted and settled. In the meantime, TH was hysterically shuttling snow out of the neighboring camp, digging in like a grunt amidst a mortar shelling. The other two had yet to show, and we were starting to worry when they finally pulled in around 0200. It takes an eternity to melt water at that high altitude, PV=NRT. And I was so wasted I lay in the pile of bedding, incapacitated, while Travis force-fed warm water and mountain houses to me before we dropped off into a fitful sleep.



Day 21. June 8

Well we're here. Finally on the move again after our long respite. Overcast, windy and cold. Headache all day. Drink, eat, drink. Read "Sex Lives of Cannibals." Hilarious account of a couple doing NGO work in the Pacific Islands & should be required reading for any Peace Corps candidate. Barely left the tent all day. Same for Christian and William; we rarely heard a murmur from their direction. Heavy winds all night, and at one point TH pulled on insulated pants in case we need to get out and fix the billowing tent. This is a treacherous, inhospitable place and I remember Dick telling me never to get stuck up here, no matter what.

Day 22. June 9

Slept in. TH dug out the tent while I offered to name my firstborn after him if he'd only just empty my pee bottle, so I wouldn't have to go outside to go again. After reading the "Cannibals" book, set in the tropics, & freezing all night in the unyielding winds, I dreamt of every warm and/or tropical place I've ever been to and woke up talking about "we really need to take a trip to Las Cruces this August." The afternoon was calm enough, and we started to stir and watch the pass for signs of daylight. Finally, Andre came over (he climbed up yesterday as well) talking about "I'm going to break the trail when the clouds let up. Do you want to help me?" and we said "Hell Yes!"

So when the clouds finally broke around 1500 we agreed, "Hey, if Andre's helping us let's just get our gear up and get over that pass."

And that's what we did. Naturally, it took us 2 hours to break everything down and pack it up. This was the first time we'd single hauled all of our possessions, and Michael laughed, calling me a "tinker", with implements dangling from every spare strap I could find. All I needed was a metal cup clanging against the snowshoes for the audio effect. As a Peace Corps applicant, I gave him the *Cannibals* book & promised he would find humor in it, either now or on return from his tour. We said a quick and somewhat inadequate goodbye to our teammates huddled in their shelter, lugged our overweight packs on our backs, and started up the slope. By the time we left camp, Andre was already ½ way up the pass, breaking through the thigh deep drifts with powerful strides. This is where the two guys died immediate to our arrival. Typically this saddle is windswept and icy, with a 1,000' drop to the basin below. On this day it was relatively safe with the drifted snow providing purchase, and our biggest concern was plowing through the powder. Even with Andre's steps, we continually broke through up to our waists with our heavy loads, or collapsed the trail entirely: crawling back up to the original path, flailing exhaustively like buffalo in a bog, struggling to regain our feet, bellowing in frustration. With 100lb packs, this was the hardest stretch of the entire journey. At 18,000 feet elevation, against thin air, deep snow, heavy loads, and frigid temperatures, I kept thinking, "You volunteered. You volunteered to be here. Nobody to blame but yourself, you volunteered. Let's just get this over with and it's all downhill from here..." The weather held and we finally struggled to the saddle, pale faced and exhausted. Or at least I was. Travis was feeling relatively strong, with enough energy to remember our secondary objective. "Hey man, how about it? The summit is just up that ridge. The weather is clear and calm. We can still do it."

Oh, Krum. Really? Can we do it? I don't know. Lemme just lie here for a while, then we'll be sensible and move downhill to a secure campsite. No? What's this you say? No, I can't do that? Well, damnitt.

At Denali Pass we got our first view down the Muldrow Glacier and the country to the east of the mountain. It was calling. We had a long conversation, discussing the pros and cons of each option. At first, I was arguing that it was late in the evening & not sensible to go up with only ½ liter of water each and a pocket full of granola. We'd talked for months about what would go in our summit packs, with Travis taking the most conservative stance, suggesting stoves and sleeping bags. Now he was proposing we go practically naked, in the middle of the night. I was on the other extreme, not wanting to make rash decisions at this altitude and in



Climbers en route from *High Camp* to *Denali Pass*

my present state of exhaustion. However, after 30 minutes of rest and refueling, with the weather still clear, it sounded feasible. I petitioned that we at least make water, but it was debated & agreed that would take excessive time. On top, the ridge was windswept and the trail was wanded. We had the gps and could track our way across the open spots so as not to get lost on the way back, should conditions change. I broke my promise to Dubois that I would not go to the summit unequipped, and at 2100 we loaded our parkas with provisions and started up the ridge, sans packs.

Andre had reached the pass and turned back for camp earlier, so to our knowledge we were the only people that high on the mountain at that time. We knew of only one team on the north side of the mountain, a NOLS class at the lower end of the Muldrow glacier, and had seen no one set out before us from the South that day. It was exhilarating up there, alone and independent, on the last leg to the summit. I couldn't quite grasp the immensity. To be moving without that pack made this part of the climb almost surreal after all the hard work to get here. It was still slow going, with a deep, hacking cough and an ever-present nausea, my internal organs protesting what I was doing to them; but mentally and spiritually I felt numb, trancelike. We were walking upward, step, breathe, step, breathe...and the sky was clear and the terrain was hospitable and this was what we came here for and step...breathe...step...breathe. *What the hell did Travis eat for breakfast?!* He was over 100 yards ahead of me again and waiting. We finally ditched that horrific, hindering Barney, for better or worse, and to be moving independently was so gratifying. Who could blame him for stretching out? I actually cherished being left behind, not being accountable for another's pace, not watching his backside or tripping on the rope, not needing to shout for patience every time I needed to catch my breath. That emotional freedom is the most memorable part of this leg-the section between the pass and the *football field*, before climbing the slope to the summit ridge. Alone and dazed and wandering in this magical haze, enamored and in awe of everything I sensed. To be alone, truly alone, for the first time in weeks, on such a fantastic stage. And as we regrouped, along came the indefatigable Andre. Having descended to camp, he looked back at the weather & decided to summit after all, so back up that steep slope to Denali pass he climbed, following our footsteps toward the summit ridge. He quickly outdistanced us, and after we restarted Travis also took off at a hare's pace. Happily trudging along on my own, I was

surprised to find a Chinese climber sitting atop the crest just before the *football field*. Tripod mounted, he was filming his teammate, who had apparently just summited and was returning across the snowy arena. I moved on to the open expanse of the field, and when I met the returning champ he was smiling and rejoicing tearfully. We shared a hardy embrace, cheering in our respective languages, and he sent a barrage of encouragement after me as I trudged on my way. Uplifted by this meeting and seeing Travis waiting at the foot of *pig hill*, below the summit ridge, I felt a surge of excitement and picked up my tired pace. I still have no idea where those two had come from or where they went to, and their appearance was one of the more bizarre encounters of the trip.

Strangely, as we started up *pig hill*, we met Andre on his way down. He had reached the summit ridge, but spent less than 10 minutes up there. Impossible to have reached the top in that short time. As he passed, he said only, "It's really cold up there," and continued his descent. We never saw him again, but I'm curious to know why he turned back in good weather so close to the top, and if he ever returned to summit. We struggled up the steep hill to the summit ridge. Adrenaline was pumping then-just 400 yards distance and a few feet in gain to the top, and, while exposed to steep drops to either side, the view from the ridge was memorable. Mountains and valleys and glaciers and a panorama to all of Alaska and we were the only two people in the world to be seeing this-a feeling of pride and achievement and accomplishment swept over me as I gathered myself for the final push. Amidst that push, my reaction quickly changed to one of caution and nervousness, realizing just how exposed the NE side of the ridge really was. There was fixed protection up here, and rightfully so. Even in this clear weather I was starting to wish for the afore accursed Barney. Teams had previously turned around at this point when roped members had fallen, a fact of which I was acutely aware at this juncture. Perhaps Andre had elected to return with a ropemate? Travis had gone ahead, and I cautiously picked my way along the ridge, cherishing the moment, reveling in the final approach, and as a side note, reminding myself to find a souvenir stone for father's day at the next exposed rock. We reached the summit pin at 0200, panting and teary eyed, awash in a flood of endorphins. "Justify it however you like," I thought, "this is why we climb."

Gazing out at the North Summit, shining ice and black basalt and grey granite and the midnight sun dipping behind clouds over the Muldrow valley. What a different world it was when the Sourdoughs summited that peak thinking it was the taller of the two. We come up here with radios and cell phones, freeze dried and sundried and fortified, llamas ready for evac at an instant's notice. Ultralight this and synthetic that and those pioneers barely had a map!

The drawback to being alone up there was that we didn't get a group photo-we didn't even attempt to set the camera timer with our mittens in the deadly cold (-25°F?), but the solitude, the privacy in our moment of intimate achievement, far outweighed that indulgence. Being alone there gave it a sense of remoteness, lent a degree of respect to the mountain that had resembled a circus pavilion on so many other days. Through luck and perseverance and support from so many other climbers, we had been poised at the right time and consequently been one of the first teams to arrive after so many days of prohibitive weather. It felt good to be there in that well earned clarity, surveying the world across clear skies and calm winds. Pirsig is right; the only Zen found on mountains is that which we bring with us. There was no outright elation, no tears of revelation, no giddy transformation, but we were proud and happy and contented. I thanked Travis for making this possible. Without his positive attitude and staunch work ethic we wouldn't have accomplished this feat; and we both knew deep down that if we had gone on to complete the traverse without the summit we'd be back here again the next year.

Snapping quick photos by alternating hands removed from mittens, we spent as much time as prudence would allow savoring the peak and the views it provided, but when the camera battery died in the frigid air we took it as a sign that we should head down.

Wise or not, we couldn't help ourselves and glissaded down *pig hill*, to the astonishment of the team traversing the *football field*, a Pole and a Canadian en route to the summit. We passed several of the Italians near *Archdeacon's Tower*, including a weary Nicolai, who had set out from ABC that morning. Apparently, the narrow window of good weather had inspired several teams to initiate summit attempts, and while we didn't see them, Christian and William would soon be coming up the pass on their own harrowing bid.

June 10, 2007; 02:00



I felt a sense of security at regaining our gear, but we had another debate whether to take the time to make more water. Still full of energy and anxious to gain ground, Travis resisted and promised that once we made sufficient progress down the Harper we would set up camp and restock. I conceded. Roped and loaded, we stumbled from the pass and headed down the glacier toward the Harper icefall. However, it wasn't long until I felt the exertion of the day & repeated the request to hydrate. Travis balked at stopping, but soon, lying sideways on the icy plane where I'd stumbled and fallen, I threw a fit. "I've asked three times that we at least make some water. I don't know what you're taking to keep on your feet but this is stupid and unless I get some I have to stop and rest." So we did.

Day 23. June 10

We camped at 0630 that morning in a small depression just above the Harper icefall, around 17,000 feet, and then slept through the afternoon. The weather held throughout the day, but as we roused ourselves and packed to move down, the skies clouded over. We departed at 1930, headed for the icefall. There is no trail on this side, no sign of passage or occupation, no wands or tent pads left by other travelers, and as we neared the icefall, it became obvious that there was still some work to be done before we were in the clear. Spotting a small opening in the surface, I quickly diverted my path to toss in the day's biowaste. We'd sent the Oscar back with Marty & Gabe, so were now using the little waste sacks used to line the Oscar & were eager to dispose of them quickly upon departure from camp.

Misjudging my step, I was instantly dumped chest deep in a crevasse: feet dangling in midair, arms splayed across the surface for stability, pack wedged in the opening. This was our first crevasse fall, and I was encouraged to find Travis supine at the end of the rope, feet and axe dug in to arrest my fall should I continue breaking through. Happily, my pack had caught on the lip of the crevasse and I was in a fairly stable spot, though with the weight of the pack I found it especially difficult to pull myself back out. This was why we'd struggled with that Barney for so many miles over so many steps. Like car insurance, it was worth the cost once we finally needed it. Encouraged at encountering such a minor fall for a confidence builder, our only real loss was that of my glacier glasses, which I found shattered in my chest pocket.



The icefall is a beautiful maze of crystalline bridges spanning deeply crevassed glacial flows. Like a rapid in a river, a steep drop in the valley causes the surface of the ice to fracture, and the result is a turbulent passage. A nasty storm set in just as we were starting our descent into the icefall, and soon our visibility was reduced to zero. We soon found ourselves perched on a ledge overlooking a foggy, white expanse, unsure whether to move forward or go back. With goggles iced over we shouted through the howling winds. Should we attempt to rappel down this slope in the blind or backtrack up the glacier and set a camp? Intelligently, we chose to retreat. Plotting our course in our rapidly decaying footprints, we moved beyond the fall and cut a shallow pad in the windswept ice, just above a gaping crevasse.

Earlier in the week Travis had cut a small gash in the tent floor while adjusting a crampon, and since then I'd been adamant about taking off crampons when working around the tent. We'd seen too many serious tears to neighboring tents at the ABC to take this risk lightly. So, poised 15 meters above this giant gulch, with nothing but windswept ice between it and our shallow tent pad, we followed protocol and removed our spikes. We soon realized this oversight on the new terrain. Travis stepped out to stow his pack and *SWOOSH!* he was gone, just like that. Slipping on his backside toward the ravine, he adeptly rolled onto his chest and dug in with the only tool at his disposal—a blunted tent stake. Skidding to a stop on a flat section just above the lip of the crevasse, he sprawled with eyes wide and panting as a trekking pole spun past his head. In seconds, I'd sunk two pickets and hip belayed down to his position. Regrouping, we kicked steps into the slope toward the tent and counted ourselves lucky.

Day 24-25. June 11-12

We'd bedded down around 0400 that morning and the storm blew through most of the day. Around 1500 the weather cleared and we climbed from the tent, stiff and restless at having retreated the day before, anxious to move down-slope. We would learn later that Christian and William had weathered the same storm just 1,000 feet above us, in a shallow foxhole at Denali Pass. While returning from the summit, the storm caught them in the open and it was too dangerous to descend in the deteriorating conditions; they hunkered down to sit out the storm, incurring minor frostbite to all of their digits.

After rappelling into the crevasse in a vain search for the lost pole, we started picking our way through the icefall, emerging several hours later onto the wide slope below. Looking upslope, the glacier dropped nearly 1,000 feet in half that distance. We'd had several minor crevasse falls-similar to the first, wedging in the bridge with our packs with feet dangling and arms sprawled. They became tiring delays, but we suffered no further injuries or equipment losses, and the dicey terrain served to keep us sharp as we navigated the maze of bridges and were continually tempted to drift in the surreal landscape. Following one bridge to its terminus, we would reverse direction and follow each other back, looking for a catwalk spanning a gap, often setting an anchor while the leader hopped an open channel between routes. Another test of teamwork and rope skills, the exercise seemed an emotionless suspension of reality, a transient passage to another place, and time stood still as we wound our way through the blue web of ice and rock. An occasional tourist plane flew overhead, and we imagined passengers watching us work the problem like a twisted lab test. We exited the icefall and moved down slope toward an abrupt cliff, where the Harper cascades over 2,000 feet of fractured granite to meet the Muldrow glacier. Here we were forced to climb several hundred feet up the steep valley wall to the foot of Browne Tower on the spine of Karsten's Ridge, circumnavigating the precipitous foot of the Harper by following the valley ridge down to the Muldrow.



Up to Karsten's Ridge

We sat, surveying the world from a peregrine's perch of exposed rock, the only two people in the world at that moment. The setting sun reflected off Wonder Lake far in the distance, and for the first time we could see our entire route stretched before us-several miles down the Muldrow, McGonagall pass linking the glacier to the vibrant tundra beyond, then miles and miles of green, rolling hills stretching out to the wide McKinley River, and finally the border of evergreen forest surrounding the lake and a road. An actual road linking us back to the world. A world so far removed that even the prospect of the busy, bustling visitor center at its end was overwhelming. Although sick of mountain house meals, there was no strong calling for anything else, no longing for pizza huts or steak houses, bustling markets or crowded streets. There was no place better than that stony perch and that moment in time.

From *Karsten's Ridge*, overlooking the *Muldrow Glacier*



Beautiful as it was, we felt compelled to move on, so at 2200 we ate a quick snack, drank the rest of our water and started down the “knife edge” composing the steep Coxcomb. We were to descend several thousand feet on this ridge until a low saddle provided a gentle 30° walk down to the valley, then follow the Muldrow in the same way we had descended the Harper. Thinking we would be down to relative safety in a few short hours, we again neglected to make water, shunning the extra time it would require and the additional weight we’d be hauling. We made good time down the ridge, using fixed lines left by previous NOLS teams to control our pace and lend some comfort on the exposed crest. A few hours later we were off the steepest section and began to traverse the lower portion of the ridge, searching for the gentle pass to the Muldrow.

Here we made our most crucial error of the entire expedition. Repeating the mistake of Elton Thayer's 1954 team on the first ever traverse of the mountain, we became confused and attempted to exit the ridge before reaching the gentle path down.

David Roberts writes of the event in *The Conquest of Denali*, "it is a particularly trying experience to descend a route that you have not climbed up. Even if you've climbed it before, climbing without a beaten trail to follow if the weather sours and a lack of knowledge of current snow conditions always causes problems. On Karsten's Ridge, the steepest part of the Muldrow route...they negotiated the wind-packed Coxcomb without a hitch, then started out onto a narrow icy step in the ridge at just below 13,000 feet. This was the only bit of technical climbing on the whole descent. A five-thousand-foot wall of ice and rock plunged to the Traleika Glacier on the right. Two thousand feet of steep snow slopes dropped to the Muldrow's head on their left. Harper's magnificent ice cascade glittered in the midday sun at their left elbow. They were wallowing waist-deep in loose, drifted, steep snow underlaid by solid ice. The going was tricky, but not difficult."

Karsten's Ridge below the Coxcomb; Browne Tower in the Background

Photo courtesy NOLS 2005 Expedition



Where that team slipped and fell from the ridge, Travis and I voluntarily chose this as our route down in similar conditions. Having traversed the technical site of the previous team's fall, we reached a saddle immediately past it and assumed the flat step in the ridge led into the path down. We started a gentle trek off the saddle. Soon, what we thought would be a simple traverse to a runout onto the glacier became a steep, icy wall riddled with abrupt drops and gaping crevasses. We soon realized that we'd made a mistake, but were still confident that we could traverse the slope and were reluctant to climb back up. Soon we started operating a running belay, with one member sinking a picket and their axe while the other moved forward, and then leap-frogging each other so that at least one of us was anchored at all times. Labored by the weight of our packs on such steep terrain, we moved tantalizingly slow, repeatedly reassuring each other that we were okay and to pay close attention to detail. A fall here could kill us.

Soon we found ourselves on an 80° face extending 10 feet to the next runout. Travis was on lead and I belayed him from an anchor point directly above the pitch. When he was anchored, I began to downclimb. A slip would throw me past Travis and shock his anchor severely, so, when he yelled up to me at the midpoint, "Hey, you're about to lose a crampon!" it really shook me. I was using lightweight trekking crampons from my hiking boots rather buying a lever-lock, step-in model compatible with mountaineering boots. This would have been okay if we hadn't strayed off-route, but my 270 combined weight on such a steep face exceeded their design and they were bowing out at my arches as I front-pointed on the ice. Nerve-wracked and panicky, I inched my way down to Travis, shuddering with adrenaline and fear. I can remember only once ever feeling this irrational panic, when strung out on a

long lead with Sam in the Canadian Rockies years back. We had strayed off route then as well, and I'd run out of rope before exiting a slabby, granite crag. The result that day was a dangerous lead fall that left me bruised and shaken for days. This experience with the crampon convinced me that continuing with the heavy pack was suicide and, determined that we would eventually reach the field several hundred feet below us (one way or another), I rolled the pack off my back. Travis stood by, stoically watching as the load shattered, bursting straps and launching gear in all directions. He knew that this was unwise-I'd just sent the tent and my sleeping bag spinning down the mountain. If a storm blew in now I'd be helpless. He also knew that I was shaken and there was no use discussing the issue. For better or worse, we sighted the pack on the snow below us and continued moving in that direction.

Soon we reached another precipice, 90° and longer than the previous section. Leading the pitch, I had the comfort of a top-rope as Travis belayed me. Aware of how precarious his downclimb would be with me belaying from below, I resolved to sacrifice an ice screw for him to rappel from, rather than risk a fall that could pull us both off. Sinking the screw, I moved on and soon reached the base of the crag and established an anchor with the picket and axe. Travis downclimbed to the screw and started belaying from this single point. While a breach of safety to rappel from a single point, not knowing what else was in store for us deprived the luxury of additional backups. Any gear used for a rappel would be abandoned on the mountain. Each of us carried one 19cm screw and a two foot picket. We felt that if it were weighted slowly, rather than holding the shock of a fall, it would hold in the icy medium. We were wrong.

As soon as Travis was committed, with all of his weight suspended over the face, the screw blew out. He soared over my head, hitting the slope below in a full skid. Shocking the Barney, he righted himself and dug in just as I absorbed the blow and bore down on my own axe. We held, sprawled on the cold face, each mastering his fear and adrenaline, mustering the energy to get up and keep moving. The time was reaching 1500 on June 12 now. We'd been moving for 24 hours since our last camp, and had been without water for over 12 hours. Desperately thirsty, no matter how much snow we ate, it just didn't matter. We couldn't get enough water into our systems to make a difference. Eating handfuls between pitches was a quick fix that soon faded, like the futility of licking chapped lips. As soon as the mouthful was gone, the torment of dehydration returned. In addition, a hazy snow shower had settled in, with temperatures dropping and visibility reduced. We couldn't see the slope below to plot our direction, and while it would have been possible to cut a bivvy into the icy slope to rest, we were fixed on reaching the valley floor before stopping. We were so close to finding the route down, just one more phase. One more leg of the exercise. We repeated this to each other at every anchor switch, "Just one more leg buddy, one more leg and we'll have this all sorted out." But each additional leg revealed another obstacle, and as we regrouped from our most recent event, we realized our next goal.

Immediately below us was a large cornice overhanging a crevasse 60 feet below. 4 or 5 pitches brought us to the lip of the expanse, and we anchored to look over. The cornice overreached the crevasse, so we could rappel safely onto the edge of the crack, a wide ledge before the final slope down to the glacier. My lonely pack sat invitingly close, just below the shelf. We might have followed the lip to a runout that would lead us down, but in the diminished visibility, we felt it would be better to get below it as soon as possible. Using both pickets as an anchor, I went first, determined to at least get my pack before the weather could deteriorate further. Landing safely on the soft snow below, I probed the lip for any holes and encouraged Travis to follow. The flat ledge with its soft snow was a welcome luxury after so long on the exposed ridge and subsequent icy slope, and I felt the tension of the day leaving my body,

replaced by a feeling of relief at having survived this latest mishap. Travis lowered his pack and soon followed, rapping on a double line. I was encouraged to see that he'd brought one of the pickets with him-insurance for any coming difficulties on the Muldrow's two icefalls. I chuckled, wondering if my sister would be offended that we'd littered the mountain (a piece she and Jeff had given me for my birthday), or proud that their gift had been the one to get us out of trouble. Encouraged, we allowed ourselves a tentative laugh as we scurried down to retrieve my pack. Gear had been strapped to every exposed angle of the rucksack, and upon impact was ejected in all directions. We accounted for everything in good order except for Woody's ice saw, of which we could find no trace. To this day I'm unsure about the choice I made. To abandon my equipment in such an extreme climate was almost unforgivable, but to continue tempting fate with the heavy load and lightweight crampons was more than my nerves could endure.

Having retrieved the pack, we continued downslope toward the Muldrow. Soon, an unforeseen change in gradient appeared, prompting us to use a running belay once again. I edged forward through the whiteout, unable to see where the slope would go, finally tossing my trekking pole forward to see what was ahead. Dumb idea, initiated from exhaustion & dehydration. The pole disappeared into the abyss and I climbed back up to Travis's position. We decided to quit pushing our luck and call it a day. Climbing back up to the shelf above, we stomped a tent pad in the soft snow where we'd rappelled and camped in the lee of the frozen cliff, sheathed in ice and gleaming an icy blue down on us. The day ended at 1800, 27 hours after entering the Harper Icefall from our last camp.

Day 26. June 13

Sleeping soundly after such a long haul, we woke early, feeling eager and rested. The skies were clear and an obvious path traversed a ledge from our location directly to the Muldrow's floor. Packed and moving by 0900, we chose to abandon the recklessly sacrificed pole and headed toward the inviting valley floor. As we traversed the ledge, it became apparent that we'd quit at a good time the day before. A steep cliff initiated just below the slope where I'd chucked my pole and plunged 200 feet to a berg at the glacier's margin.

We arrived at the glacier within the hour, relieved, and encouraged at having reached a major milestone in the descent. "One Last Leg Buddy!" After a celebratory second breakfast, we moved down the glacier, eager to reach our next goal, the Great Icefall. Zagging down slope, the equivalence of a laminar river glide, we stitched a path between open crevasses, up drifts and over gaping fissures. Around noon we took a long break while a heavy haze obscured the contours and made dodging crevasses increasingly complicated, but soon we were moving again, past Sourdough Gully, where the original explorers to the mountain had ascended to the North Summit. We spotted the benign saddle where we should have descended the ridge the day before, appreciating the gentle slope and unbroken surface of the solid crest. It felt good to be gaining ground after so much meticulous route finding, and we scurried on throughout the day. At one point I stumbled while cresting an icy drift and broke the avvy probe that we were using to prod for crevasses.



Nothing a little duct tape couldn't fix, and we continued. At 2400 we reached the upper end of the Great Icefall and called it a day. Dropping our packs, it was exciting to nimbly probe the edges of the expanse, unweighted and mobile once again. In terms of river morphology, the Harper icefall had been an abrupt cascade, and by comparison, the Great Icefall on the Muldrow was a long rapid. Not as severe a grade, but extending for half a mile down the valley, tumbling toward the moraine that we could just see past a bend in the gorge. More route finding and meticulous rope work lay ahead.

Day 27. June 14

There was a gull track in the snow outside our tent that morning—strange evidence of life outside of this frozen, sterile world. It was exciting, and our attitudes reflected the progress & perseverance we'd displayed in recent days. We started picking our way through the icefall around 1000 and made quick progress through the field, having honed our balance and tuned route finding skills on the previous icefall. At one point, we set anchors and dropped our cumbersome packs to belay across a shady looking bridge, dragging our loads behind us. Otherwise, the passage was uneventful, and we emerged in the late afternoon to a calm, flowing basin of soft snow amidst gently rolling drifts—**AND PEOPLE!** Someone besides Huey and Travis on this isolated North Slope. We'd seen the group caching at the foot of the icefall and retreating as we negotiated the maze, progressing like ants on the valley below us, and we descended to find two of them posted calmly on the field watching our advance.



Feeling like both seasoned explorers and graceless Neanderthals, I felt some anxieties at seeing other peoples after so many days on the edge, but welcomed the interaction nonetheless. Two Poles: a father and son team. We exchanged the usual banter concerning the weather and the route. But, as the conversation progressed, it became obvious that they were not enjoying each other's company. Or, to be more accurate, the younger of the pair seemed to harbor some teenage anxiety toward his father's company, while the older member appeared confident but somewhat naïve about what lay ahead of them. We gave them all the relevant information we could remember and departed, wishing them well and hoping for the best. Now, with a trail leading us through the warren, we moved quickly. But the snow had become soft and mushy at this warm altitude, and we continually broke through the crust into waist deep slush, floundering once again under our loads and struggling to maintain composure.

With the camp in view, the last mile was a struggle, physically and emotionally. "Just one more thing," exclaimed Travis, fighting to regain his feet after a particularly deep drop. We were continually searching for the end to the endless queue of challenges which emerged in sequence. "Just one last leg buddy." Our mantra as we emerged from one trial, only to find another poised in our road. We longed for a solid trail, a clear path that would let us set a cruise control and relax, but every time we'd

complete a segment, congratulating each other and expecting a respite, we'd find another unforeseen barrier, swallow our frustration, and soldier on for "one last leg".

Finally, we crested a rise to arrive at the fortified teaching camp. If our previous tent villages had been shanty towns, this was a Renaissance plaza exhibiting every aspect of urban planning. Tents arranged in orderly spokes surrounding a large gear depot. Crisp, boxed walls protected each, with a tidy kitchen space dug into the plot adjacent. The perimeter of the camp was delineated with cord to mark the boundary of the probed area, and the fortified latrine was stationed at the remote end of the establishment. At our unannounced arrival, scruffy heads popped from burrows throughout the camp. *Whack-a-mole*, I giggled. "If I only had a giant rubber mallet." We must have been a shocking sight to this young group, only recently arrived on the glacier. One of the team leaders greeted us with steaming cups of tea—a young lady of Amazonian beauty and Victorian manners to these road weary characters—she graced us with friendly banter as we sat, sipping our coveted beverages. Black tea, with milk and sugar—such a long lost delicacy. And *Soylent Green*, it' people! Someone to talk to other than the grunts to which TH & I were reduced in our daily routine, or just to myself, through endless hours at the end of that purple cord. They confirmed our impressions of the Polish team. Those two had been following the class thus far up the Muldrow, asking novice questions and depending on the large team to lead the way. The NOLS leaders were worried and frustrated that the Poles would get into trouble, requiring rescue up on the Harper and throwing off the NOLS summit attempt. They relayed that such inexperienced crews should be on the other side of the mountain, with park service crews and better communications through larger crowds. To meet one or two hardened teams like ours in passing was common place, but this pair, imposing on the course instructors to coach them in addition to managing their own large team, was dangerous. We slurped in solemn agreement.

Our climb permit expired that day, so we imposed on them to borrow a sat phone & tell the park service where we were, so that they could then pass the message to family & friends that were certainly calling to check on our well being. I was soooooo tired, and we contemplated staying over at the amiable station. BUT, in a quest for green turf and the rediscovery of some chlorophyll, the two fools said "push on".

We dropped over a ridge and descended toward the lower icefall. Picking through this riffle in the valley, we found it a slushy, cracked sled-hill this late in the summer: working along the edge of the icefield, in the shadow of dark, terraced slate walls, still roped together and slushing along in our clumsy snowshoes. The sudden swath of black, in what had been such a monotone landscape, added a new dimension to the panorama. Pausing in the shadows, amidst the dark & colorless setting from Mordor, an unseen trigger from above sent a gray slurry of rock and slush rolling across the path before us—two feet deep and 40 feet wide—had



we not stopped to look at these new rock formations we would've been swept off the path and into the rocky channel of the slushy crevasse to our side.

Skeptically thankful for the latest credit in a long string of good fortune, we shook our heads & continued down the icefall, pausing from time to time to admire the changing view. Patrick F. McManus wrote a short story describing his methods for admiring the changing view and "other devious methods" of convincing your companions that you really aren't dead weight. A personal favorite is the T.P. caper—you wait until the team advances several miles up a steadily climbing trail until exclaiming, "Egads! I forgot the toilet paper!" Then, ignoring their suggestions that you do without, you reassure them, then drop your pack & take off at a steady trot down the trail. Once around the first bend, find a soft mossy spot to catch a quick nap, then splash some creek water on your face & steadily jog back to your marveling companions while happily waving the concealed roll of T.P. in your outstretched hand. When used with discretion, it's sure to assure one's notoriety as the most fit component of any weekend outing. Another, less disruptive tool, is the "nature lover." The proposed naturalist makes the most of the campaign by stopping to admire any new flora or fauna found along the path. This one is like a good joke, it can be altered to fit any setting: anthropology, hydrology, glaciology, and in this case—geology. "Wow Travis, stop for a minute and look at that big boulder over there..."

We emerged from the icefall into a wide, soggy, slushy valley. Still several miles from the pass, we stayed roped for safety and staggered out onto the plain. It took what seemed a very long time to reach the end of the melting snow and onto terra firma, picking large boulders as landmarks in the distance and marching toward one after another. When we finally reached moraine, the spectrum of new colors was overwhelming. For two guys excited about discovering bird tracks and gray-black landscapes in their lives, this range of ancient rock was captivating, and as we dropped our packs to unrope & remove battered snowshoes, our focus wandered toward a childlike fascination with this new feature of our trek. Painfully aware of our weak geology base, we wondered at the spectrum of rock emerging underfoot, and repeatedly exchanged coarse gravels..."Wow, look at this one." "Yeah, here too..." "Check this out."

It was still hard. I landed responsibility for the heavy rope-a-trade for Tiny carrying the blue pig earlier in the journey, and with flippity-floppity snowshoes on our backs, we continued down the valley. Crunch-crunch-crunch, with wet gravels underfoot. A mile further over the soggy, shifting pebbles brought us to McGonagall's pass. We stopped to check out the NOLS cache and mull over our strategy for passing the torrent of snowmelt between us and the steep grade out of the valley. As usual, we chose different procedures; however, without the Barney as an arbitrator, we could take off in separate directions. Nonetheless, we both emerged from the broad channel with wet, cold feet. Nodding concession, we shouldered our packs and charged up the switchbacks leading us across the divide and into a new world.

Around midnight we reached the top of the pass. A skinny, rocky gully extended to a great green valley below us, looking like a scene out of the lost world, and we half expected to see a herd of giant brontosaurus grazing the tundra below. I guess we'd imagined some fantastic transformation as we exited the glacial valley, but as our initial enthusiasm waned, we found the path still rocky, the descent from the pass sinuous and stumbly, and strong as we'd become, the packs still heavy. I'd developed a steady regimen of ibuprofen to numb the fiery throb in my left shoulder, and Travis's lower back was aching under the weight from a disc he injured the year before.

Brave New World!



We stumbled down the gully for an hour or so when it opened up into the green, squishy tundra. This was truly what we'd been striving toward and the soft mosses and lichens were better than a moon bounce at a birthday party. Reveling in this goal acquired, we finally exchanged armored mountain boots for the light sneakers we'd carried for weeks in anticipation of this moment and took time to stretch out on the turf. The swarms of mosquitoes were all we'd expected, and there was no regret at carrying headnets and deet for that issue. After our shoe respite, we carried on a short while and set camp in a broad meadow around 0300. While we had yet to see any large mammals, we had no doubt they were around, and a brief discussion led us to agree for once on a camp system. Accustomed to camping with bears in forests, we had to educate ourselves on what to do with food when there's no bear-sack tree. Instead, we triangulated the camp-tent, cooking area, food cache-and resigned ourselves to any losses we might suffer.

We'd nearly had mutiny days before, when I'd refused to eat one more slimy, constipating bite of mountain house dehydrated meals, and Travis threatened to hold me down and force feed that crap down my throat. So, imagine my elation when I joined him at the kitchen to find a freakin' pot of tamale pie! Not only did he carry a freakin' fat tamale pie this freakin' far, but he'd had the self restraint to hold on to it this long. I instantly forgave him for the coffee incident back at the ABC and we had a real party-tamale pies and fresh running water! *Man this is livin'*, my buddy Gary used to say, as he cracked open a dented Natty Light can on our beat up pontoon boat down at the lake, "I wonder what all the poor folks are doin' right now!" No more melting snow for us-we had clean clear water straight off the tundra. Maybe I take too many chances in the high country with marmot gardias, but I did a whole master's thesis on the stuff, and my conclusion is that if it ain't rainin'



and there's not a cow standing directly in the stream, it's pretty clean water. In addition, I've probably exposed myself enough times that my system has some sort of resistance to the nasty little protozoans.

Life was good. We'd started the day above the Great Icefall on the Muldrow Glacier and landed ourselves on a soft mossy bed well into the tundra. Even though our original flight had already left us in Anchorage, we felt good about the decisions we'd made, even the bad ones. We felt lucky, strong, dedicated. We'd been to the edge, stepped through, and come out the other side; now we were eating tamale pie, drinking fresh water, wearing sneakers and sitting on soft, warm tundra. We'd fought and bickered and talked down to each other like brothers, but we trusted each other like brothers too. We'd seen into each other's eyes and known what it was to be scared and be tired and be alive to the tip of each raw nerve, and we still had 18 miles to go-through tundra rich with swollen rivers and thirsty mosquitoes and territorial bears and pissed off moose. LIFE WAS GOOD.

Day 28. June 15

We'd been in the backcountry for 28 days. I was still wearing the same underwear since I got on the airplane, and we were ready to finish this trip. Not anxious, not hurried, just ready. We were tired and sore, but still strong and ambitious. We had done and seen what we came for and were ready to find the next step in our lives, whatever it might be. That morning was comfortable. We'd exterminated the few mossies that made their way into the tent, and slept soundly well into the morning. Now it was time for one last leg. One last breakfast of crappy power bars and vitamin C packets. One last day in our solitary world before the hustle and bustle of humanity would control us once again. It was sentimental, and the wilderness held me in limbo. I was hesitant to rejoin that humanity.

Upon departure at 0900, we immediately crossed Cache Creek-a ten foot wide channel of icy-cold, clear snowmelt in a gravel/cobble bed and lined by a riparian of alder stands. It felt good to be back in my element, and I stopped barefoot, mid-channel, to dislodge an armored cobble and check for algae and macros. In my mind I'd been describing glaciers as rivers for weeks and weeks, and now I was finally in a river. The purest of rivers, originating from one of the most pristine environments left on this crowded planet. "Tell me again, why are we leaving?"

In the mean time, Travis is now the one hopping up and down like the *Happy Feet* penguin. He's on the far terrace, looking downstream, and he's excited. I saunter over inquisitively. Rumor has it that a very large grizzly bear is 50 meters down slope and very interested in what we're doing in its valley. We continued slowly down the trail, and soon could see it running in the other direction. "Well, that went about as well as we could have wished."



We started out enthusiastically. 18 miles. Just 18 miles to the end. We do 18 miles in our sleep, man. Just 18 miles left to go. One. Last. Leg.

There were moose and caribou sheds scattered across the tundra, alongside the ever-present excitement concerning when that bear would return with backup. The trail was an incised rut, with several inches of standing water, framed by a majestic arch of alder branches that met just below face level. We'd long since given up any designs on maintaining dry sneakers, but alternated opinions on whether or not to wear our headnets. While they kept out mossies, they also made breathing and shooting snot rockets a little awkward while on the move. There were rolling green hills in every direction and we felt like we were advancing really quickly-really quickly for people used to glacier travel at least. The hours ticked away with the miles, and around 1400 we reached the Clearwater Creek crossing, a little over ½ ways there. Let's see, 10 miles in...7 hours? Maybe we weren't moving so fast after all. Our sneakers were so wet and muddy we didn't even bother to remove them for the creek crossings any more. Did I mention that those packs were heavy?

After Clearwater, we climbed a ridge onto a rolling terrace and could see Turtle Hill in the distance. Travis caught a burst and disappeared into the distance as I trekked up the round mountain. Soon the trail disappeared altogether and, convinced that it was ridiculous for anyone to pound through the wall of soggy alder before me, I chose to summit the Turtle for a look around. As I dropped onto a bench-sized boulder at the peak (3,104 ft), I could watch Travis doing the impossible-pounding like a drunken moose through that very thicket that had driven me uphill. The McKinley River ran east to west immediately before me. A 400 meter wide channel of riffing, icy-cold snowmelt in a series of braided channels. "Well...that's going to be fun to cross." Feeling a little nauseated from the Percocets I'd drug out to numb my shoulder, I took a long break on the hilltop, drinking heavily from my Clearwater refill and eating the last of my powerbars, or whatever derivative I'd saved to the very last-probably not the chocolate-fudge Cliff's. Those always go first. Finally, I got up and charged straight north off the rocky hillside in the general direction of where I'd last seen Tiny headed. Soon I broke through the alder jungle and almost fell head first off the flood-plane terrace onto the gravelly banks of the river. There I found my companion stretched like a corpse on the rock. Mosquito net on his head; hands in pockets; sore feet propped up on his backpack; cheery halo replaced by an aura of utter exhaustion.

Just one more leg buddy. All we needed to do now is cross this giant river, find the trail on the other side, then climb 3 miles up the other side of the valley to the end of the trail. One thing at a time.

The river was all we'd hoped for: a gravel-cobble riffle/rapid racing past at about 6.25 feet per second (¿I've never been a good guesser at this?) and nearly waist deep in places. The river was braided into about 10 channels and we attempted to plot our course before entering. "Okay. Go that way really fast. If something gets in your way...turn."

We started safely enough, and the first several crossings were fairly straightforward. But, as we neared the center of the river, the waters got deeper and faster (they say that happens, but who are *they* anyway?!). Soon we were linked, hand in hand; white-knuckled and panting with fear, cold, and adrenaline; two remaining trekking poles grasped in our outside fists; stumbling one slippery step at a time across the main braid. One of us would stumble and the current would grab him, buoyant pack holding him afloat while the other of us would jerk the victim back to his feet. We lost about 30 meters downstream in the 20 meter width of the braid, stumbling and paddling the entire way. Once reaching the following gravel bar we dropped to our knees, breathless and wheezing, eyes wide with energy. "Wow man, that was pretty cool."

We completed the ford and rested on the opposite bank. Now we were really tired. Cold to the core and tired, tired, tired. Once we could focus our thoughts properly, we changed into dry socks and clothing-all except the underwear. I'd worn the same pair this far & wasn't about to retire them prematurely. What's a little more chafing this close to the end?! As Tiny cooked up the last of our food-two delectable mountain houses-I took off through the alder riparian in search of the trail. Again and again people had warned us to find this trail before heading out of the riparian, else we'd have a hard time of it on the pending climb up the valley. It took a while. Especially as my spydey sense was going bananas. Every now and again, when I'm alone in the wilderness, I get this overwhelming sense of alarm that some large mammal is about to eat me. Usually it's in a quiet box canyon around sunset and there's an imaginary cougar perched on a rock ledge just above my head. No kidding. I've turned around and headed straight back to camp on more than one occasion. So, there I was. 2200, in a dense, bear infested thicket, swarmed by mosquitoes, exhausted, drugged, malnourished, all alone, with wet feet, and ultimately convinced that an *Ursus arctos horribilis* (horribilis?! No joke man. I wikiied it) was about to come crashing out of the brush and squash me. I started clapping and singing the bear song- "*Hey bear! Hey Hey bear! Howdy Bear!*" The lyrics are pretty straightforward, and usually the bears don't care if you screw them up. Early one morning in New Mexico I was singing the bear song on the Ponil River, and Shelly was in her tent thinking "Why the hell is he singing and clapping at 5 o'clock in the morning?" So, she popped her head out of the tent to shut me up, only to see me prancing around the meadow: barefoot, in my boxers, clapping over my head, and shuffling in a circle around my tent as a giant black bear followed me curiously. That had been a good bear encounter, as our visitor left camp when Shelly got out & joined in the bear song as a round.

Finally I did locate the trailhead, about 1/8 mile downstream from where we'd crossed. In our prudence not to miss the trail, we'd erred on the side of caution & come out of the river way upstream of our destination. Good enough, at least we knew where we were. I retreated to get Tiny for backup before the *horribilises* caught up to me.



We choked down the last mountainhaus and went together to find the trailhead. Soon we were on a clear, dry path ascending out of the flood plain and into a pine forest. This was swank, man. Forest?! The mossies persisted, but in crossing the river we had just taken our fist step toward rejoining humanity. This trail showed signs of wear. Signs of a road nearby. Signs of day hikers even. It was encouraging, and we needed encouragement at this point. Tiny's feet were shredded from the soggy trek & my arm was about to fall off on the ground. Each and every time we stopped, even just for a drink of water, I'd throw the pack down on the trail and walk around in circles, shrugging my

shoulders, wanting to squeeze away the burning, fiery knot that had formed under my shoulder blade and make the throbbing cease. It does stop when that's happening. It stops burning just as soon as I throw the pack on the ground, and it starts right back up again just as soon as I put the pack back on. Usually it isn't too bad, & even on normal pack trips when it gets annoying a little Advil will cure it. At this point I needed a lot of Advil.

We limped up a steady grade, across tidy board walks and hard packed trails, over a little, rocky ridge and then back down toward Wonder Lake. We could finally see glimpses of it through the trees and tried to increase our pace. Finally, the trail emerged onto a gravel road. A real road, and at the end of that road, almost a mile away from our location, was the campground. A mile?! A freakin' mile? What a ridiculous victory parade that was for anyone watching. We gave each other a wink at the irony, then picked up a little bounce in our step. Limping and bouncing down this high forest road in the Alaskan twilight. Victorious. Victors of what? We didn't care. We'll figure that out later. We came. We saw. We compromised and we grew as individuals and as humans from the experience. To be reaching this finale' was totally surreal. More surreal even than being on that summit at this exact same hour 6 days earlier, because now we were really done. This was the last leg. The sign post was in sight. We were there.

Ever conscious in this elevated state of depravation we'd come to embrace, we stumbled, wordlessly, to the signpost. A strong embrace and a farewell photo confirmed the event. Then, to avoid missing the 6 a.m. departure time, we climbed directly onto the tour bus & spread our bedrolls in the gear loft at the back. The very last task of our trek was to write a note to the bus driver as to why we had taken over the rear ½ of her vehicle, so as to avoid being shot the next morning. Then we slept a deep, happy slumber.



Last Leg Touring

Established June 16, 2007

Wonder Lake, AK



Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.

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