**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:** 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.

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. At one point Donald was having some trouble with his goggles so he removed them, and rhime ice immediately began to grow from his eye lashes.

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, 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.

The cold and wind gusts of the evening before continued today, our fourteenth day on the mountain. All the same our objective was to get back down to the more protected Basin Camp at 14,200 feet where the fourth member of our team awaited us. However it wasn’t until 2:30 pm when we broke camp and 1.5 hours later we retrieved our cache at the top of the headwall. Due to our loaded back packs, the fixed lines were more difficult and time consuming to descend taking us two hours to get back to Basin Camp from the 16,200 foot col. Arriving, with light snow falling, to the relative comfort of our established camp at 14,200 feet felt really nice. It was good to see Art and he was pleased to learn of our success. Our tiredness soon overtook us as Art melted us some snow for drinking water. Donald feel asleep with his sunglasses on.

Monday, June 9 our plan was to take a rest day by 2:00 p.m. the day was turning from warm to stormy so we decided to pack up hoping to get down to the 11K camp before the full force of the storm arrived. Arriving at our 13500 foot cache area the weather really started to deteriorate, and a guided group ascending informed us that there were a lot of snow pillows after Windy Corner which turned into trail-breaking for us. As we continued down it began to snow 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 relied on them to find our way down. 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 so I was getting a lot of cold air circulating around my backside, as such I thought to myself “you are literally freezing your butt 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 the 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.

As might be expected the camp spot we had built eight days earlier was taken, but we found an open one, with existing walls, on the north end of camp. The next morning I slept late until 10:00 a.m. at which time I looked out to find it was still snowing and very windy and knew then that we would not be traveling today. 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. In the early evening the Russians returned, as we played cards in the big tent, and asked if we had any extra sleeping bags and/or pads. Turns out the Russian couldn’t make it back to 14K due to the storm and so they were stuck at 11K.

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, the storm passed and it was clear with many groups heading. I packed up expecting we’d all want to do take advantage of the weather and head down too. However our team decided it might be easier 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 arrive too late for a flight out today. 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.

By 10:30 p.m. when Art and I were preparing a late dinner the camp had mostly cleared out, and the temperature had dropped significantly. That night, morning of June 12, we didn’t make it out of camp until 1:45 a.m. in the very crisp cold weather. 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 – a fleece, a 150 gram 850 fill down coat, a Gortex shell, and my 390 gram summit parka.

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. 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 their 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, we stopped to repack the problem sled and from then on the voyage down changed to incredibly enjoyable. With steady uninterrupted travel we soon warmed up and I was able to remove my parka and shell leaving and I was comfortable even though the packs and sleds were covered in frost.

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. At one point the full moon was out, and there was also alpenglow on the mountains and 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 even though I was initially against traveling at night, it ended up being an amazing experience.

Upon arrival at Base Camp we pulled the sleds up near the door of the Base Camp managers hut, she 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. , an hour and a half away. Our timing had worked out perfect even if we were 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. 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, then found a place to get a burger. 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 dinner. 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.

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 its 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.

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.

**Boundary Peak, NV, 13,140 ft. – October 6, 2014, HP #17: It turned out to be no easy ridgeline with a lot of loose rock and rock pinnacles to down climb and skirt around.**

October 5th I left Provo at 6:15 am and drove to the Nevada/California border, mostly via highway 6, to the Queens Mine trailhead of Boundary Peak. Boundary Peak is the highest point in Nevada at 13,140 feet. It took about 9 hours to get there, and since my plan was to climb the peak the next day I had plenty of time on my hands. After sitting for 9 hours my back was sore and I needed a walk so I wandered up the trail for about 50 minutes to just shy of where the Trail Canyon route joins the Queens Mine route, and in so doing I got a good feel for what I would be up against the next morning. I didn’t see anyone else on the trail, but I thought I might as there was a van parked one switch back down from the trailhead.

When I got back to my vehicle, and moved it to a flatter spot to camp, a pickup with two brothers in it pulled up. By now it was about 5:45 pm, and they talked as though they were going to climb the peak that evening, and then drive to the Mount Whitney trailhead to do the John Muir Trail to its peak the next day. As they prepared to go, we noticed a couple other hikers coming down. Soon after the brothers set off the other hikers arrived at my camp. One gave me his card explaining he had lost his phone and asking me to contact him should I find it. Then they wandered over to their van.

I proceeded with cooking my diner and arranging my SUV to sleep in the back, and before dark the brothers returned, having come to their senses. Soon they left and I was again all alone much to my liking. When darkness arrived I realized how tired I was from the early morning so I set my alarm for 5:10 am planning to start hiking by 6:15 the next morning, and it was then I realized I was no longer in the Mountain Time Zone and that it was really only 7:30 pm. Nonetheless I was soon asleep, but I woke up at 10 pm (Pacific time zone), then again at 2 am, 3am, 4 am, and 5 am.

I had planned to start out in the dark, arriving at where I had stopped the day before at around sunrise, but with the time change, I was able to turn off my headlamp at 6:15 am as I left camp. I was pleased to have the natural light.

The hike to Boundary Peak consists of three sections. First the ridge to the intersection of the Trail Canyon trail and the Queens mine trail, which took about 1 hour and 5 minutes to cover. Next is a steep section up loose scree, with a dusting of snow on it, to the top of a false summit. This section needed about 1 hour to cover it. The last section is from the false summit to the true summit, and it steepens up even more, and again had just enough snow on it to make it dangerous, and it took about 1.5 hours to cover that section. As such I arrived on the peak at 9:50 am (Pacific Time), and I managed to get a text off to my wife.

Off to the south about a mile away and 300 feet higher is Montgomery Peak in California. The ridge between the two peaks didn’t look bad, and I was doing great on time so I decided to wander over to Montgomery. It turned out to be no easy ridgeline with a lot of loose rock and rock pinnacles to down climb and skirt around. In the end I must have had to gain close to 1000 feet to reach the 13441 foot peak, and it took about one hour to arrive from Boundary Peak. I wasn’t happy about how tough it was. On Montgomery I managed to get a text off to Daniel giving him a time estimate for when I would be back at my car and heading to Lee Vining where I was to meet him that evening.

On the return trip to Boundary I tried to by-pass its peak and in so doing I down climbed to far and had to regain the lost elevation which added a half hour to my return time. Between the true summit of Boundary and its lower false summit I noticed another hiker, an older lady, alone, who wasn’t following my tracks so we didn’t cross paths. It got really warm on the descent and I ended up down to just my underwear top. By 4 pm I was back at my camp. Just as there had been on both my hikes up, there were a lot of mule deer present on the way down along the lowest section.

Back at my vehicle I attempted to text Daniel but couldn’t get a message to send, and as I drove out I attempted several more times finally succeeding when I reached highway 6. I arrived in Lee Vining before 7 pm, and looked around a bit before I let Daniel know I had arrived. I was having a Burger at Mono Cone when he arrived at perhaps about 7:30 pm. We chatted a bit, having not seen each other for about a year, and then I followed him into the National Forrest and a camp spot he had in mind. At the camp I was flossing my teeth when one of my crowns popped off. I was tired from the long hike, and it was dark so I was in bed by 9 pm asleep in the back of my SUV.

**Panorama Point, NE, 5,424 ft. – May 29, 2015, HP #18: The point is merely a slight rise on the vast plains.**

We had been back in our house in Orem since the first of the year, and I had been busy with an endless list of tasks relating to it. Having just installed the lawn irrigation system and laid the sod, I was at point where I both needed and could afford to take a break. As such I convinced my wife Ana to take a high pointing road trip with me to Nebraska, and the Dakotas. May 29 we drove the 500 plus miles to the south west corner of the Nebraska panhandle. Our first stop was the so-called, and incorrectly named, tristate corner of Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming. A plaque there correctly states “Corner common to Nebraska and Wyoming on the Colorado state boundary” and also that a surveyor “established this corner monument August 17, 1869 at the intersection of the forty-first parallel of north latitude with the twenty-seventh degree of west longitude (west of Washington, D.C.)”. For the record many US surveys of the 1800s were based on the Washington Meridian, which was officially abolished in favor of the Greenwich Meridian in 1912. More information let us know the monument had been rehabilitated in 1981 and 1997. Next to the plaque stands the preserved original marker with a USGS benchmark on top of it. The “new” base is sort of a map labeling Colorado and showing the corner of Nebraska and Wyoming. The marker is fenced in protecting it from cattle. Besides the plaque and the marker there really is nothing but prairie to see here however it’s intriguing to be able to be in three US states simultaneously.

From the tristate marker it is only a few miles to the highest point in Nebraska. This is farm and ranching land with few people and so the roads are gravel and require paying attention to find your destination. The highpoint is privately owned and is located on a Bison Ranch. A large sign at the ranch states “Welcome to High Point Bison” and askes visitors to pay a highpoint entry fee. Attached to the large sign is a small one warning about ranging bison residing in the area – as they can be aggressive toward humans. From the welcome sign to the over one mile high top of Nebraska is around a mile on another gravel/dirt road. Upon arrival one would never think they were at a high point as the point is merely a slight rise on the vast plains. Off to the west far away are the Rocky Mountains and in all directions are extensive views of the prairie. As is common on the prairies the wind was blowing from the west. We were not lucky enough to see any of the bison which supposedly roam freely around this area.

To be clear, the highpoint itself is nothing extraordinary; in fact it is simply a monument in the middle of a field at an out of the way place one would likely never otherwise visit if it wasn’t for a highpointing goal. Nevertheless the feeling of reaching a destination and the knowledge of being on the highest natural point of a state felt good.

The high point monument, standing four feet tall is an obelisk of granite supported on a concrete base, seems out of place. However it’s more at home then the black painted piano like metal bench located next to it. The metal bench contained the summit log book which we signed. To prevent the buffalo from rubbing up against the monument it is enclosed behind a handrail, which made a nice place to climb on to for a triumphant highpoint pose with arms extended toward the clouds above. The Highpointers club has placed one of their benches next to the metal table.

From Panorama Point we drove north to the Black Hills where we spent the night at a Motel 6 in Hot Springs, SD. Lots of miles this day, about 700. And another US state highpoint checked off.

**Black Elk Peak, SD, 7,242 ft. – May 30, 2015, HP #19: From the top of the tower we spotted mountain goats likely there to drink from the pond.**

Having arrived in Hot Spring South Dakota the evening prior, we let the motel by 6 am and drove through Custer State park to Sylvan Lake. En route we saw bison, turkeys, deer, and antelope. On the Needles Highway we pasted through two one-way tunnels with the narrower of the two being only about 8 feet wide. From Sylvan Lake we hiked 3.5 miles to the top of Harney Peak, as it was still officially named in those days, the high point of South Dakota.

Black Elk Peak, as it is officially named since August 11, 2016 lies in the south west corner of its state among a jumble of granite spires sticking out above the dark green, almost black, ponderosa pines. The summit is the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains, and pretty close to the geographical center of the United States. The Native people referred to the area as Paha Sapa which translates to hills that are black. The name Black Elk honors the prominent Lakota Sioux medicine man of the same name.

American settlers used Black Elk Peak as a fire lookout tower as far back as 1911, and during the make work projects of the Great Depression a stone fire tower was erected being completed in 1939. That tower was staffed until 1967. Today the outlook is on the register of historic places, but is still open to the public to climb and take in the outstanding views. Interestingly the summit has even been the home to an official US Post Office back in the 1940s.

From the top of the tower we spotted mountain goats likely there to drink from the pond near the pump house. When needed he manmade pond (aka reservoir) supplied water to the living quarters which were located in the lower level of the fire tower. The lunch we packed in was enjoyed on the summit.

Even with an hour on the peak, the whole hike was done by noon for a total of four hours. In the afternoon we visited Mt. Rushmore and were impressed with it. From Rushmore we had an early dinner in Hill City and then drove up to Deadwood, SD where we found primitive camping at the Mt. Roosevelt Picnic Area. It rained most of the night and was windy.

**White Butte, ND, 3,506 ft. – May 31, 2015, HP #20: The clay on the hiking path was wet and slippery.**

After spending a rainy night in a tent in South Dakota that following morning we continued north into North Dakota to its state highpoint, White Butte.

White Butte is located forty five miles, more or less, northeast of the south west corner of North Dakota. This is a sparsely populated area, in the least populated county of the state, consisting mostly of grasslands. This state high point resides in the Little Missouri National Grasslands which is a section of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands - a National Forest unit consisting entirely of prairies. However while the summit is itself part of Federal Lands, the access to the summit is via private land.

We parked shy of an old dilapidated and abandoned farm house, and walked due south along a flat, over-grown, dirt, farm, road. Within a half a mile we went through a gate, to the west, in the barbed wire fence paralleling our track. Next we crossed a sandy wash in a little ravine as well as downed barbed wire fence, and soon encountered a steep section to the peak. The elevation gain is roughly 400 feet, but since there are virtually no trees on this wind swept prairie it's enough for some really nice views in all directions. Looking around we felt the buttes had an almost badlands like vibe to them.

A rock cairn stood to the north of the USGS benchmark which is mounted to the top of a two foot tall, three inch or so diameter, pipe. Attached to the pipe by a cable was a green ammo box containing a summit registry book which we signed. Next to the ammo box sat a long wooden box which we didn’t open, but which I have since learned contains a hand trowel which I don’t know the significance of. Also close to the cairn is a metal marker for the late Lawrence P. Buzalsky (1935-1990) a member of the family that used to own the farm next to White Butte.

We snapped several picture from the highpoint before returning to our vehicle. The clay on the hiking path was wet and slippery after lots of rain the day and night before, and as we descended Ana slipped giving her a muddy gray colored back-side.

Hikers are often cautioned about the rattlesnakes which are abundant in the area, but we didn’t encounter any at this time of the year.

That was a quick hike of under an hour round trip covering approximately 2.2 miles total– but I understand that nowadays the trailhead has been moved about 0.7 miles to the north of the abandoned farmhouse making the round trip closer to 3.4 miles.

By noon we were driving south again. We drove by Devils Tower in Wyoming, and then to Casper for dinner. From Casper we continued to Rawlins and checked into a motel there at 10 pm. Way too much driving for one day!