**Humphreys Peak, AZ, 12,633 ft. – November 18, 2010, HP #11: The 360 degree views are expansive seeming to never end almost as though one is looking into space.**

We were supposed to leave at 9:00 am but it was almost 10:30 by the time we headed south on I-15 from Orem, Wednesday Nov 17, 2010. We stopped for dinner at Denny’s in Page AZ and by 9pm we were at Arizona Snowbowl ski area, a 14 mile drive up US-180 from Flagstaff. We camped in the parking lot at over 9,300 feet on a cold night, with no one else around. I had told Ana to bring a warm sleeping bag and an extra blanket or two, but whatever she had wasn’t warm enough and I ended up giving her my down bag. Ana had never tapped resourceful accommodations like this before, and that probably added to her sleeplessness.

Next morning we were up at 5 am, and on the trail at 6:30 am with the sun somewhat up. Our destination being the highest peak on San Francisco Mountain, named Humphreys Peak - the highest natural point in the U.S. state of Arizona. Yet another mountain peak with a boring name, paying tribute to an Army officer. Perhaps an officer is a bit better then honoring a politician - another common heedless way to name a peak. San Francisco Mountain, also known as San Francisco Peaks or simply The Peaks, is a group of dormant volcanic peaks along a horseshoe shaped Massif located in the Coconino National Forest. San Francisco Mountain is situated between highway 89 to the east, and highway 180 to the west, and houses Arizona Snowbowl ski resort on its western aspect with the town of Flagstaff east of the mountain.

The Humphreys’ Peak trail wasn’t obvious so we ended up hiking under one of the ski lifts eventually crossing the trail a few hundred yards beyond the end of the lift. Following the trail we were guided into a conifer and aspen forest, on the west side of the mountain, and up a set of long switchbacks. Near tree line, just below the saddle between Humphreys and Agassiz Peaks, the forest becomes bristlecone pines bent and twisted by wind and frost. A short push up to the saddle offers hikers views of the Inner Basin of the Massif that forms the San Francisco Peaks. Up to this point we had cover roughly three miles, with one and three quarter’s miles remaining. Here, above tree line, the terrain appears volcanic as the route steepens passing three false summits before reaching the highpoint.

We made it to the roof of AZ in 3.5 hours, with Ana doing very well. A dusting of snow, here and there, coated the mountain but volcanic rocks showed through it everywhere. This was my 11th US state highpoint, and my 179th mountain climb. The 360 degree views are expansive seeming to never end almost as though one is looking into space. Out there somewhere was the Grand Canyon, and a lot of seemingly empty land some of which surely is the Painted Desert – it was remarkable. We had the summit to ourselves making the views that much easier to enjoy. After 45 minutes on top of Arizona we began the return trip down.

I wanted to summit Mt. Agassiz on the way down but on the ascent from the saddle we noticed a sign saying it was closed. I have no idea why it was closed but the sign seemed serious threatening a $500 fine. I had just begun a seven month un-jobbing phase, and didn’t like the idea of spending $500 to reach another peak.

Around 3pm we returned to the car, having covered 9.5 miles and over 3300 vertical feet.

On the drive down from the ski resort we stopped before Flagstaff and ate dinner on the side of the road, then headed to the Kaibab forest near Jacobs Lake where we found a free spot to camp for the night.

**Mount Whitney, CA, 14,497 ft. – September 23, 2011, HP #12: Amazingly we had the highest point in California too ourselves.**

Jay, Leif, and I left Utah County around 8 pm September 21, 2011, arriving in Las Vegas around 1 am (Mountain Time). Next morning we took off around 9 am (Mountain Time), and drove west through Pahrump, NV and into Death Valley (where the road reaches a low of 190 feet below sea level, and the temperature was over 100 F), arriving in Lone Pine, CA around noon (Pacific Time). Our first stop was the Ranger Station where we picked up our backcountry permits, and rented a couple of bear proof canisters. Next we stopped at a pizza joint and had lunch. After lunch we drove the 13 miles from 3,727 ft. high Lone Pine to 8,365 ft. high Whitney Portal, where the walking would begin.

By 2:30 pm (Pacific Time), we had our gear and backpacks organized and were on the main Mount Whitney trail. Within a mile or so we left the main trail where it crosses the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek. On the new trail we headed up a wooded slope into a willow-choked valley, roughly following the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek. After the second creek crossing we arrived at the base of the Ebersbacher Ledges. Traversing the ledges involved some class 3 scrambling where a slip could be fatal. Once over the ledges we reached 10,300 ft. high Lower Boy Scout Lake, around 5:15 pm having walked approximately 2.5 miles. We crossed the creek and traversed around the lake on its left (south) side, and were soon climbing over talus, eventually crossing the creek again where it runs over granite slabs. Within a mile or so from the lower lake, and by 6:00 pm, we had found a camp spot at Upper Boy Scout Lake (11,300 ft.). We managed to get our tents set up before the sun set. That night I ate a Mountain House Pasta Primavera which was surprisingly tasty!

Next morning, September 23, 2011, we left camp around 5:15 am heading toward Iceberg Lake (12,560 ft.) at the base of Mount Whitney’s Eastern Buttress. Iceberg Lake is approximately 1 to 1.5 miles east of Upper Boy Scout Lake and 1,200 plus vertical feet higher and we reached it by 6:30 am, with the sun totally up. At Iceberg Lake we pumped some water, then scrambled up a 1,000 vertical feet of talus and 3rd class terrain to a notch below a tower where the roped climbing would begin.

The first two pitches were more or less straight up to the top of the second tower, and took about an hour and a quarter to climb, putting us at the top of pitch two around 9 am. Leif led the first pitch, and Jay led the second pitch. These first two pitches have ratings ranging from 5.6 to 5.8. Although we started out before another group consisting of two climbers, they caught up to us at the top of the first pitch. Sharing the route with them ended up being the story of the day.

The third pitch is where things got difficult. We had the option at this point to go over a short arête (5.7) or to drop down a big step to a ramp (5.6). With speed in mind, and hoping to pull ahead of the other party, we decided on the ramp, but what we didn’t realize was it was spot covered in snow and ice due to its northern aspect. Leif led this pitch, and masterfully avoided most of the snow/ice, but as I followed I soon had my climbing shoes covered in snow, and my hands frozen. This was a bit nerve rattling to say the least, especially when my now wet shoes failed to grip even as I tried, unsuccessfully, to smear them on the rocks to dry them. Arriving at the belay ledge at the base of a prominent right-facing corner was a great relief, and my shoes eventually dried out. The other party used the 5.7 option for the third pitch converging at the same belay area and informed us that their route was easier climbing but with limited protection.

It was after 10:00 am when Jay led the 4th pitch, and he ran the rope almost completely out on this 5.6 step like section known as the "red corner". Leif led the next pitch which took us up to a large ledge just under the "peewee" block.

The 6th pitch which runs along the right hand side of the peewee block was led by Jay, and the three of us topped out on that by noon. All this time there was one other party of two ahead of our two parties. This front-running party, were often referred to as the "white guy" because one of the fellows was dressed in white, and the other in black if you can believe it. At this point, the top of the peewee, all three groups overlapped momentarily, with the lead group soon pulling ahead again.

Keeping with leads swinging between Leif and Jay, Leif lead the 7th pitch, choosing a flake which was too good to pass up even though he worried it might be challenging for me to follow as my alpine rock climbing experience was very limited. Fortunately it ended up being fine for me to follow.

We ran into a little bit of trouble on the 8th pitch when we decided not to wait for the climbers we were sharing the route with to finish the pitch. Jay attempted a variation only to run into a difficult ceiling causing him to be lowered back to the belay station. By now, around 1pm, the other climbers were gone, and we were able to follow the standard pitch they had used. Leif also led this one, which looked relatively easy but turned out to be challenging as tired and as cold as we were.

At the top of the 8th pitch, I put in one more piece of protection, climbed up a large boulder and unroped, and Leif and Jay followed. At this point I decided to remove my "cruel shoes" and put on my boots understanding the remaining 300 ft. to be mostly class 3 or moderate 4. As I did so, my friends kept moving and I soon lost sight of them.

Eventual, as I scrambled up what turned out to be 4th class and moderate 5th class, unroped at over 14,000 feet I noticed Leif, and decided climb towards him. About 30 feet from the top, I ran into a sheer 10 foot wall which I dared not climb unroped. I scrambled around a bit looking for an easier alternative only to come up short. I had just decided to sit down and eat my lunch before trying to work my way down and south to the class 3 stuff (left if climbing up), when I heard Leif calling out to me. I asked him to get a rope and drop it down to me, which he did. On rope I was able to climb past my road block, in my boots, and then finish the scramble to the 14,497 foot peak arriving on top at 3:00 pm (about 6 and 3/4 hours from the time we roped up). There was no site of the other two parties who had been on the east buttress with us, and amazingly we had the highest point in California too ourselves.

By 3:45 pm we located the Mountaineers route, and started down it. It was coated in ice, and we didn’t have crampons nor axes, so we stuck to the 4th class boulders on the left side still having to work our way around some snow and ice. Eventually we crossed it on a sugary snow section and continued down the right side. Just above the saddle where the route turns right and heads down to the west we were forced to down climb a 5th class section about 20 feet high, that had limited hand holds with spots of ice and snow, it was quite unsettling, especially after all we had been through up to that point. Fortunately, we all made it down without incident and continued down the "never ending" west aspect couloir of the Mountaineers Route arriving by 6:00 pm at Iceberg Lake. Within an hour we were back at our camp at Upper Boy Scout Lake. Fourteen hours of hiking, climbing, and scrambling was now behind us!

September 24, we woke up to hail, that would come and go intermingled with sunshine and/or rain. Enjoying and needing the rest, we forfeited our plan to scramble up Mt. Russell. By 11:30 am in steady hail we headed down. Soon the hail stopped, and the sun came out. At the lower lake I removed my jacket and paused to look back noticing the peak of Mt. Whitney above the lakes eastern wall, it looked a long ways away!

At the Ebersbacher Ledges we got off track by following a lone hiker in an orange hat. We soon discovered our error and notified the hiker as well. Once we got down the ledges and across the creek, we stopped for a drink and I noticed the hiker had ignored us and was way off course, in potential danger, and without his back pack. I whistled at him, caught his attention, and we were able to yell directions to him, allowing him to get off the ledges. I left my pack and hiked up to him meeting him just a few yards past the creek crossing. He seems uneasy but he said he was fine. I asked about his pack and he said it fell off the cliff when he tried to lower it down a section. Hearing he was alright and confirming a second time that he didn’t need help, we continued down arriving at Jay’s car by 2:15 pm. I weighed my pack at the trailhead, and it was only 2 pounds lighter than when we started out, and I had no water left. A liter of water weighs 2.2 pounds, so essentially my pack was unchanged in weight from the hike in.

From Whitney Portal it was back to Lone Pine and the pizzeria, and then to the Ranger Station to return the bear canisters. Back through Death Valley, to Las Vegas, and my first deep sleep in days! Sunday morning we were up at 5:15 am (Pacific Time), and back to Utah County by 1:00pm (Mountain Time). What an awesome, unforgettable adventure, and how lucky for me that two good friends were willing to allow an inexperienced rock climber, namely me, join them!

**Granite Peak, MT, 12,799 ft. – August 18, 2012, HP #13: The prospect that Granite Peak would not be in reach this trip settled in hard on us.**

I woke up at 3:00 am August 17, 2012 about 45 minutes earlier then I needed to, but sleep wouldn’t return. As planned I left the house at 4:30 am and drove up to Peter’s place. From there we got into his truck and drove North 450 miles through Utah and Yellowstone to Cook City, Montana where we had lunch.

By 2:07 pm we were on the Lady of the Lakes trail thinking we’d make it to Lone Elk Lake between 6 and 6:30 pm. Our goal for the outing was to climb 12,799 ft. high Granite Peak of the Beartooth Mountains and the high point of Montana. We would be in the wilderness for three days and two nights. Where we parked seemed to be an old abandoned sawmill, and there was a lot of scrap metal parts etc. rusting and lying around.

The walking was quick and before we knew it the trail had faded away, and we were wondering if we’d missed a turn. A quick look at the map showed that all we had to do was head due north, so we continued north ignoring the feeling that we weren’t on route. By 5pm we reached a lake at the top of a steep hill, and we wondered why it wasn’t on the map, but the map was of poor quality and it looked like there might be a blue spot under the blue trail line so we kept on walking. As we rounded the east side of the lake we encountered another hiker and he seemed to confirm that Lower Aero Lake was to the North East about an hour’s hike away. So we tried to go north east, but we couldn’t find the lake.

Finally we had to accept that we had messed up, and the prospect that Granite Peak would not be in reach this trip settled in hard on us. What a disappointment! Where had we gone wrong was the question we mulled over and over for hours as we back tracked to the Lake and then down the hill in the dark. By 10:00 pm, we found a good camp spot near Zimmer Creek and we stopped. Now with the peak out of our reach we hoped, tomorrow, to at least find Aero Lake and discover how and where we had gone wrong.

The next morning as soon as the sun came up, we woke up. By 6:30 pm we were out of the tent. The realization came that just maybe we’d have enough time today to get back on track and even make it up Granite Peak. It was a long shot, and a long ways to go, but we decided to give it a try. This morning we had luck on our side as we discovered we'd walked far enough back, the night before, that we were again at the trail. Within 30 minutes we were back down to the intersection of Zimmer creek and Broadwater River. Next it was through the trees, on the south of the river, and then across the river, and we found a trail heading downstream, and we knew we were on route. By noon we reached Rough Lake, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and we thought maybe, just maybe, we still had a chance of reaching the peak. So we continued up Sky Top creek and along the Sky Top Lakes and soon we spotted Granite Peak. One of the smaller Sky Top lakes just west of the big lower lake had a remarkable calving snowfield along its edge.

By 2:00 pm we found a camp spot, at roughly 10,400 feet and by 3:00 pm, with lighter loads, we were aiming for the peak. It didn’t take more than 30 minutes to reach the head of the large Sky Top Lake, and shortly after we encountered a man and woman heading down. We asked them about the south west couloir route, and we were snapped at by the woman who said “if you don’t know where you are going, we shouldn’t help you”. I returned her rudeness by impolitely waving her off as the man proceeded to chat with us. We hoped to reach the slab, on the face of the mountain, by 5:00 pm, but the walking was slow over miles and miles of boulders.

Peter stared to feel the altitude and by 5:00 pm he told me to just go ahead and try to reach the peak, and that he would follow along at his own pace. We arranged a meeting place as well should he opt to not continue. Feeling guilty about separating I recognized I had to go for it, setting myself a turnaround time of 7:00 pm at the latest. By 5:30 pm I had traversed the base of the slab and was looking up the south west couloir, and up I went. It was all but snow free, and my ice axe wasn’t needed. At 6:15 pm I reached a point that was stout class 4. Worried about the return down climb I searched for an easier way and after trying three different ways up I just about turned around. But then something told me to give it one more go, and up I went reaching the summit ridge by 6:25 pm and the peak by 6:30 pm.

Out came the camera, snap, snap. Next I signed the summit log, and had a bite to eat. By 6:55 pm I started down. Just off the ridge a 3 foot wide chunk of rock broke out from under me, luckily I had two good hand holds, and went zooming down as I yelled “rock, rock” over and over. I prayed Peter wasn’t below it. I made it back to my trekking pole about 50 feet up the couloir at 7:31 pm. I had left the pole there with a piece of orange webbing tied to it as a guide for Peter to spot from the mouth of the couloir.

By 7:40 pm I was out of the couloir and skirting along the slab. By 8:00 pm I spotted Peter at our arranged meeting point on the moraine at the base of the peak, and a few minutes later I joined him. It wasn’t until 10:38 pm that we finally wandered back into camp. Finding the camp in the dark, had been yet another test. We’d been hiking for 14.5 hours! Exhausted I lay on the ground and asked Peter to take my photo. After a few snacks we laid down in the tent and slept.

Next morning I was up at 6:15 am with an upset stomach, and by 8:15 am we were marching out. By 9:00 am we reached Rough Lake, and by 9:45 am Lone Elk Lake was behind us. There were a lot of mountain goats on the ridges east of Lone Elk Lake. At 11:00 am we stopped along the Sky Top creek, and soaked our sore feet as we ate some snacks. By 12:45 pm we were back at the intersection of Broadwater River and Zimmer creek, were we instantly realized how we missed the right turn the day before. Someone had blocked the right fork of the trail with some logs and so we had gone left, and crossed the creek more to the west where the trail downhill along Broadwater River could not be seen. Our lesson learned - bring a better map, and plot a few way points! At 2:15 pm we reached the truck, plenty tried and with more than one sore muscle. We still had 450 miles of driving ahead of us, and by the time we got back to Peter's place we had been gone for 66 hours, with very little rest.

The day after returning home a glance at a terrain map showed were we had wandered off to Zimmer Lake about 2 - 2.5 miles from the turn off to Aero Lake, where the trail ended. From Zimmer Lake we’d gone up to the 11,000 foot south ridge of Mt. Wilse, wandering both south and east, adding at least another 1.5 miles. Overall we walked 8 miles extra from the turn off to Aero Lake. I'd also guess that from our first night camp spot to Broadwater River (aka Star Creek) was 1 to 1.5 miles. So over all we added around 11 miles to our trip.

In summary, day one we drove 450 miles then walked from 2pm till 10 pm, covering 12 or so miles (2,400 vertical feet -from 8,800 to 11,200 ft.). Day two we walked from 8:00 am till 10:38 pm covering around 16 miles and going up at least 4000 vertical feet. I’m not sure how much we went up and down on day two but we started somewhere closed to 8,800 feet and went up to 12,799 ft. Day three we walked from 8:15 am till 2:15 am covering about 11 miles, and then drove 450 miles home.

**Wheeler Peak, NM, 13,161 ft. – April 27, 2013, HP #14: A few cars over took me as marched down the gravel, but they all ignored my thumb asking for a ride.**

Undoubtedly, by this this point in time I was making a conscientious effort to reach state high points. As such April 26, 2013 I drove unaccompanied from Orem to New Mexico’s Taos ski resort. On the way I swung by the four corners where I did my best inverted crab pose, aka a hybrid wheel pose, so I could be in four US states at once – one hand in Colorado, the other in New Mexico, with my feet in Utah and Arizona separately.

Next it was on to Farmington, NM where I purchased a few supplies for the trip and finally to Taos ski resort. Northwest of Taos, along highway 64, after passing through the Apache Nation Reservation, I encountered an Earthship home. I don’t recall if this was before or after crossing the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge the second highest bridge on the U.S. Highway System – but it was probably before.

The ski resort allows free over-night camping parking in their upper lot so I took advantage of that sleeping in the back of my SUV. The next morning I woke up at 4:00 am and by 5:00 am I was hiking the Bull of the Woods trail en route to Mt. Walter (13133 ft.), and its neighbor Wheeler Peak (13161 ft.) the two highest peaks in New Mexico. I had to do a little route finding, and I made the occasional stop, so it took 4.5 hours to cover the 3,660+ vertical feet and 8 miles to Mt. Walter. I spooked some bighorn sheep along the way.

It was pretty cool to find a summit sign on Mt. Walter, as it is not every day you get stand on a mountain that shares a name with you, shame it was not his last name. The sign read, “MT. WALTER, ELEV. 13,141 FT., NAMED FOR H. D. WALTER, WHO LOVED THESE MOUNTAINS” and it made me smile.

It was only another 20 minutes to the highest point of New Mexico, Wheeler Peak. From here the ski slopes of Taos are only a mile and a quarter away as the crow flies. This peak used to be called Taos Peak, meaning “place of red willows” but in 1950 it was changed to its current name in honor of the leader of the Wheeler Survey. There is a plaque on top, mounted above a cannon type pipe of some sorts, mentioning he lead the survey for ten years. Walter and Wheeler lie in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (Spanish for "Blood of Christ"). Perhaps alpenglow led to the name of this range which extends into Colorado.

As I headed down, I decided to make my excursion into a loop hike, turning left (west) between the two peak. With everything still covered in snow I down climbed and glissaded to Williams Lake in about 45 minutes. In another 30 minutes, heading north, I arrived at the south end of the ski resort by 11:30 am. Then I had an hour walk on the Twinning road back to my SUV in the Coyote parking lot at the north end of the resort. A few cars over took me as marched down the gravel, but they all ignored my thumb asking for a ride.

Later that evening I drove to Taos, and then through Durango, Co to near Cortez where I camped in the National Forest. Next day I arrived in Moab and road the slick rock trail on my mountain back, and drove my SUV over Baby Lions Back before returning home.

**Guadalupe Peak, TX, 8,749 ft. – June 8, 2013, HP #15: I was a little less cautious in watching out for rattlesnakes on this leg of the trip.**

Friday morning I got up at my regular time of seven. After spending nine hours at work, I drove from Springville, Utah to the SLC international airport to catch a flight to El Paso, Texas via Phoenix Arizona. I arrived in El Paso at midnight, June 8, 2013, feeling quite sleepy, and picked up a rental car.

From the airport I drove to Wal-Mart and picked up a few grocery. Following Wal-Mart I found highway 180/62 and drove east for about 110 miles to Guadalupe Mountains National Park. En route I encountered, for the first time in my life, an “lnland (aka Interior) Check Point” operated by the US Border Patrol. As I approached I assumed it was a weigh station, but as I entered I had this strange feeling that I was crossing the border. So I asked the agent as much and he told me that it was an inland check point and that the border agents have the right to set up check points anywhere within 100 miles of the border. He asked me where I was going, seemed a little surprised due to the late hour, and wondered where I would be staying. I told him I would sleep in the car. There was another officer nearby with a dog, they went behind the car and I assumed the dog was sniffing for drugs. Once the officer’s apparent curiosity was satisfied he asked me to state my country of citizenship, and pleased with my answer he sent me on my way.

By 3:00 am I arrived at the Pine Springs Campground, and spent the next hour looking around, getting food ready, and generally organizing my stuff for my pending hike to the highpoint of Texas - Guadalupe Peak at 8,749 feet tall. The hike rises just over 3,000 vertical feet in 4.25 miles. I figured I could cover that easily in three hours up and two and a half hours down, and I wanted to leave the park before 2pm so I could make it back to the airport two or more hours before my return flight. Having the time and not wanting to deal with darkness, I decided to try to catch an hour of sleep in the car. I did doze off, but as if on cue I woke up 5 am, to a hint of dawn. So I grabbed my pack, adding my headlamp to it (instead of wearing it), and was on the trail by 5:15 am. As I wandered up several switch backs the sun was soon up, and the temperature was very comfortable for a t-shirt.

To estimate distances as I walked I referred to document I had printed from the NPS website, and about 1.5 miles into the hike, I calculated that I was covering about 0.5 miles every 15 minutes. At that rate I reasoned that I would likely be on top by 7:30 am. The walking was easy, the trial was direct and by 7:10 am I reached the top of Texas, without having seen another person nor having to stop to drink any water. I snapped a few pictures of the summit monument. At this early morning hour the sky in all directions was a cloud-free brilliant blue. Next I ate my breakfast sandwich and both signed and read the summit log book, greatly appreciating the solitude. Several summit registry entries mentioned the lack of a view due to hazy conditions, definitely not the case this morning. Around 7:40 am I mistakenly thought I heard voices, so I rapidly grabbed my pack and started down.

I had lots of time, so I decided to travel cross-country over to El Capitan to the south, keenly aware of potential rattlesnakes. El Capitan, although not a true peak, sits about 664 feet below the Texas highpoint, but due to the nature of the landscape one must drop closer to 900 feet before he can begin climbing up to El Capitan. Within an hour of leaving Guadalupe I encountered a green military ammo box (exactly like the one on Guadalupe Peak) on a highpoint of El Capitan. My instinct wasn’t convinced this was the actual highpoint, but as I looked around nothing seemed noticeable higher so I accepted it as the highpoint, opened the ammo box and signed the summit log. It hadn’t been signed for a few months. The views off the cliff face to the west were breathtaking, and the view back, to the north, of the Texas highpoint made Guadalupe Peak more impressive. At this point I noticed two hikers at the monument.

I hoped I would encounter a trail on El Capitan which I could follow back to the parking lot, but since I didn’t I opted for the prudent thing to do and descend El Capitan and climb the 900 feet or so back up to the Guadalupe trail. This took me just under an hour, as I was a little less cautious in watching out for rattlesnakes on this leg of the trip. Once back on the established trail, I made good time only crossing paths with four or five groups heading up, all who were quite friendly. I glanced over at El Capitan a few times and questioned if the summit register was really on the highpoint. The temperature remained pleasant, with the occasional strong wind gust typical of the area, and by 11:15 am I was back at my rental car having reached two peaks in about as much time as I had allotted for just the one.

With nothing else around to catch my interest I decided to head back to El Paso, where I could get some lunch and hopefully catch a nap at the airport prior to my 6:30 pm departing flight. As I headed west on highway 180/62 I looked back at the peaks, and noticed that the sky was filling with dust, gone were the clear views I had enjoyed that morning.

On the outskirts of El Paso, as I approached, I stopped at different Wal-Mart then the night before. Got myself some fruit and juice and continued into El Paso. Tired and not really interested in looking around I decided to fill up the car with gas and return to the airport in search of a nap. It must have been close to 2pm when I dropped off the rental car, and I found a restroom in the airport to clean up and change out of my hiking gear. By the time I checked-in, cleared TSA, and found my gate it was after 3pm, and so I sat down hoping to sleep. It was uncomfortable to sleep sitting and so I moved to a couch near one of the TVs, and I managed to doze in and out for the next 45 minutes or so.

Eventually it was time for my flight to Phoenix and from there to Salt Lake City. I arrived close to 11pm, and was home a few minutes after 12 am. After 41.5 hours of no real sleep I was exhausted, and so happy to jump into my bed. It was an easy quick hike to the top of Texas, but a fun adventure nonetheless, and I have now reached 15 of the 50 US states highpoints.

**Denali, AK, 20,320 ft. – June 7, 2014, HP #16: I was a little less cautious in watching out for rattlesnakes on this leg of the trip.**

A full year past from the time I stood on the highest natural point in Texas, until I reached another state highpoint. The wait was worth it, as the next one was the grandest of them all.

Since at least 2009 the seeds of one day climbing Mount McKinley (as it was still officially named back then) had been growing in my mind. By 2010 having climbed both Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainer the itch had gotten pretty serious. Even so it wasn’t until 2014 when I finally got the chance to do so. Over those four years I practiced sled hauling, did a lot of winter camping, and climbed a lot of mountains including 18,490 foot Pico de Orizaba in Mexico. I also improved my rock and ice climbing skills as well as my glacier travel skills as such I was qualified when my chance arrived.

On March 16, 2014 I contacted thirteen people on Summitpost.org in search of climbing partners for Denali. That resulted in getting in touch with Calvin of Colorado who invited me to join his “Kicking Buttress” team becoming its final member. None of the four of us knew each other but we all had good climbing resumes making the gamble worth it. We would all meet in Anchorage in 65 days.

Climbing permits needed to be purchase, for $360, no less than 60 days prior to the climb start date, so I immediately took care of that and next arranged a flight to Anchorage.

Less than two weeks later disaster stuck when I woke up from a nap to learn my house was on fire! I warned my wife, and then immediately set out saving my climbing gear before the police escorted me out of the smoke filled building. Initially I feared that now I would have to cancel the Denali trip. Fortunately, I was able to make arrangements and my climb plans carried on.

Time passed quickly and soon I found myself in Anchorage arriving at close to midnight to a well lite night sky. At the Hampton Inn I woke up Art meeting him for the first time. Shortly after I meet Calvin and Donald as they arrived. The next morning we made our way to REI, Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking, and Wal-Mart to pick up our remaining food and gear items. As the evening approached I was filled with anticipation thinking about what we four strangers were about to take on together.

The next morning the Talkeetna Taxi shuttle service picked us up at 6:30 a.m. taking us 114 miles north to Talkeetna. Arriving at 9:15 am we had plenty of time to first drop off the Russian climbing team, at Talkeetna Air Taxi, who were sharing our shuttle prior to our 9:45 a.m. orientation meeting at the Walter Harper Ranger Station. Denali’s Harper glacier and the Talkeetna Ranger Station are both named after Walter Harper an Alaskan native and the first recorded person to stand on Denali’s tallest peak. Harper was 20 years old at the time, and the date was June 7, 1913.

Following the orientation we walked down Talkeetna Main Street carrying our issued Clean Mountain Cans (CMCs) making our way to K2 Aviation, where we had already unload our gear. As my teammates went into the office to obtain our flight schedule, I entered the hangar to change into my climbing clothes and to prepare my gear for flight. Prior to boarding the Cessna that would fly us to base camp each of us with his gear was weighed ensuring none exceeded 300 pounds. By 1:10 p.m. we were in the air looking fresh and full of excitement.

Soon we left all signs of green landscape behind, as we enter a world of jagged mountains and wide, glacier-filled valleys. The 55 mile scenic flight to the Kahiltna Glacier landing strip at a 7200 feet elevation took 30 minutes. By 2:00 p.m. our gear was unloaded and we had checked in with the base camp manager. The weather was clam, so after we dug the required food and fuel cache we set off for Camp I. Having to move four weeks’ worth of food, fuel, and gear requires each team member to carry 50-60 pound packs, while pulling 60 pound sleds.

Traveling over glaciers requires tying the team and sleds to a rope which if keep tight limits the danger of falling into hidden crevasses. Our rope order was Calvin in the front, followed by me, then Art, and then Donald. Being in the back is the toughest position as leaving Base Camp entails descending 400 feet down Heart Break Hill. Pulling a sled downhill without rigid polls, when there is no one behind you to control it, is an inconvenience. Also if the last person falls into a crevasse he risks being hit by his sled as again there is no one behind him to stop it from following him into the crack.

It took us 4 hours to cover the approximately five and a half miles to Camp I. The camp was in the shade of the surrounding mountains when we arrived and so we immediately bundled up to avoid catching a chill. 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. The idea with the tents was that we could all take turns in the small one thus providing us with some alone time. By the time we set up camp, and melted water, and prepared dinner it was 11:00 p.m.

Tuesday, May 27 we woke to snow falling. Also it was cold enough and windy enough that the tent poles were covered in rime ice indicating the wind was from the south. Before leaving Talkeetna we had been warned of an approaching storm, knowing that it might last multiple days we decided to move up to the second camp in case conditions further deteriorated.

The 2.5 miles from Camp I to Camp II involves going up Ski Hill to just below Kahiltna Pass to an elevation of 9700 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. In low visibility due to the snow falling, we broke camp at 3:25 p.m. and labored up to Camp II in 4.5 hours. It’s astonishing how much time it takes to go such a short distance when loaded down with heavy packs and sleds.

At Camp II it was cold enough that I put on my summit parka even as we shoveled snow and erected walls for our campsite which took an hour and a half to complete. It was midnight before we ate and after one a.m. when we went to bed. Bear in mind that at this time of year darkness never reaches the mountain – 23 hours of sunlight are granted and just one hour of twilight. I didn’t even bring a headlamp onto the mountain.

Along with us camped at Camp II were members of the British military known as the 1 Rifles Alaskan Bulge team, a group of Black Diamond employees, a troop from Columbians, and a two Russian teams.

Over the next three days the storm did not let up, and even though some climbers moved up to the next camp, we stayed put. Overnight the tents would become buried in snow up to nearly the top. As we waited on the storm we had plenty of work to do digging out the camp, melting water, and cooking. Free time was spent playing cards, or resting. In spite of being pinned down I wrote in my journal “I love this experience”.

Our sixth day on the mountain, and our fourth day in Camp II, I was the first one out of the tent and the weather broke momentarily causing me to notify the others and prompting us to start packing. I was eager to start up even when the snow shower resumed but the others wanted to wait to see what the Brits did as they had sent out a reconnaissance team to scout out the path and conditions. When the Brits returns saying the trail was heavily wanded our full team agreed to move up to the next camp.

Camp III is located at the base of Motorcycle Hill 1.5 miles away. The elevation gain from Camp II to Camp III is 1300 feet. We traveled in a storm again. As we went up we passed groups coming down the mountain many who had been stuck at the 14,200 foot camp for as much as 10 days, without a chance to attempt the summit. I notified one of the descenders that his nose was white indicating the possibility of frostbite.

We arrive at the 11,000 foot camp at 7:30 pm. For much of the ascent I was down to a polyester shirt over a wool shirt, but once we stopped at Camp III it became very cold and being sweaty we felt it even more. We were not luckily enough to find a vacated camp spot as there were many teams staying at Camp III. As such we had to get to work preparing a spot by digging and sawing snow to erect wind block walls, and to level out spots for the tents. It was after midnight before we crawled into our sleeping bags.

The next day I woke with a stomachache and was out of the tent by 7:00 a.m. No one in the camp appeared to be up yet. By 7:30 a.m. Calvin joined me, and him and I improved the camp walls and added a large kitchen area. It was windy and cold till about 10:00 a.m. when the sun came over the ridges and soon folks were heading up Motorcycle Hill. By 1:30 p.m. we too were hauling a cache up the hill. Thankfully, we encountered no wind at Windy Corner. We were carrying small enough loads that we didn’t use the sleds this day. After covering 1.75 miles and arriving at 13,500 ft. we dug a hole in the snow and buried a cache of food and fuel. Food caches necessitate being buried in the snow to prevent crows??? from getting into them. Also they have to be marked with wands so they can be found after a snow storm. Mountain regulations required the markers be labeled with stickers issued to each team during orientation, that way if caches are not recovered the violators can be fined.

Our eight day on the mountain turned out to be mostly clear, and we took advantage of that by moving up to the Basin Camp (aka Camp IV) located at 14,200 feet, passing by and leaving our cache on the way. I was in favor of leaving two of our four sleds behind at our Camp III cache and sharing the remaining two sleds but we ended up taking just one. As such we had full back packs. Calvin was a real champion this day as he single handedly pull the overloaded sled all the way to the Basin Camp.

Wandering into Camp IV we found all the established spots to be full {estimate number of people here} so once again we had to dig snow and build walls. Temperatures were around 0F (-18 C) at that time of day, 9:30pm, and I donned my summit parka over my other X layers. We didn’t eat until 11:30 p.m. and we went to bed about 12:30 a.m.

It was a cold night, but again my -40 bag was plenty warm. The day warmed up significantly once the shadow of the mountain receded at about 10:00 a.m. I scored food from a departing group and then proceeded to trade some of it to the Brits for some fuel. Armed with the food and fuel we didn’t have any need to go down to 13,500 feet to retrieve our cache, meaning we could use the day as a rest day. I had a headache from both the altitude and a poor night’s sleep as well as from not eating enough so I welcomed a day off. Due to the heat reflecting off the snow it ended up getting “super-hot” during the day even though the ambient temperature was -5 Celsius.

We learned that no one on had gotten onto the Kahiltna Glacier after May 26 for about 5 days, as such it was very lucky that we had arranged to get out May 26 rather than our planned May 27 date. Sure we had been pinned down at 9700 feet for several days but at least we were on the mountain and acclimating rather than being stuck at nearly sea level in Talkeetna.

June 4 after a late breakfast the four of us roped up and walked down to get the cache at 13500 feet. When we got back to camp Calvin, Donald and I practiced fixed line travel, boot ice axe belay, and ice axe carabineer belay techniques in preparation for the high aspects of the mountain to come. Art had decided the 14200 foot camp was the end of the line for him.

It was another clear, sunny day identical to the pervious one and we speculated that a lot of folks were finally reaching the summit. Later it was rumored that as many as 100 people summited this day. Until now the summit percentage for the season was 20% or lower with only 15 people having reached the summit the day we had our orientation. We too decided to take advantage of the weather and moved a cache up the headwall to the col at 16,200 feet. The steepness of the headwall necessitates ascending fixed lines on an ascender. It was fun to go up the lines, however going down the fixed lines was no fun at all. Trying to use an ascender on descent is not advisable; I tried it but soon abandoned it and switched to the arm wrap technique which marked up my coat sleeve and burned the palm of my mitten.

That night we ate spaghetti. Our meals were arranged on a three day repeating schedule, which was helpful for buying the food but which we didn't necessarily stick to on the mountain. Our three breakfast choices were freeze dried bacon and eggs with freeze dried yogurt and dehydrated apples, or instant oatmeal with freeze dried pineapple, or granola. Herbal tea, and/or hot chocolate was also part of breakfasts. For lunches we had bagels, wraps, salami and cheese, or snack food such as trial mix or potato chips. Our dinner menus were either pre-packaged freeze dried meals, or Rice-a-Roni, or angel hair spaghetti with pesto and parmesan cheese. Granola bars, chocolate, hard candy, and similar snacks were also part of our diet. We also had a few limited variety items like couscous, Ramon, beef jerky, freeze dried desserts, and fig newtons. Our diet was satisfactory, but supplementing and varying it with items obtained from other teams was appreciated.

June 5 was a rest day as the following day we planned to move to the high camp at 17,200. It had been a rough night for me as there was a lot of snoring going on. I was thankful when in the afternoon Donald told me he’d like to get out of the single tent so I offered to trade spots with him. With only one person’s body heat it is much colder in the single tent then in the group tent and he’d found it not to his liking.

The next day we didn’t leave for high camp until 12:45 p.m. At this point the snowshoes we had worn up to the Basin Camp were left behind, and we attached crampons to our boots. The previous trip up the headwall had taken us 2.5 hours but this time it took us 3 hours and 15 minutes – there were more people using the lines which slowed us down as did our heavier packs.

After digging up the cache we decided to just take enough food for that night, and for the next day, and for the following day’s breakfast, even though in the cache we had four days’ worth of food for three people. As such we were really banking on making the summit on June 7 and being able to get back to either the 16K cache or the 14K camp June 8.

From the cache it took 3 hours to cover the 1000 feet up the 16 K ridge, over Washburn’s Thumb, and into Camp V at 17200 feet, arriving at 7:30 p.m. I had read that climbers should plan on covering only 300 vertical feet per hour at the higher elevations and that was about our speed.

It was cold but calm and sunny and it seemed like the shadow that covers 14K camp at 7:30 p.m. would not reach Camp V for a while, so we wandered over to the top of the rescue gully and took a few pictures of the 16 K ridge, as well as Basin Camp below with Mt. Foraker behind it.

Unlike the 11,000 ft. and 14,200 ft. camps the high camp contained very few other teams. By 9:30 p.m. we had camp set up, it went quite quickly as we were able to modify an existing spot. During the night Donald woke up and complained about having trouble breathing. I explained to him that that was to be expected as at our elevation there is only 50 percent the amount of oxygen as there is a sea level – the air was thin! At that elevation it one must inhale twice to obtain the same amount of oxygen of one breath taken at the sea.

Why is it called the West Buttress Route?

Saturday June 7, we were up at 8 a.m. yet it took until 11:45 a.m. before we set off for the summit, mostly because it takes a long time to melt snow to have enough water for three men for a full day. We tried to pack reasonable light and still be prepared for emergencies. Between us we carried a sleeping bag, an insulted matt, a stove, 3 pickets, an extra pair of crampons, a snow saw, and a shovel. Additionally we each carried extra clothing, a camera, food, and water. At these high elevations we donned our insulated pants, shell pants, over boots, and multiple layers on the top half of our bodies. My upper body clothing was a toque on my head, a neoprene mask for my face, two wool shirts, a fleece jacket, a down jacket, a water proof wind proof layer (Gortex), goggles, and double layer mittens. In my pack I also carried my large down parka, -40 degree mittens, and a neck gaiter things anticipated needing on the summit.

From high camp the route heads northeast (mostly east) along the steep “Autobahn” toward 18,200 foot Denali Pass. This section does not get sun until the afternoon and so it is extremely cold, as such most avoid early starts out of Camp V, however our start was unusually late.

Add something about the 1967 tragidey at Denali Pass

The Autobahn has a steep dangerous fall line to climbers left and has been the site of many Denali accidents so as we went up we took advantage of pickets in place and clipped our rope to them.

Perhaps three quarters of the way up Denali Pass Kilian Jornet booted past and I watched him as he got near the top of the pass, took off his crampons and put on his skis, and then disappeared. That day he set a new speed record reaching the peak in 9 hours 45 minutes from Base Camp and descending in 2 hours and 3 minutes. Add a note about how speed climb live on the mountain and scout it out before setting the record

It was stimulating to reach the top of Denali Pass where we turned south toward Arch Deacons tower. After Kilian passed us on his way down, we had the false impression that we were nearly at the top of North America. But alas we were wrong, and we still had a long way to go across the football field, up Pig Hill, and across the summit ridge. On Pig Hill we met the guide camped next to us at 17200 ft. who was short-roping down one of his Japanese clients. Another guide was bringing down what I assumed where Russian clients.

Gaining the summit ridge we trudged along on the left side, in strong winds, aware that the right side drops over 8000 feet down to the east fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. No one else was around when at 9 p.m. (9 hours and 15 minutes after leaving Camp V) we reached the top of North American at 20,320 feet. Coincidentally, we reached the south peak summit on a Saturday, the same day of the week as the first expedition did, and exactly 101 years, to the date, after the first.

All I could think about was getting down, as the weather was bad, and likely to get worse. The amazing views were hidden from us obstructed by clouds and blowing snow. I snapped a picture of the summit marker, and one of Calvin at the marker, then had him take a photo of me, followed by a selfie. I also got a photo of Donald approaching the summit, as he was the third one on the rope, and a picture of Calvin’s watch to document the time. We couldn’t 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 didn’t even take the time to don our extra summit layers as we started down without resting leaving no time for our body temperatures to drop.

The winds were gusting extremely strong as we descended, blowing up a lot of snow and reducing visibility to 20 feet or less; likely it was probably also snowing. On the way down my face mask froze up and I had to switch to my neck gaiter. To avoid frostbite I’d often place my gloved hand on my nose and cheeks.

I hoped that once we turned to go west down the Autobahn that we’d get out of the wind but in fact it just got worse. I felt like we could really be in trouble and wondered if we were going to make it down without an accident. Fortunately the other teams we had seen coming down were in front of us and now and then we could still find their tracks and very rarely we could see them.

Much to my relief eventually we caught up another group and at 1 a.m. we rolled back into High Camp dehydrated, hunger, and too tired to solve either. I had some ice in one of my bottles so I put the bottle in my sleeping bag to melt overnight, popped a hard candy into my mouth, and lay down to sleep thankful to be back at camp and delighted we had made the summit.

**Our left off here**

June 8 (Sunday), Day 14: The cold and wind gusts of the evening before continued today. We ate Mountain House dinners for a late breakfast and broke camp at 2:30 p.m. We got down the 16K ridge in 1.5 hours and retrieved our cache. The fixed lines were even tougher this time, due to our loaded back packs, and it took an hour to descend them. I ended up trying the ascender again, as I was wearing finger gloves, but changed to just a safety on the line and walking down face into the mountain just as I would if not on a fixed line; this worked much better than the other methods I had tried. It took two hours to get back to Basin Camp from the 16,200 foot col.

Once we got off the fixed lines the clouds burned off and the sun came out making it feel hot and I worried about getting a sun burn. Arriving to the relative comfort of 14,200 ft., and our established camp felt really nice, and there it was lightly snowing. It was good to see Art and to report our success, and he was happy to see us too. We were all tired so we had Art melted snow for us for water to drink.

June 9 (Monday), Day 15: To lighten the load for our pending descent we gave away a lot of our extra food, and it turned out most of it went to Mike and his party. In the early afternoon as Art and I were roping up to go over to the Edge of the World Mike stopped by to congratulate me. I wished him luck on his summit attempt as well. By 2:00 p.m. the day was turning from warm to stormy and after we got back from a viewless Edge of the World we packed up hoping to get out before the storm arrived. This was supposed to be a rest day but that had now changed. We made it down to the 13500 foot cache area when the weather really started to deteriorate, and we passed a tired looking group who were going up. Their guide informed us that there were a lot of snow pillows after Windy Corner which would mean trail-breaking for us and that turned out to be very true.

From Windy Corner down to the Camp III at 11,000 feet the winds were very strong, and it was snowing steadily. I was the third guy on our rope, behind Donald and Art respectively, and many times I could not see Donald. Luckily there were wands in place and we were able to find our way down using them. I had the side zippers of my pants unzipped to the knees for ventilation and without stopping and using both hands it’s not possible to zip them up all the way so I was getting a lot of cold air circulating around my behind – I remember thinking to myself “you are literally freezing your ass off”.

Right around Squirrel Point one of my crampons came loose and fell off. To get it back on was a big ordeal as it required removing my pack, securing that to avoid losing it, then cleaning snow off the boot, removing my gloves and reattaching crampon. The adjustment on the crampon was frozen and so I was unable to tighten it, but luckily it stayed on for the rest of the descent to Camp III.

Before arriving at Motorcycle Hill I was worried that it would be loaded with snow and as such a major avalanche concern (it has slidden in the past and caught and killed climbers in 2011), but luckily the hill was on the windward side and the new snow was blown off it. It took us 3 hours to travel from Camp IV to Camp III a distance of 2.75 miles. Once again Calvin singlehandedly managed our only sled.

With the storm it was obvious that we were going to stay at Camp III. As might be expected the camp spot we had built eight days earlier was of course taken, but we found an open one, with existing walls, on the north end of camp. It’s a tad risky camping at the north end of Camp III as the headwall above it (which is located to climbers left of Motorcycle Hill) has been known to avalanche and our camp spot was not below any protective rock bands. However it was the only prebuilt spot free and we were too tired to set up another camp spot. I took the single tent and wrote in my journal at 11:30 p.m. as the others played cards next door.

June 10 (Tuesday), Day 16: I slept late until 10:00 a.m. at which time I looked out to find it was still snowing and very windy. Lots of moisture had built up over night in the tent as it is a single wall, so my down bag was quite moist but still insulating fine. My stomach was again bothering me, but along with the rest of our team I ate oatmeal at noon.

In the afternoon some Russians came down from Camp IV and asked if they could rest in our kitchen. They told us they had come down to get their food cache as they had run out of food at the higher camp. We still had a lot of extra food so we let them take what they wanted of ours. Before the Russians came down a Japanese group made it down from 14K and while on Motorcycle Hill they made a false “Avalanche” claim alarming those of as at Camp III who heard the bogus declaration. In the early evening the Russian returned, as we played cards in the big tent, and asked if we had any extra sleeping bags and/or pads (of course we didn’t). Turns out the Russian couldn’t make it back to 14K due to the storm and so they were stuck at 11K – I’m not sure how that turned out for them.

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. I was hoping the weather would break and we’d get the chance to continue down but neither happened. We spent the day shoveling, napping, and playing cards. For dinner Art and I cooked couscous with a tomato sauce.

June 11 (Wednesday), Day 17: Today was clear and many groups were heading down including many coming down from higher camps. I packed up expecting we’d all want to do take advantage of the weather and head down too, and Calvin came over and informed me that we were going to stay in camp all day and leave at 1 a.m. The idea was to avoid having to set up camp again at Base Camp should we not be able to make it down in time enough to get a flight out. A reasonable idea but I felt it was shrewder to travel while we knew the weather was good and also during the day when the temperature is warmer. Nonetheless we used the day as a rest day, and as we rested I heard planes flying all day, undoubtedly dropping off and picking up climbers from Base Camp, even as late as 10 p.m.

I spent the day mostly napping and reading. We had extra food still, and I was hunger, so I cooked up some group meals and we ate a lot. Additionally I watched climbers going up and down Motorcycle Hill, and for a while there were even some skiers doing laps on the terrain to the right (east) of the Hill. The skiers worried me at first as the terrain looked very loaded with fresh snow and I didn’t want to see it slide, but they had fun and no incidents occurred. At one point a snowboarder came through camp. By 10:30 p.m. when Art and I were preparing a late dinner the camp had mostly cleared out, and the temperature had really gone down. During the day I’d seen many groups I recognized from the 14K and higher camps pass through.

June 12 (Thursday), Day 18: We didn’t make it out of camp until 1:45 a.m. in very crisp cold weather. Luckily the wind was absent. 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 wore and all my coats (fleece, GoLite down, shell, and FF parka).

As it turned out the 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. On the downhill the last on the rope doesn’t pull a sled as without rigid poles there isn’t any efficient way to prevent a sled from running into him. It might seem like being behind two sleds, on the downhill, would be a lot of work to hold them back but since the gradient of the terrain we were on wasn’t extremely steep, and with new snow on the path to slow the sleds down, the sleds only required occasional attention from there follower. Conversely being in front of the two sleds was probably the toughest position as it required some extra pulling effort when sections of the terrain were either flat or from time to time uphill (especially going up Heart Break Hill).

The journey down started out a bit sloppy as members of the rope team were losing snowshoes and sleds were tipping over. Donald realized the seriousness of the situation when he mentioned that if he had to keep stopping that he risked getting frostbite. And so, not long after we left Camp III, he and I repacked his sled, as it was apparent that it was going to continue to roll over, taking Arts sled with it, if something didn’t change. Once we got the sled repacked the voyage down changed to incredibly enjoyable, but before that I was glad no other groups were out to see our temporary disarray. With steady uninterrupted travel we soon warmed up and I was able to remove my parka and shell leaving me with just the fleece and Golite jacket and I was comfortable even though the packs and sleds were covered in frost. Occasionally Donald, who was wearing his overboots, would lose a snowshoe, but for the most part the remainder of the trip down was smooth.

The section between 11K and 9.7K camps is known as “Land of the Ghost Wands”, and even though a lot of the wands were covered up due to all the fresh snow there were at times multiple paths through this section – when we’d get to a situation like this, I’d ask for unanimous group agreement on which way to go before we’d proceed. Typically the branching paths would later reunite.

It felt great to be the only ones out, as though we were the only ones on the mountain. We walked toward a full moon, and of course it stayed light all night as it does up there. At one point the full moon was out, and there was also alpenglow on the mountains; I wondered if that can happen at lower altitudes where the sun actually sets. It was so still and quiet, with no one else around and no shuttle planes flying, so peaceful. So even though I was initially against traveling at night, it ended up being an amazing experience.

I had estimated the time to travel the 9.5 miles from Camp III back to Base Camp to require 6 hours. As it turned out we arrived in Base Camp at 8:00 a.m. Going up the 400 vertical feet of Heart Break Hill had taken an hour putting us just 15 minutes over the six hour estimate. On the way down we didn’t cross any open crevasses; with all the new snow they were all covered.

Upon arrival at Base Camp we pulled the sleds up near the door of the Base Camp managers hut, she (Lisa) opened her door and asked our group name and what airline we were with, and a few minutes later she announced K2 would be by to pick us up at 9:30 a.m. Our timing had worked out perfect but nonetheless I was exhausted from the lack of sleep.

Once I got my snowshoes and harness off and my sled unpacked I grabbed my shovel and went to work digging up our cache. The cache was deep plus there was a lot more snow over it then when we buried it so it was a lot of work. With all the caches in one spot and marked I thought it seemed a lot like a graveyard. I had dug down to the cache when Art and Calvin arrived to help and they finished off the removal.

It wasn’t until 10:15 a.m. that the first K2 plane arrived. The park rangers were also waiting for K2 so we didn’t know if they’d go first or not, but we ended up on the first K2 plane along with two Canadian fellows named Liam and Brian. As it turned out Brian was the snowboarder who came through Camp III the afternoon before. Also I realized we had seen Brian and Liam attempting to skin up the rescue gully the day we were going for the high camp. It’s kind of a small world on Mount McKinley.

On the 30 minute return flight I was so tired that I dozed off. Back in Talkeetna we checked in at the ranger station and reported our success, returned the CMCs, and ate a burger at the Twister Creek – I was too tired to remember the order of those events. In the afternoon K2 shuttled us to their bunkhouse and Calvin, Art, and I set up clothes lines and hung out our gear to dry. After showering we headed back into town for pizza at Mountain High. Donald ended up ordering the biggest calzone I have ever seen, and he finished 90% of it, while Art, Calvin and I shared two large pizzas.

While at Mountain High a couple from Illinois came in and when they learned we’d climbed the “High One” they chatted with us for a while. After such a long day I was literally too tired to sleep and the others must have been the same as we stayed up at the K2 bunkhouse and taught Liam and Brian, who were also staying there, how to play 31. We played just for fun, and I ended up winning. Around midnight I went to bed.

June 13 (Friday), Day 19: I was in a bunk room with Art, Liam and Brian, and they got up about 9:00 a.m., but I stayed in bed till 11:00 a.m. Soon after I got up Donald, Calvin and I strolled over to the Roadhouse to meet the other three for breakfast. I called my wife on Arts phone to let her know we had made it up the mountain and were back down safely and in Talkeetna, she seemed surprised. An older couple from Ontario was seated at the same table as us and they were very interested in our Denali experience. Calvin put one of his “Kicking Buttress” stickers on a pillar which we then posed in front of for a photo. After breakfast others, from another table, who had overheard our story, ask if they could take our picture.

Following the Roadhouse we went over to the Ranger Station to watch the 17 minute film about climbing Denali called “Climbing Mt. McKinley”. After Calvin looked at a pick-up for sale, hoping to rent it, while Donald went looking for souvenirs and Art and I wandered over to the library to use the Internet to check on changing our flights home. I was disappointed to learn how expensive it would be to change my flight. That evening we went to the West Rib for burgers, and Donald treated us. After dinner he had to hurry off as he had been lucky enough to arrange a cheap flight back to Denver for that night.

June 14 (Saturday), Day 20: In the morning I returned to the Talkeetna library to again check on flight prices but they had only increased even more so I decided I’d stay in Alaska sticking with my original flight which would leave early on June 22. Art was able to change his flight, and he caught a shuttle to the airport at 2:30 p.m. on the same shuttle, I believe, as Liam and Brian.

In the early afternoon I ran into the owner of AMS (Colby Coombs) and asked him if his business rented tents, he said no but that he had one he’d sell me. I told him I’d drop by AMS later if I decided to get it.

Later in the afternoon, after Art had left four climbers arrived at the K2 bunkhouse fresh off the Kahiltna Glacier. Two of them were the couple from California, Eric and Galina; the other two where two more Canadians, actually the other half of the Brian and Liam group, namely Ally and Andrew. Calvin and I hung out and chatted with the four of them and exchanged Denali stories. It was pretty funny at one point when Galina was teasing others about their goggle tans, and everyone just looked at her and then someone told her that she had the worst one – seems she hadn’t looked in the mirror yet. I reminded Andrew that he had given me some gummy bears on the headwall just below the fixed lines on June 6. Later Ally, Andrew, Calvin and I went out for Thai food. Following dinner Ally, Andrew, and Calvin went to Twister Creek Restaurant and I went over to AMS and bought the tent. Then I took the tent to the K2 bunkhouse and cleaned it up and got ready to head to Denali National Park and Preserve the next day.

June 15 - 19, Days 21 -25: Traveled to Denali National Park and Preserve. Spent the first full day in the lower part of the park at the visitor centers, etc. Next day I rode the camper bus to Wonder Lake, and I finally got to see Mt. McKinley. After camping at Wonder Lake I returned to the Riley Creek Campground, and the next day took the Alaska Railroad back to Talkeetna.

June 20, Day 26: Traveled to Anchorage from Talkeetna and got a bed at the "Basecamp" hostel (formerly known as "The 26th Street Hostel").

June 21, Day 27: Toured around Anchorage. Met a Romanian climber at "Basecamp" who got some serious frostbite on Denali. In the evening I took a cab to the airport.

June 22, Day 28: Overnight I fly home to Utah.

July 3 (Thursday), 12 days after leaving Alaska: Today I stumbled across my summitpost.org “plans and partners” post from January 28, 2013, where I was advertising my desire to get a team together to do the West Buttress in June 2014. Click here to read it. SummitPost.org’s system doesn’t email you when someone responds, and so I only found out today that Calvin (aka Charmann) had replied on Dec 13, 2013 9:42 pm saying, “Still looking? I'm interested in getting in on a group or putting one together. I thought I had a team but they seem to be flaking and I need people who will commit or need someone committed for late May/early June. I'm looking to do the west buttress.... Please let me know if you're interested!!”.

Summary

I've been asked, since I got home, if I had fun climbing Denali. Sure, there were lots of moments of fun during the experience, but I don't think it is correct to say that mountain climbing is fun. With that said, I don't mean to imply that mountaineering isn't enjoyable. Of course I enjoy it, in fact I'd go so far as to say it's what I like the most in life, but nevertheless so much of the sport of alpinism is hardship and suffering. That seemingly inverse relationship between enjoyment and hardship seems to be a large part of what draws mountaineers back into the mountains time and time again. There is pleasure in working hard, and mountain climbing is mostly hard work which I hesitate to call fun least I cheapen it.

There were several times during the climb when we talked about how nice it would be to be done, or how we hoped to summit on this trip so we wouldn't have to come back. Yet we consciously knew, and even said, that once the experience was done, and we'd had a bit of time to recuperate, that we'd be up for it again (whether it be climbing Denali again or any other mountain). I think this might have been what Jim Whittaker meant when he said about mountaineering that it "is like hitting oneself in the head with a hammer - it only feels good when you stop." Similarly Wojtek Kurtyka said, "Alpinism is the art of suffering", and Chip Brown said, "Anyone who climbs [mountaineering] understands the relation of pleasure to risk and the great joy of escaping hardships you have brought upon yourself." Also in "Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills" it states, "mountaineering is more than climbing, panoramic views, and wilderness experience. It is also challenge, risk, and hardship. And it is not for everyone. Those drawn to the mountains can find them exhilarating and irresistible, as well as frustrating and sometimes even deadly. There are qualities to mountaineering that bring inspiration and joy in a pursuit that is more than a pastime, more than a sport a passion, certainly, and sometimes a compulsion."

It's a tough sport, and it certainly isn't for everyone, but it's rewards are amazing, and looking back it seems we got to experience a lot of what Denali has to throw at climbers. We had sunny days, multi-day storms, white-outs, alpenglow, views, wind, clouds and everything that goes alone with these things. Every section of the climb had its own charms and challenges. For instance trekking up the Kahiltna Glacier had us crossing open crevasses and offered broad views which were miles long. Getting pinned down at Camp II by one long continuous storm taught us patience and resilience. We learned how to fortify our camps with snow walls, and how to efficiently stay warm and cook in Artic weather. We got to climb blue ice on the headwall while ascending fixed lines. From High Camp we were rewarded with amazing views of the Basin Camp, the Edge of the World, and Mt. Hunter and Mt. Foraker. Each time we’d reach a higher camp I would say “if this is as far as I make it, this expedition has been worth it”.

We got to meet some wonderful people from the Rangers at the Walter Harper Ranger station, to K2 Aviation employees, and fellow climbers from all over the world. But no one was as noteworthy as my three teammates. Calvin was an excellent organizer, and always willing to go the extra mile especially with load hauling and camp chores. Art was pleasant to be around, always willing to offer a helping hand and to learn from his teammates. Donald was quick with a joke, efficient in his methods, knowledgeable of the landscape pointing out the various mountains and routes by name, and a generous teammate.

It’s pretty amazing that four guys, with four different backgrounds who didn’t know each other were able to take on and succeed at an endeavor the grandeur of climbing North America’s highest mountain. We did the climb in excellent time, self-guided, accident-free, and in one of the lowest summiting percentage years on record, plus we got three of our four team members to the summit. I’d like to say “well done” and “thank you” to three of the finest people I now have the privilege of knowing.

I'd also like to ask to my teammates, "what's next?" Like Howard Snyder says in his book "The Hall of the Mountain King", "it is the nature of enthusiastic mountaineers, after they have completed one successful and long-awaited climb, to start planning immediately for the next".

Mountain Itinerary

Day 1 Landed on the glacier at 1:45 p.m. and traveled to Camp I.

Day 2 May 27, moved to Camp II.

Days 3, 4, 5 pinned down at Camp II.

Day 6 Moved, in the storm, to Camp III.

Day 7 Hauled cache to 13500 ft. and returned to a storm.

Day 8 Moved to Basin Camp.

Day 9 Rest day. Day 9 & 10 calmest, clearest of the expedition.

Day 10 Picked up cache from 13500 ft. and established cache at 16200 ft.

Day 11 Rest day.

Day 12 Moved to High Camp.

Day 13 Summited.

Day 14 Returned to Basin Camp.

Day 15 Descended to Camp III.

Day 16 Pinned down a Camp III.

Day 17 June 11, rest day.

Day 18 Returned to Base Camp and flew off the glacier at 10:25 a.m.

Some Things I Learned

• Bring extra water from Talkeetna to drink at Base Camp removing the need to melt water and conversing expedition water for Camp I. • Bring rigid poles for the last sled on the rope. The terrain is steep enough, and up and down enough, to warrant them. Only the end sled needs them, the other sleds are easily controlled by the climber behind them.• Bring a high density foam seat, it’s worth its negligible weight.• Bring extra zip-lock plastic bags, as well as extra white and black garbage bags. • Bring a pen. I used a pencil for my journal writing as I was told pens freeze and don’t work, but if you warm the pen by keeping it close to your body it will work.• Bring mint tea for your thermos as it can be used as an alternative to brushing ones teeth, which can be an inconvenience in extreme weather. Once I discovered this I never went to bed without a thermos of mint team beside me for the morning.• Toothpaste, Colgate at least, does not freeze.• -40 Western Mountaineering sleeping bag is too warm for Denali. I’d suggest their -25 C bag.• Two sets of ear plugs is plenty.• Skin on fingers tends to dry and crack in the cold. Bring crazy glue to repair the cracked fingers, as the cracks are painful.• Adding a crushed package of Ramen Noodles to four packs of Rice-A-Roni significantly enlarges the meal portions.• Group practice with sled hauling is a good idea. Sleds are a very good way to haul gear and lighten loads in back packs but only if all team members know how to pack and pull them effectively.• Two sets of sunglasses are useful. I rigged one with a nose guard and left the other set without, and switched between them depending on the conditions thus removing the need to remove the nose guard. Also having two sets gives you a back-up set in the event one is lost or broken.• Ice screws are not needed for the West Buttress route.• It doesn’t get dark on Denali, but a headlamp for reading during twilight inside the tent can still be useful.• Digging out the snow inside the vestibule makes the vestibule more useful. Some folks dig the snow down six feet or more! • It’s a good idea, if you like to keep records, to bring a reliable thermometer and take a couple of temperature reading throughout the day and record them in a journal. We neglected to do this, and I now wonder what the temps were especially at the High Camp and on the summit.• Hillegerg – Keron tents, or something similar (such as the Kaitum 2 model), seem to be the best tent for Denali, and by digging out the vestibule eliminates the need for a cook tent.• Getting to 14K camp is the key to climbing the West Buttress. This camp offers good protection from the weather and one can camp there quite comfortably waiting for the best weather before moving higher.• Ascenders are not useful for descents, and using them is dangerous in my opinion. I preferred descending facing into the headwall while using just a sling girth-hitched to my harness and attached with a carabineer to the fixed line. • I didn't get a chance to try this, but the perfect way to place wands exactly evenly spaced is to set one, notify the last person on the rope, and then we he reaches the wand he yells out for the next one to be placed. Repeat this process and the result is evenly spaced wands.