

## Epics

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Epic: A climber's term referring to a long drawn out mishap. Frequently involving death or injury, but always involving suffering.

It was early morning. My wife Claudia was standing in the middle of the Kicking Horse River in British Columbia looking for interesting rocks, and I was on the Little Athabasca glacier. Some months earlier we had decided to go to the Canadian Rockies for our usual late summer vacation. On the border between Alberta and British Columbia sit four magnificent contiguous National Parks, Banff, Jasper, Yoho and Kootenay. We had been to Jasper and Banff previously and so this time we decided to concentrate on Banff, Yoho and Kootenay. The area abounds with great climbing and I was eager to climb something. With some difficulty I contacted a Canadian guide Todd Craig who lived in the small town of Golden, British Columbia. In Canada, unlike the United States, all guides are licensed and must pass a rigorous series of exams. As a result you can climb with a Canadian guide you don't know, with some level of confidence. Todd and I talked about my climbing background and he mentioned that the north face of Athabasca was "interesting."

Athabasca lies at the edge of the Columbia Icefield at the boundary of Banff and Jasper National Parks. The Columbia Icefield is one of the great wonders of the world. A great ice sheet over 1000 feet thick, it covers more than 125 square miles of rugged mountains and glaciers. Mt. Athabasca lies near the road and rises almost a vertical mile from the glacier. The north face route is the hard route on the mountain. It requires an approach over the heavily crevassed Little Athabasca glacier to the base of the ice headwall. The headwall consists of 1700 feet of near vertical ice leading to the summit.

I agreed that the north face sounded interesting, very interesting. I had recently learned to climb waterfall ice in Colorado and I was confident that I was ready for the north face.

A month before we were to leave, I got email from Todd. He said the weather had been exceptionally good and the route was in great shape. Two weeks later I got more email from Todd. He had hurt his back climbing and would not be able to climb for some months. He had however, lined up a new guide for me, Patrick Baird.

Claudia and I left for Canada. A few days before I was to climb with Patrick, we did a glacier walk on the Athabasca glacier. We walk on the Athabasca glacier every time we are in Banff or Jasper. You go with a guide and a dozen or so other people. The long walk is a half-day and takes you right up to the icefall. Icefalls are places where the glacier tumbles over a steep cliff. Above the icefall the glacier is wild, rough and very heavily crevassed. Above the icefall you need to be roped. The Athabasca glacier in August is a wet glacier. It is full of crevasses, rivers of water flowing in ice channels and millwells. Millwells are holes cut into the ice by water. On the Athabasca glacier the millwells may be a 100 feet deep. The ice in the millwells and in the crevasses is under great pressure and glows a beautiful but terrifying blue. The glacier is never the same twice and is always fascinating. Claudia mentioned to our guide Lilly that I would be climbing the north face with Patrick. Lilly knew Patrick and told us that Patrick had just passed his guide exam the previous week. This did not reassure Claudia. Patrick had in fact been guiding for some years as an associate guide under the supervision of a full guide, but I think I was his first client as a full guide.

I met Patrick and we spent two days rock climbing and getting to know one another. It was clear that Patrick was not keen on the north face. Several times he suggested that we climb the Victoria glacier instead. The Victoria glacier is scenic, but easy, and I was not particularly interested in it. I assumed that Patrick's reluctance was due to his doubt about my ability, and I was sure that I was up to the climb. Only later did I realize that as a new guide Patrick did not want to guide the north face.

In the end, we headed to the Icefields and the north face. Sorting gear the night before the climb Patrick and I had our only real argument. Patrick was concerned about the weight I would be carrying and wanted me to leave behind the slings, prusik loops and carabineers that I would need to get him out of a crevasse. This was my personal

nightmare. Glacier travel by a two-person team is tricky; it is very difficult for a single climber to rescue a badly injured or unconscious partner from a crevasse. My nightmare was sitting on the surface and watching my partner freeze to death in a crevasse, due to my inadequate skills. I had spent a lot of time practicing crevasse rescue to make sure that this did not happen. Patrick explained that clients were never good enough to pull off a crevasse rescue, and that Canadian guides assumed that if they fell into a crevasse and could not get themselves out, they would die. I told Patrick that if he could not climb out, I would come get him. I reminded Patrick that I was a physicist, I understood pulley systems, I had learned crevasse rescue on Rainer, and I had recently practiced crevasse rescue. He was skeptical, but I kept the gear.

We camped that night in one of the campgrounds near the Icefield center. By late afternoon it had started to snow and it snowed all night. We woke up at 2:00 am and after a breakfast of bad coffee and cold oatmeal were on our way by 3:00. The day was warm but the glacier was covered with fresh snow. We were the only team on the mountain. As we slogged across the glacier I could tell that Patrick was getting tired. Breaking trail in the snow was taking its toll. I suggested we alternate leading but Patrick was afraid I would fall into a crevasse and would not hear of it. After five hours we reached the ice headwall. It was loaded with snow and Patrick was afraid that it would avalanche while we were climbing. Even a small avalanche could sweep us off the wall. We turned around and walked back down. At that point we would have taken any route to the summit, but they all had high avalanche danger and we went down.

We drove back toward Golden. Patrick lived in Golden and Claudia and I were staying in a cabin just outside of Golden. When we got close to Golden, Patrick turned the radio on saying that he wanted to get a weather report. It was September 11, 2001. There was no weather report. Instead the Canadian Broadcasting System anchor kept referring to “Today’s terrible events” without mentioning what “today’s terrible events” were. There was apparently an assumption that everyone already knew what had happened. What we did learn was certainly terrifying. In solemn tones the anchor announced, “all leaves for Canadian Armed Forces personnel are canceled”, “all of North American airspace is closed to civilian traffic”, “Carrier battle groups have been sortied to protect the east coast”, “American and Canadian fighters are flying combat air patrols

over North American air space.” Our imaginations ran wild. Had there been a rogue ICB launch from Russia or from one of the old Soviet Republics? Maybe North Korea had sneaked a nuke in. We both felt a nuclear event was likely. Had we lost New York, or Washington? When we finally learned what had happen, it almost seemed anticlimactic. Then I recalled that 50,000 people worked in the World Trade Center. Later that night Claudia and I went into a bar in Golden and in horror and anger watched the footage of the attack on TV. I will never forget the horrifying sight of people jumping from the Trade Centers.

We still had a few days left before we were scheduled to leave Canada for the States and so we hiked and tried to pretend that things were normal. The day before we were to fly out of Edmonton, we mailed anything that could have been considered remotely threatening back home. At the airport the lines were long but everybody was polite and considerate. As we stood in line, one flight after another was canceled and I knew we would not be flying home that day. But we did. And we only left a few minutes late. I think ours was the first flight from Edmonton to the US after 9/11. The flight was uneventful except that my fellow passengers and I spent the flight nervously eyeing one another. I expected to be delayed at customs since I anticipated strict questioning of all arrivals, but the customs agent simply looked at our passports and said, “Welcome home.”

Two years later we went back to the Canadian Rockies. This time we intended to hike and backpack in Jasper, Banff and Mt. Robson Provincial Park. And, I had unfinished business on the north face of Athabasca.

I contacted Patrick and arranged the climb. There was one complication, which I failed to mention to Patrick, I had recently had knee surgery. But I was working hard in rehab and I was sure I would be ready. Since it would just be the two of us, I began to brush up on my crevasse rescue skills and spent hours training to haul an unconscious Patrick out of a crevasse. Then I got email from Patrick. He had taken a job as a manager of a heli-skiing lodge and could not climb with me. But, not to worry, he had arranged for another guide, Rich Marshall to climb with me. This was bad news. Patrick and I knew and trusted one another, now Rich and I would have to get to know one another. Although, somewhere in the recesses of my mind I had a vague recollection of having

heard the name. I called Rich and we talked about my climbing experience. He seemed completely comfortable with the north face. We agreed that we would climb two days with the north face the second day. He was not sure of his schedule and suggested that I call him again when I got to Jasper and we would firm up the date. As a compulsive type A personality, I was not happy with this arrangement, but I agreed.

Claudia and I arrived in Jasper and I called Rich. He assured me that the north face route was in great shape. Conditions were ideal. Due to Rich's schedule we arranged to climb rather late in our stay, around the 10<sup>th</sup> of September. Rich thought that we should climb a peak called A2 on the first day. A2 is a little known satellite peak of Athabasca. It appears in no guidebook and I had never heard of it, but Rich thought I would like it. He explained the climb would involve both ice and rock climbing and complex glacier travel. The term complex glacier travel means glacier travel where you must climb in and out of crevasses, through icefalls and around or over ice seracs. I agreed that it sounded fun.

A few days before I climbed, Claudia and I once again did a glacier walk on the Athabasca glacier. We always do this. Our guide was Lilly again, and Claudia mentioned to her that I was climbing the north face with Rich Marshall. Lilly squealed, "Rich Marshall, you're climbing with Rich Marshall?" "He gave me my guide exam." Lilly filled me in. Rich was a guide examiner, climbed on the world cup ice climbing circuit and was a world-class alpinist. Claudia was reassured.

I was to meet Rich at 6:00 am in the icefield's center parking lot. It is just over an hour drive from Jasper to the icefields, so we had to get up early. This was not helped when I set the alarm without taking into account the time difference between Cincinnati and Jasper. As a result I got us up two hours earlier than need be. I discovered this after I showered. I went back to bed and Claudia assures me, fell back to sleep in minutes. Claudia tossed and turned. I got up a second time and we met Rich a little before 6:00 am. It was still dark and the parking lot was deserted. We agreed that Claudia would meet us the next day. Rich said we would summit the north face about 11:00 and would be back in the parking lot by 3:00 pm and in any event no later than 5:00. Rich and I got in his camper and drove a mile or so down the road. We pulled off, shouldered our packs and began the approach to A2. Whereas Patrick had double and

triple checked my gear, Rich never even asked about it. It was clearly a test. If I hadn't shown up properly equipped for A2, I had no business on the north face. Rich set a fast pace and as we walked across the knife-edge of a sand dune he appeared to assume that I was comfortable with the exposure. This was clearly another test. The approach was as Rich had promised, very scenic. An alpine lake behind us, a knife-edge sand dune underneath us and a glacier and mountains in front of us. The weather was great, sunny and cool. It was a magnificent day. When we reached the glacier we roped up. Soon we reached the first icefall and began to climb ice. We climbed with one tool, a standard straight-shafted alpine ice axe rather than the two technical tools we would climb with tomorrow. Rich climbed ice with grace, power and appalling speed. He looked like a large cat. Graceful, but with barely masked power. I had seen several world-class rock climbers climb rock and Rich had the same look as he moved over the ice. I knew at once the he was the "real deal." Rich was a guide's guide and he taught as he climbed. What line would I pick across the glacier, what was the correct angle for an ice screw in this ice? If I were leading, what decisions would I make? Climbing through the icefall was a little intimidating but at the same time great fun. The ice climbing was easy and the scenery spectacular. We climbed in and out of crevasses, and over and around ice seracs. Early on, some soft snow collapsed underneath me. My ice axe was firmly planted in a large serac so I didn't fall but I swung hard against the serac bruising my ribs. I made a mental note to be more careful. In the crevasses the ice was under great pressure and glowed a ghostly blue. It also made unnerving popping and cracking noises as it shifted. Soon we climbed through the first icefall and back onto a gentler part of the glacier. A glacier mimics the rock underneath it and when the rock flattens out so does the glacier. We climbed up the glacier and through the second icefall. After a while we reached the end of the glacier and the rocky summit of A2 stood before us.

We stashed our crampons at the top of the glacier, put our ice axes on the outside of our packs, and started to climb rock. Unfortunately the beautiful weather disappeared above the second icefall. It was grey, windy and spitting snow. The climbing was easy but the rock was loose, rotten and essentially un-protectable. It was a bad place to fall. We soon reached the summit. The weather had worsened and we could see nothing. I was not going to look out over the icefields today. Rich held his ice axe up. He turned to me

and said, "Give me your ice axe." I did and he held one in each hand over his head. He handed them to me, and said, "Feel that?" I did, the ice axes buzzed, a sure sign of lighting. Rich looked at me and said, "Let's get the fuck out of here." We descended as quickly as possible. Once we climbed down through the upper icefall the weather turned glorious again. Sunny, with blue skies. As we climbed through the lower icefall, I began to congratulate myself. The icefall had seemed intimidating on the way up, now I was comfortable and at home in this terrain. My comfort was short lived. We were traversing the bottom of a crevasse when there was a loud "wamph." A large block of ice had just shifted. We didn't know where, and we were not interested in finding out. We simultaneously looked at one another; both wide eyed and said "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Below the lower icefall the glacier was gentler but still crevassed. Using the phrasing that the best guides seem to favor, Rich said, "If your comfortable, I am comfortable" and pushed me into the lead so that I could sharpen my skills navigating a crevassed glacier.

We walked along enjoying the weather and the scenery and were soon back to Rich's van. It took only a few minutes to drive to our campsite on the icefields parkway. Along the way we stopped at the icefields center to get the latest weather report. It called for cold, clear conditions tomorrow. Ideal climbing weather. At the campsite we spread our wet gear out on a picnic table in the hope that we could dry it before morning. However, it soon started to rain and we gathered up our gear and retreated to Rich's camper. A veteran campaigner Rich immediately retreated to his sleeping bag for a nap while I tried briefly to read before I too fell asleep. By this time it was raining steadily. Conditions on A2 would be bad right now, and we congratulated ourselves on starting early enough, and moving fast enough to be off the mountain before the weather deteriorated.

Since we were looking at a 2:00 am start for the north face, we ate an early dinner. Rich did the cooking, and I couldn't help but notice that none of the kitchen utensils were very clean. Dinner was distinctly mediocre, but we both ate like pigs.

I became increasingly worried. The rain continued without let up, and I knew that on Athabasca it would be falling as snow. Even if the weather was good in the morning, a repeat of two years ago seemed likely. I usually don't sleep well the night before a climb, but perhaps due to fatigue from climbing A2, I slept like a rock. Breakfasts for alpine starts are generally bad, and this one was no exception. Bad coffee, and lukewarm instant oatmeal. Anticipating this, I had brought two cinnamon buns from the Black Bear bakery in Jasper. Unfortunately mice had found them. Cutting around the damage, we managed to salvage half a bun each. After a quick breakfast we loaded our packs and drove to the parking lot that serves as the starting point for climbs of both Athabasca and its sister, Andromeda. We were the only vehicle in the lot. We signed the climber's registry, turned on our headlamps, and began the approach. It was cold and stars glittered overhead. It looked like the weather report was right. Still, I was worried about how much snow there would be high on the mountain.

To reach the foot of the Little Athabasca glacier you must first climb over the terminal moraine. It's just hiking but it sucks. It's steep, loose rock and you slide a half step back for every two steps forward. The large rocks can roll and are potential ankle turners. This part of the climb sucked last time, and this time was worse. Rich set a fast pace and because of my recent knee surgery, I was not as fit as I had been. I sucked wind. My ribs hurt with every breath.

When we reached the toe of the glacier we stopped, drank water, put our crampons on and got an ice axe out. The day before we had climbed with a single alpine ice axe. Alpine ice axes are long, 70- 80 cms and straight-shafted. They are the tool of choice for self-arrest and self-belay on a glacier or snowfield. But, they are not very good for climbing steep technical ice. So, today we each carried two technical axes. Shorter and curved, they are ideal for steep ice, but are harder to self-arrest or belay with. Until we got to the ice headwall, we would each use only one axe. As we moved up the glacier it became crevassed and we stopped and roped up. Un-roped, a crevasse fall would almost certainly be fatal. It was still dark and we climbed by headlamp, but I noticed that the stars had disappeared. Shortly, it began to snow, gently first and then more seriously. Shortly after dawn we passed the Silverhorn. The Silverhorn is the second highest point on Mt. Athabasca and is the second hardest route up the mountain. It looked ominous.

Loaded with new snow it looked much as I had seen it two years ago: an avalanche waiting to happen.

An hour or so later we reached the bergschrung. The bergschrung is the last crevasse on the mountain. It is where the glacier pulls away from the permanent snowfield above it. As the mountain steepens it eventually becomes too steep to support a glacier. The snow slides off and never gets deep enough to be compressed into glacier ice. The bergschrung marks the transition. The crevasse at the bergschrung is usually large and often hard to cross. We crossed it on a snow bridge without incident.

Above the bergschrung lay the ice headwall. Seventeen hundred feet of near vertical ice. It had taken us over five hours to get here, and I was sure I was screwed. It was going to be an exact repeat of two years ago. In fact conditions were worse. There was more new snow, it was snowing hard and visibility was dropping. The base of the ice headwall is a decision point. The north face is known in climbers jargon as a committing climb. Once you are on the headwall it is hard to retreat. To retreat, you must repel off, and that means leaving gear. Once you are more than a few hundred feet up you won't have enough gear left, so it's up and then down by a different route. I could see spindrift avalanching off the headwall and I resigned myself to the walk down. Even summiting by an easier route looked out of the question.

However, I had underestimated the difference between a new guide and a guide examiner who was one of Canada's top alpinists. Rich looked at the wall and said, "Well, there is some spindrift avalanching off, but nothing that should bother us." I put Rich on belay and he began to climb. We were climbing with a 60-meter rope, which meant the Rich could climb for almost 60 meters before he had to stop and put me on belay. This is known as a pitch. As Rich climbed, he put in ice screws every 20 feet or so. If Rich fell he would only fall twice the distance that he was above his last screw, that is, if the screw held! Lesser climbers put in more screws. My job was to lock off the rope and catch Rich if he fell. When Rich was almost out of rope he would put in two ice screws and thread a sling through them to construct the anchor. Using his ice axe he would then chop a ledge a few inches wide in the ice. This was the belay ledge that he would stand on while he belayed me up. Each time he chopped a ledge, chunks of ice rained down on me. Once he had me on belay I would climb up to him, removing his ice

screws as I climbed. I would hand him back the screws, and any other hardware that I had cleaned and I would put him on belay. We would then repeat the process. We would do this almost a dozen times.

The first few pitches went smoothly, although the climbing took more out of me than I expected. It wasn't that hard technically, but by the end of each pitch I was gassed. The combination of altitude, a bruised rib and not being in top shape was taking it out of me.

As we climbed the weather worsened. It was snowing harder and visibility dropped. We could no longer see more than about 20 feet. The rope became a ghostly snake connecting us. But we were committed. Safety lay in summiting. The spindrift avalanched off the wall and pounded us. I began to worry about falling asleep at the belay. Rich was clearly worried about the weather, since he suggested that I start dismantling my belay as soon as he had one screw in for his belay. The textbooks warn against this, but in alpine climbing speed is often safety. When Rich had one screw in and was clipped into it he would yell "secure" and I would take out one of my screws. When he had the second screw in and had me on belay he would yell "on belay" and I would take out my second screw. I was afraid I would screw this up and remove both my screws at once so I began to talk to myself. "That screw, don't touch the other screw, asshole." We were starting to fall behind schedule. The pounding from the avalanching spindrift sapped our energy. The person climbing often had to wait, pressed tight against the wall as snow swept over us. By this time we were climbing in a complete white out. It was hard to see and hard to hear. And we were slow.

A few pitches farther on, Rich forgot to lock a carabineer. I locked it, said nothing and Rich never knew. On the next pitch, in an attempt to save time, Rich put himself on my belay device while I re-racked the ice screws. When Rich started to climb I realized that he had put the wrong end of the rope through my belay device. If Rich fell, he would fall 60 meters before he came tight against me. This would almost certainly pull the anchors out and pull us both off the wall. I said, "Stop, you are not on belay." Rich very carefully down climbed, clipped back into the anchors and I put him on belay. I realized then that I was not the only one who was exhausted.

After a couple of more pitches, we reached the crux pitch, a near vertical pitch of ice and rock. Such a pitch is known in climbers jargon as “mixed,” meaning that you must climb both ice and rock. Mixed climbing requires standing on small indentations in the rock with the front points of your crampons, and the ability to hook small rock features with your ice axes. You may have the front points of one crampon driven into the ice and the front points of the other on a small dimple in the rock. If you move your foot at all the crampons blow off. Mixed climbing demands precision and control. We needed to climb through what was, effectively, a rock and ice funnel. This funnel also funneled the snow that was avalanching off the wall. Rich turned to me and said, “Wait until it really shits itself and then climb as fast as you can.” The theory being, that this would give us time to climb through the chute before too much more snow built up. We waited until there was a large spindrift avalanche and then Rich climbed on. At the crux there was a fixed piton that had been hammered into the rock years ago. It was rusty and did not inspire confidence. Rich clipped the rope into it and climbed on. Visibility was poor and he soon disappeared from sight. As soon as Rich yelled, “You’re on belay,” I finished taking the anchor apart and waited for a large spindrift avalanche. As soon as I got one, I started to climb. The climbing was not hard, and I soon reached the fixed pin that Rich had clipped the rope to. To unclip the rope I needed a free hand. The standard procedure was to plant one axe firmly in the ice, and unclip the leash from the axe while staying on the face using your crampons and the other axe. You then unclip the rope and take any gear that is not fixed. You then re-attach the leash to the axe and climb on. I had done this numerous times on the earlier pitches, and this time should have been particularly simple, since I didn’t have to clean an ice screw, just unclip the rope and go. But I couldn’t find a place to plant my right axe. With snow blowing across the face, I could not tell rock from ice. I tried several times to plant the axe in what I thought was ice, only to have it clang off snow covered rock. My left arm was starting to tire. Finally, I thought “screw it, I’ll just let the right axe dangle.” I knew this was bad form, a dangling axe is a hazard, but I thought I could live with it. I let go of the axe and watched in horror as it fell into the white abyss below me. I yelled “Shit.” “What’s wrong,” Rich yelled back. “I dropped an axe.” “Keep climbing,” Rich replied. I must have inadvertently hit the thumb catch on the leash earlier in the pitch and thus have

unleashed the axe without knowing it. Rich and I figured later that the axe probably fell 1500 feet onto the glacier below. Well, there wasn't much I could do about now, so I kept climbing. With only one axe the climbing was harder and slower. I was forced to use my right hand as if I was a rock climber. A rock climber with gloves on. I searched out rocks and small dimples and indentations in the ice, anything I could grip with my right hand. Several times I had to stop and plaster myself against the face as snow washed over me. At last I reached Rich and the anchors.

Only a few more pitches lay between us and the summit. The climbing was easier on the last pitches and we had no real problems. I pulled onto the summit, and in a replay of the day before, Rich looked at me and said, "Congratulations, now let's get the fuck out of here." I was exhausted. We couldn't see anything. Visibility was zero.

We had planned to descend via the AA couloir. This route takes you down onto the Athabasca-Andromeda glacier. However, the hot summer had opened up exceptionally large crevasses on the route and Rich did not think it would be safe in this weather. We would have to traverse west, climb the Silverhorn and then drop down to the glacier by the regular North Glacier route. Rich explained that I should feel lucky, this way I would get to bag not only the main peak but also the Silverhorn. All I could think about was the number of additional vertical feet of climbing that this would require. We traversed west on the knife-edged ridge that runs from the main peak to the Silverhorn. Route finding was easy we just followed the ridge. And with the almost complete lack of visibility I couldn't even see how exposed we were. We climbed to the top of the Silverhorn and then down onto the glacier. It was here that our troubles really began.

Our world was a featureless expanse of white. There were no landmarks at all and we had no sense of distance or perspective. In such conditions, it is all too easy to walk into a crevasse or off the edge of an ice cliff. Many climbers have. And we were on a heavily crevassed glacier with two bands of ice cliffs between us and safety. I knew we would have to spend the night on the mountain. It was just too dangerous to move. I had extra warm clothing in my pack, and we could use our ice axes to dig us into the snow and out of the wind, so I knew that we would be all right. But, I didn't think Claudia would let me out of the house again. I figured Rich's wife Abby would take an unplanned

night out in stride. After all, she was a mountain guide herself and a world-class climber who had won the X-games several times.

I was wrong on all counts. Abby had learned that the weather was bad on Athabasca and had already called the warden in charge of mountain rescue. She was told that nothing could be done until the weather improved. Meanwhile Claudia sat at the ice field center and stared at nothing. She had come early so that she could watch us on the north face through her binoculars. Not only did not she see us, she couldn't even see the mountain. Around 3:00 pm she too was starting to make inquiries with the wardens who told her there was nothing they could do.

Back on the glacier it was clear that I had underestimated Rich's skills. He felt we could descend. He took a 20-foot length of cord, tied a knot in one end to give it some weight, and started down, tossing the cord in front of him. If he could see the end lying on the snow he knew the next few steps were safe. If the end disappeared from sight he knew that we were on the edge of either a crevasse or an ice cliff. Somehow he had an idea of the general direction we should go. The going was slow, we often reached dead-ends trapped by crevasses or ice cliffs. When this happened, we had to climb back up hill, traverse one direction or another and try again. Rich had to go first since he was doing the route finding and this meant that a slip on my part could be disastrous. Due to the crevasse hazard we had a lot of rope out between us, if I slipped and failed to self-arrest, I would fall twice that distance before the rope came tight. Rich might not be able to hold a fall like that. So I tried to pay close attention.

At last we worked our way through the first band of ice cliffs and I congratulated Rich on his navigation. He turned to me and said, "We're not down yet." I decided I should worry more.

Shortly after that, Rich said he was lost. We stopped and stood in our tracks for about 20 minutes. Then the weather improved, slightly and briefly. For a couple of seconds we saw an undistinguished, partial visible gray rock in the distance. It meant nothing to me. Rich said, "Ok, I know where we are" and we went on.

The second set of ice cliffs and crevasses was worse. Once again we often ran into dead ends and had to retrace our steps. Pressed for time, it had been hours since we had anything to eat or drink. As we worked our way down we came to a large, deep and

long crevasse that we had to end run. Even in the whiteout we could see an ominous blue glow from the crevasse. We had a long traverse right above it and it was clear that if one of us slipped we would both tumble to our deaths. Rich turned to me and said, “ You know, neither of us can slip here.” I explained that I had already figured that out. The procedure was simple; make sure that you had one foot and your ice axe planted at all times. However, in my fatigue-induced state, it took all of my concentration to be sure that I did not pick up a foot and my ice axe at the same time. It cannot have taken us more than five or ten minutes to complete the traverse, but it seemed to take forever. After we end-ran the crevasse the terrain eased up and I began to have hope. However, the crevasse hazard remained high, and I kept Rich tight on the rope. Because of the crevasses we had a lot of rope out and had to yell in order to talk to one another.

Suddenly Rich yelled “shit” and disappeared from view. I knew instantly what had happened. This was the start of my worse nightmare, Rich had fallen through a snow bridge into a crevasse. Oddly, time seemed to slow. I yelled “Got!” and jumped backwards to take up some of the rope stretch. I didn’t really have Rich yet, but I wanted to reassure him, and for some reason I was certain I would catch him. I dove onto the snow and got into the team arrest position. As I had been taught on Rainer, I kicked my crampons securely into the snow, got over my axe, cranked up hard on it and looked back along the rope. I then reached for the ice screw that I had clipped to my pack so that I could start building an anchor. I don’t think that there was any conscious thought the whole time, it was all reflex. Just as I was preparing to put an ice screw in, Rich popped up from the lip of the crevasse. He looked at me with a weak grin and said “ good reflexes.” Unhurt, Rich had been able to climb out of the crevasse using his ice tools. And with that we went on.

No more than half an hour later we came to what was clearly a very shaky snow bridge. Rich yelled, “ Get the best stance you can and keep me on tight.” My stance was shit and I told Rich this. “Hang on, while I chop a quick snow seat” I said. Using my ice axe I chopped a butt sized depression in the ice, sat in it and kicked my feet into the ice. I gave silent thanks to the guide who had taught me this trick. I kept Rich tight and he slide across the snow bridge on his stomach without incident. Now it was my turn. I was not on tight. Since I was above Rich, and we had a lot of rope out, I would go a long way if

anything happened. I cautiously approached the edge of the snow bridge, carefully lowered myself onto my stomach and began to slide across.

I don't know if Rich had weakened the snow bridge when he crossed or if my technique was just not as good as his, but as I slid across, the bridge crumbled. It crumbled unevenly and I began to roll. Not by design, just by luck. Rich yelled, "Keep rolling!" This seemed to me to be a brilliant idea and I rolled. I managed to roll fast enough so that the bridge collapsed above me, not under me. As soon as I was sure that I had rolled past the lip of the crevasse, I rolled over on top of my ice axe to self-arrest. The new snow that made the glacier so dangerous also made the self-arrest easy, and I arrested without trouble. Once again I don't remember any conscious thought, just reflex. My guides on Rainer had taught me well. Rich was also down on the snow in the team arrest position. We picked ourselves up and went on.

From there we reached the toe of the glacier without incident. Rich gave a sigh of relief and said, "we're safe from all mountaineering hazards now." I was less sanguine. True, we were off the glacier, but the rocky terminal moraine was covered with a thin coat of ice and snow. It would be very easy to slip and break a leg. I was sure that Rich wouldn't slip, but I was not confident of my abilities, especially as tired as I was. We unroped and took off our harnesses. I kept my ice axe out to use for balance on the icy rocks. The walk down the moraine seemed to take forever. I was totally exhausted, my ribs hurt every time I took a breath, and I knew that both of my feet were bleeding. Such are the joys of alpinism.

Meanwhile Claudia was still sitting at the ice center, which was now closed to the public. There was still at least one warden in the ice center and she could hear fragments of conversation from their radio. The conversation was not reassuring. She heard something about following a trail of blood and was afraid they were talking about us. We never did find out who the conversation was about.

Finally, we reached the parking lot, 15 hours after we had left it. We were only an hour past the time Rich had told Claudia we would be back by at the latest, which was amazing, all things considered. Rich signed us out, writing in the comment section that the weather had been "epic." He later told me that it was the worse summer weather he had ever climbed in. We walked to his van and I took my boots off. Sure enough both

socks were drenched in blood. Rich started the van and we drove the ½ mile to the ice center.

Claudia had been staring at the van for hours, willing it to move and could not believe it when it finally did. Claudia was there to meet us when we pulled into the parking lot. She had a thermos of hot coffee, two mugs and a bag of muffins from the Black Bear bakery. She asked if we wanted some.