Denali, AK, 20,320 ft. – June 7, 2014, HP #16: The High One

"Denali" is a Native American word meaning "The High One." Those lucky enough to have seen it will tell you it towers above its neighbors. In fact, it is the highest mountain in North America by over 750 feet. Its difference in height from base to peak is 18,000 feet – more than any other mountain residing entirely above sea level.

From 1917 until the eve of the National Park Service's 100th anniversary on August 25, 2016 North America's tallest mountain was officially named "Mount McKinley." A gold prospector is given credit for the name change from the Koyukon language when in 1896 he began calling it after then President-elect William McKinley – a man who would go on to be the 25th President of the United States.

Most of Denali is permanently covered in snow and ice and could as aptly be named "The Cold One". With a record low of minus 77 F (-61 C) and wind chill down to minus 148 F (-100 C), the mountain's extremely cold temperatures freeze exposed human skin in an instant. Strong winds are common and have been estimated to gust as high as 300 miles per hour. By some measurements it is considered the coldest place on earth. Even during the summer Denali's temperatures routinely dip lower than winter temperatures of the other 49 US States. The mountain is totally visible on average just four days a month during June, July, August, and September due to incessant weather issues. Many large glaciers cover its slopes. The Kahiltna Glacier on its southern side is the longest in the entire Alaska Range at 44 miles in length. Its Ruth Glacier is nearly three quarters of a mile thick.

In search of Denali climbing partners, March 16, 2014 I reached out to thirteen strangers. Only Art Delgado of Texas replied. He informed me the "Kicking Buttress" team had an open slot, saying I should contact his team lead, Calvin Harmann, at the email address provided. March 19 Calvin offered me the open slot, and I accepted.

With May 24 being the day the team was meeting in Anchorage, I had only 65 days in between to arrange things on my end. First, I purchased a climbing permit, and next I booked a flight – as such I was one hundred percent committed. For five years I'd had my sights set on climbing Denali and now I was finally getting my chance. Over the years I had earned the needed background, plus physically and mental I was ready. Anxiously, I finalized my gear list and began to purchase outstanding items.

Less than two weeks after I joined the "Kicking Buttress" team disaster stuck when I woke up from a nap to learn my house was on fire! I warned my wife, and immediately began saving my climbing gear. The house was ruined; however, I was able to keep my climbing plans in place.

Time passed swiftly and I found myself in Anchorage. It was after midnight, May 25, when I woke up Art at the motel where our team of four had arranged to meet. Soon after Calvin along with Donald Tapia arrived. Previously strangers, they had flown together from Denver. After catching a few hours of sleep we used the rest of the day to pick up the remaining food items. As the evening approached, I was filled with anticipation thinking about what we four strangers were about to take on together.

May 26, Talkeetna Taxi shuttle service picked us up at 6:30 a.m., taking us and three Russian climbers 114 miles north to Talkeetna. After dropping off our gear at K2 Aviation we located the Walter Harper Ranger Station to attend a mandatory climbing orientation.

Following orientation, we made our way back to the K2 Aviation hangar to catch our flight to Base Camp. Prior to boarding the Cessna, each of us along with his gear was weighed ensuring the combination did not exceed 300 pounds. The 55-mile scenic flight to the Kahiltna Glacier landing strip at a 7,200 feet took 30 minutes.

By 2:00 p.m. our gear was unloaded, and we had checked in with the Base Camp manager who issued us five gallons of white gas for our camp stoves. The weather was clam. After digging the required food and fuel cache, we set off for Camp One five and a half miles further north up the Kahiltna Glacier. Having to move four weeks' worth of food, fuel, and gear meant each of us was carrying at least 50 pounds on his back and pulling an additional 60 pounds on a sled. To reduce the possibility of falling into hidden crevasses all four of us along with our four sleds were attached to a single rope.

Arriving at Camp One, we set up our two tents. A two-man tent to be used by one person, and a four-man tent to be used by the other three – allowing us to alternate nights in the single tent to provide a break from the team. By the time we set up camp, melted water, and prepared dinner it was 11:00 p.m. At this time of year darkness never reaches the mountain; 23 hours of sunlight are granted along with one hour of twilight.

Before leaving Talkeetna, we had been warned of an approaching storm. As predicted, in the morning we awoke to falling snow. We decided to move up to Camp Two while we still had the chance.

The two and a half miles from Camp One to Camp Two involves going up Ski Hill to an elevation of 9,700 feet. This leg is often done as a double carry, meaning loads are taken up with two trips. With concerns about the weather and still full of energy we decided to tackle it as another single carry. We labored up to Camp Two in four and a half hours as the snow

continued to fall. Arriving, we had to level out tent platforms in the snow. We also cut blocks of snow and stacked them around the tents as a wind barrier. It was after 1:00 a.m. when we finally found the time to sleep. Along with us at Camp Two was a large British military team, a group of Black Diamond employees, a troop from Columbia, and two Russian teams.

Over the next three days the storm did not let up, and we dared not move higher. All day long, and especially during the nights, we were forced to dig out our tents to prevent the aluminum poles from breaking under the extra load of the accumulating snow. During the day there was plenty of work to be done with melting snow for water, cooking, and improving the camp. In spite of being pinned down I wrote in my journal "I love this experience."

Our fourth day at Camp Two the weather broke momentarily prompting us to move up to Camp Three located at the base of Motorcycle Hill one and a half miles away. The elevation between the camps gains 1,300 feet, and again we traveled in a storm. As we went up, we passed groups coming down several of which had been stuck at the 14,200-foot camp for as many as 10 days without a chance to attempt the summit. We arrived at 11,000-foot Camp Three at 7:30 p.m., yet it was close to midnight before we crawled into our sleeping bags having once again had to erect protective walls and level out spots in the snow for our tents.

The next morning started out extra windy and cold. But around 10:00 a.m. the clouds cleared out and soon folks were heading up Motorcycle Hill. By 1:30 p.m. we too were hauling a cache up the hill, having replaced our snowshoes with crampons. We were carrying small enough loads that we did not need the sleds. Thankfully, we encountered no wind at Windy Corner. After covering one and three-quarter miles taking us to 13,500 feet, we dug a hole in the snow and buried a cache of food and fuel.

Food caches are being buried in the snow to prevent ravens from invading them. Also, they must be marked with wands so they can be found after a snowstorm. Mountain regulations required the markers be labeled with team identifying stickers issued during orientation. As such, should a cache not be recovered the violators can be fined.

Our eighth day on the mountain turned out to be mostly clear. We took advantage of it by moving up to the Basin Camp (aka Camp Four) located at 14,200 feet; passing by our cache on the way. A pattern had emerged, at Camp Four we found all the established spots to be full so once again we had to dig snow and build walls. Temperatures were around 0 F (-18 C) at 9:30

p.m. I donned my summit parka over my other five layers – two wool shirts, a fleece, a down coat, and a Gortex shell. At 14,000 feet and higher, during the month of June, Denali nighttime temperatures are routinely -30 F (-34 C) or lower.

An estimated thirty teams were staying at Camp Four. At any given time, during the summer climbing months it is very possible to have around 500 climbers on the mountain at one time. Typically, fifty percent will reach the actual peak. The Annual Mountaineering Summary by the National Park Service reported that for 2014 only one in three climbers reached the summit. Between 1967 and 2014 inclusive, only in five seasons has the summit reaching percentage fallen below 40%.

The next day we learned how lucky we had been to have flown to Base Camp when we did as following May 26 no planes had been able make the journey for five days. Sure, we had been pinned down at 9,700 feet for several days but at least we were on the mountain and acclimatizing rather than being stuck at nearly sea level in Talkeetna.

June 4 was another sunny and clear day, identical to the previous one. Later it was rumored as many as 100 people had obtained the peak that day. Until then the summit percentage for the season was under 20% with only 15 people having reached the summit. Taking advantage of the weather we sacrificed part of our scheduled rest day moving some items from our 13,500-foot cache up to the top of the Headwall at 16,200 feet. Art did not join us as he had decided the 14,200-foot camp was the end of the line for him.

Climbing the Headwall is the steepest part of the West Buttress route. This gradient necessitates ascending fixed lines with the protection of an ascender. It was fun to go up, however coming down the fixed lines was dangerous as ascenders do not work for descents.

We stayed true to our schedule for June 5th and used it as a rest day. The following day we moved to the High Camp at 17,200 feet – from where we would make our summit bid. The three of us started out toward the Headwall at 12:45 p.m.

From our cache at the top of the Headwall it took three more hours to cover the one and a half miles, and 1,000 feet of vertical gain across the narrow West Buttress ridge. Crossing the ridge, the terrain dropped away sharply on both sides - to the left (north) a deep basin border by Wickersham Wall, and to the right Camp Four 2,000 feet below. Along the crest, rocks now and then protrude from the snow exposed by wind. To pass Washburn's Thumb, a prominent rock outcropping, we worked our way up a short steep section offering a well-worn fixed line. In the process we gave each other running belays as we skirted the thumb on its left side.

We reached Camp Five at 7:30 p.m. It was cold, but calm and sunny and it seemed like the shadow that covered Camp Four below would not reach the High Camp for a while. Prior to setting up camp, we wandered over to the top of the Rescue Gully and took a few pictures of the ridge we had just traversed. The views down to the Basin Camp below with Mt. Foraker looming behind were some of the most aesthetic of the entire route.

By 9:30 p.m. we had camp set up. Unlike the Basin Camp, the High Camp contained very few teams. Due to the reduced levels of oxygen at this high elevation during the night Donald awakened expressing concern about having trouble breathing.

Saturday June 7, it was 11:45 a.m. before we set off for the summit. Melting snow to have enough water for three men for a full day had delayed us. We tried to pack reasonably light and still be prepared for emergencies. Between us we carried a sleeping bag, an insulated mat, a stove, three pickets, an extra pair of crampons, a snow saw, and a shovel. Additionally, we each carried a summit parka, extra mittens, camera, food, and water. For the first time, we donned our insulated pants, and over-boots, as the temperatures were the coldest we had encountered and expected to drop more as we climbed higher.

From High Camp the route heads northeast (mostly east) along the steep "Autobahn" toward 18,200-foot Denali Pass. The Autobahn has a steep dangerous fall line to climbers left and has been the site of many Denali accidents. As we went up, we took advantage of pickets in place and clipped our rope to them.

It was stimulating to reach the top of Denali Pass at over 18,000 feet where we turned south toward Arch Deacons tower. With the lack of oxygen, speed of thought and general mental capacity can be reduced by as much as fifty percent. The higher we went, the more noticeable those effects became. At the apex of Denali Pass we had a view of the Harper Glacier directly to the east.

I was aware that in the vicinity of Denali Pass was where the 1967 Wilcox expedition had their High Camp. On July 18, 1967 after splitting up, with five descending, while the remainder lingerer to make their summit attempt, one of the fiercest storms in the mountain's history ravaged this locale. By the time the storm subsided, the group of five had reached Base Camp, but the other seven members of the expedition had perished. To date this may be considered the severest mountaineering disaster in North America. Since then, over one hundred more have perished on Denali, averaging out to about one death per year.

Crossing the Football Field and reaching Pig Hill we encountered a guide short roping his Japanese client down the mountain, while another guide was helping down some Russian patrons. Recognizing us from the High Camp, the first guide offered some words of encouragement. Gaining the summit ridge, only a quarter mile separated us from our final goal. We trudged along on the left side in strong winds, aware (but unable to see) that the right side drops over 8,000 feet down to the east fork of the Kahiltna Glacier.

Nine hours and fifteen minutes after leaving Camp Five we reached the top of North American at 20,320 feet. The time was 9:00 p.m. and no other teams remained at the highpoint. Coincidentally, we reached the peak on a Saturday, the same day of the week the first expedition did, and exactly 101 years, to the date, after the first.

The amazing views were hidden from us obstructed by clouds and blowing snow. All we could think about was getting down before the already bad weather worsened. I snapped a picture of the summit benchmark stamp "Mt. McKinley Expedition 1989", and one of Calvin at the marker. I had Calvin take a photo of me. I also got a photo of Donald approaching the summit, as well as a picture of Calvin's watch to document the time. We could not have been on top for more than five minutes and all my photos were taken within the same minute (9:02 p.m.) before my camera could freeze. We did not even take the time to don our extra summit parkas as we started down without resting, leaving no time for our body temperatures to drop.

The winds were gusting fiercely as we descended, blowing up a lot of snow and reducing visibility to 20 feet or less. Fresh snow was falling. Shortly, my mask froze up and I had to switch it out for my neck gaiter. To avoid frostbite, I often place my gloved hand over my nose and cheeks. At one point Donald had trouble with his goggles. Upon removing them, rime ice immediately began to grow from his eye lashes.

We hoped once we turned west to go down the Autobahn, we would leave the brunt of the wind behind but in fact it only worsened. Becoming worried, I prayed we would make it back to High Camp without incident. Soon after we noticed descending tracks in sheltered spots along the trail now and then. Much to my relief eventually we caught up to one of the other descending parties.

At 1:00 a.m. we rolled back into High Camp dehydrated and hungry but too tired to solve either. The drinking water in one of my bottles had frozen so I put the bottle in my sleeping bag to warm it up, popped a hard candy into my mouth, and laid down exhausted; soon fast asleep.

The cold and wind gusts of the evening before continued the next day - our fourteenth day on the mountain. All the same our objective was to get back down to the more protected Basin Camp where Art awaited us. We broke camp at 2:30 p.m. and one and a half hours later we retrieved the remainder of our cache at the top of the Headwall. Within an additional 30-minutes, with the blue ice of the Headwall behind us, we arrived at the relative comfort of our established encampment at 14,200 feet. Light snow was falling. Art was pleased to learn of our success, even as our tiredness soon overtook us. Donald fell asleep with his sunglasses on.

The next day, Monday, June 9, was scheduled as a rest day but by 2:00 p.m. the day was turning from calm to stormy. Hoping to get down to the 11,000-foot camp before the full force of the storm arrived, we packed our gear. Before starting down, to lighten our loads we gave away

much of our food knowing we had more in three caches below. Arriving at our remaining 13,500-foot cache the weather worsened. As we dug up the cache a guided group ascending informed us that there were a lot of snow pillows after Windy Corner implying that we would have to break trail.

As we continued down it began to snow steadily. Positioned as the third on our rope, behind Donald and Art respectively, many times I could not see Donald. We relied on the trail marking wands to find our way down. At one point, having the side zippers of my shell pants unzipped to the knees to allow ventilation, I thought to myself "you are literally freezing your butt off."

Near Squirrel Point one of my crampons detached itself. To reattach it I had to remove my gloves leaving my fingers frigid. The adjustment on the crampon was frozen so I was unable to tighten it, but with luck it stayed on for the rest of the descent.

After three hours of traveling in the storm we reached the camp at the base of Motorcycle Hill. The spot we had built eight days earlier was occupied, but gratefully we found a vacant site with existing walls.

The next day the storm continued making further descent an unwise option. Ready to return to civilization, getting pinned down on the descent was wearisome and the Beach Boys song "Sloop John B" with its "Let me go home, I wanna go home" lyrics kept going through my mind.

Day 17, with the skies clearing I packed up expecting to take advantage of the weather and head down to Base Camp. However, our team decided it might be less complicated to stay in camp all day and leave at 1:00 a.m. The idea was to avoid setting up again at Base Camp should we arrive too late for a flight out. By 10:30 p.m. when Art and I were preparing our customary late dinner the other occupants of Camp Three had mostly cleared out. The temperature had dropped significantly. That night, morning of June 12, we did not make it out of camp until 1:45 a.m. in the very crisp cold air. I had on my wool long Johns under my insulated pants which were under my shell pants, as well as hand warmers on my ankles (to assist in keeping my feet warm). I also donned all four of my coats.

Our rope order became Donald and his sled, trailed by Art's sled, then me and my sled, followed by Art and Calvin's sled, and lastly Calvin. During the descent, the last on the rope does not pull a sled as without rigid poles there is no efficient way to prevent it from running into its forerunner.

The late-night travel started out a bit sloppy with snowshoes coming off and one of the sleds tipping over multiple times. Donald commented on the seriousness of the situation say, "if we have to keep stopping, we risk getting frostbite." After repacking the problem sled the voyage changed, becoming incredibly enjoyable. With steady uninterrupted travel we soon warmed up; our packs and sleds, however, remained covered in frost. We walked toward a full moon even as the night sky remained lit. With no one else traveling if felt magical, as though we were the only ones on the mountain. The absence of shuttle planes in the sky accentuated the divine

quietness and tranquil stillness. At one point, along with the full moon, alpenglow covered the mountains; I wondered if that could happen at locations where the sun actually sets.

The final stretch of the nine-and-a-half-mile trek to Base Camp necessitates climbing Heart Break Hill which alone required one hour; overall the journey took six and a quarter hours. Arriving, we pulled the sleds up near the door of the Base Camp manager's hut. She asked our group name and which air shuttle we were with. A few minutes later she announced K2 Aviation would be landing shortly to pick us up; our timing had worked out perfect. In the meantime, I grabbed a shovel and began retrieving our cache which was now under a lot more snow.

On the 30-minute return flight the lack of sleep caught up with me, and I dozed off. Back in Talkeetna we checked in at the Ranger Station and reported our success. Following lunch, we located the K2 Aviation bunkhouse where we set up clothes lines and hung out our gear to dry. After showering we headed back into town for dinner. Donald ordered the biggest calzone I have ever seen while Art, Calvin and I shared two large pizzas.

Photo Album: https://goo.gl/photos/Dm4UXe6kd9HDBGaB8