

## Literary Club Paper 3/19/12

TITLE: BECAUSE?? By Carl Iseman

I'm from the PowerPoint generation and although I know we're not supposed to use visual aids, I'd like you to close your eyes and picture a valley with a long, flowing glacier somewhere in the Himalayas...it's extremely cold and as we creep first over the boulders and scree left from the receding glacier and stumble ever farther along the valley, trudging one foot after the next, climbing higher and higher....breathe breathe, wheez wheez...step, rest breathe, breathe, ..wheez., cough gasp...step..it's a never-ending battle . We begin to see the outline of an enormous wind- blown mountain replete with cirques, arêtes, hanging glaciers, crevasses, it's peak obscured by wind blown snow. Some of us will wonder what the hell ever provoked us to do something as foolhardy as risk our lives in a god forsaken world of extreme cold where your breath freezes before it even leaves your lungs, the sun is so strong that it can fry your unprotected eyeballs in minutes...the burning sensation in your lungs is awful, the nausea keeps you unbalanced.... we miss our families and question our own sanity. Most of us open our eyes to remember we were just digging into the freezer compartment at Graeter's to pick out our favorite flavor of ice cream....but a very few of us will be filled with the exhilaration and excitement of the challenge, the inexorable quest for the unknown and as Mallory said when asked " Why do you want to climb Mount Everest" he responded: BECAUSE IT'S THERE!!

It's this question of WHY followed by the answer, BECAUSE that has kept me reading and thinking about adventures such as Mallory's 1924 and Hillary's 1953 expeditions to Everest, as well as modern day climbers such as Reinhold Messner, the first to solo climb Everest without supplemental oxygen. My readings have also included Jim Whittaker, the first American to summit Everest and Ed Viesturs who after summiting Everest for the 5<sup>th</sup> time and was filmed on his 6<sup>th</sup> of 7 ascents in 1996 as part of the IMAX epic, Everest. In addition to climbers, those memorable victories of the mind and spirit such as Shackleton's journey to the South Pole and Tristian Jones' quest to single handedly sail the worlds lowest and highest navigable bodies of water continue to amaze and inspire me.

My love of the outdoors and my curiosity about what it took to accomplish these feats of daring led to my own adventure two weeks before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.....the objective was 14,411 foot Mount Rainier in Washington state southeast of Seattle. Rainier is the highest mountain in Washington and the Cascade range, a major mountain range extending from southern British Columbia through Washington and Oregon down to northern California. Rainier is classified as a stratovolcano, a tall, conical volcano built up by many layers of hardened lava, pumice and volcanic ash. Stratovolcanoes are characterized by a steep profile and periodic, explosive eruptions and

are among the most common types of volcanoes. Two of the most famous of this type are Krakatau, best known for its catastrophic eruption in 1883 and Vesuvius, famous for its destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 A.D. Having done a lot of hiking and climbing while a student at both Boston and Cornell Universities in my younger days, I looked at myself and felt confident that with some hard training this then 48 year old body, bruised by years of football, squash and some unfortunate falls while quarry climbing in Massachusetts and ice climbing in New Hampshire could be whipped into shape to attempt a four day trek and climb to the summit of Rainier.

Much of my adult life has been spent either in the gym working out or rehabbing from various injuries, I knew the task would be difficult, but not insurmountable. As with most that had climbed before me, my approach would be two pronged: first to learn as much as I could about Mount Rainier and the challenges I would face and second to develop a conditioning and equipment plan that would see me successfully summit one week shy of my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. From the get go, I knew that my physical condition was OK, but not nearly in the kind of shape required to climb more than 10,000 vertical feet to altitudes higher than I'd ever skied in. I was also concerned about the extreme cold I expected we would encounter at higher elevations and when the sun went down...my finger tips ached at the thought of the sub-zero temperatures I would encounter.

Enough with the prelims...I sent in my deposit to Rainier Mountain Expeditions and immediately began to extend my regular gym workouts to include conditioning of the type that would put me in a good shape for the climb. My wife called these workouts exercises in masochism as they included running on the treadmill at up to 8 miles an hour with tape across my nostrils, hanging by my fingertips on a chin-up bar while wearing a 40 pound weight vest and running up and down the stairs of UC's football stadium. My diet was composed of eating tons of granola and other protein and carbohydrate-rich foods and supplements....you may even have seen me on one of my many hikes around Hyde Park or the Cincinnati nature center carrying a 60 pound pack!!

When you spend countless hours conditioning you have plenty of time to daydream...and daydream I did. I thought about those that I had read so much about...Mallory, Irvine, Hillary and the challenges they faced in their epic attempts to conquer Everest.

Although Rainier isn't of the magnitude of Everest, McKinley, K2 or the Eiger, the challenge for me was almost as great. As I began to assemble my equipment I thought I'd find it comforting to compare my high tech, modern equipment to that which the early climbers used. However as I did my research I found that today's polypropylene inner garments and fleece, rip stop nylon and Gore-Tex outerwear are not considered to be as comfortable nor effective as Mallory's custom made clothes made of alternating inner layers of silk, cotton and wool with an outer covering of tough gabardine. Contemporary pictures of Mallory and his climbing partner Sandy Irvine as they began their 1924 journey on Everest show them jauntily dressed in the then current English gentlemen's attire of plus fours, trousers four inches longer than traditional

knickers. ( Golfers among us may remember seeing these same “plus four” pants as we followed professional golfer Payne Stewart on the PGA tour) and tweed jackets originally intended as shooting attire. These jackets were designed with a pivot sleeve allowing arm movement over the head without exposing the midriff to a nasty chill. The fatal flaw of these garments was their use of buttons and the problem of fastening them with cold fingers, as zippers weren’t used in clothing until the mid 1930’s. Incredibly, fly buttons were left undone as there were thought to be enough over-lapping layers to protect one’s manhood! On their feet these early climbers wore leather lace up hobnailed boots with iron strengthening both the heel and toe and three to four layers of wool, silk and/or cotton socks. In contrast modern boots are composed of an inner layer of foam, nylon and plastic with an outer layer of Kevlar, covered by an outer boot of nylon and Gore-Tex. Instead of the hobnail boots used by the early climbers I would use 12 point crampons fastened to my boot soles and sharpened to a knife point.

Climbing equipment had also changed dramatically since the days of Mallory and even Hillary. Coarse, unforgiving twisted hemp rope had been replaced by colorful nylon perlon rope designed to absorb the energy of a falling climber. When a climber falls, modern rope stretches reducing the maximum force experienced by the climber, their belayer and their equipment. Ice screws and pitons have been augmented with spring loaded camming devices, hexagonal alloy nuts, ascenders, descenders and all manner of protective devices. Finally the all important ice ax, once composed of a wooden handle and a straight metal pick, sharpened at both ends was replaced by a light alloy instrument with sharp teeth in a curved blade to more securely grip the hard packed snow and ice at any angle and a blunt end for hammering in pitons . The change from a straight pick to a curved ax will be seen as a major improvement later on in this paper.

As in many expeditions, a fatal flaw reared its ugly heads as the time came for me to sign up with a professional who would guide me up the mountain and help me refine the skills needed to conquer Rainier. I had waited too long to reserve a space on one of the teams forming to assault the mountain during the prime 2000 climbing season. I was determined that this was my year and that meant I would have to go earlier than expected, climbing during the first week in May, when the weather was very unpredictable and oftentimes quite severe. I was committed, I was psyched, never once thinking that the mountain would have its way with me. I was as ready as Mallory, Hillary and the rest and excited about the prospect of accomplishing something I had dreamed about for many years. Fast forward 18 months and I’m off I to CVG to catch a flight to the Seattle Tacoma/SEATAC airport. As the plane finally took off I assumed that I would sleep soundly as I normally did, but the excitement of finally heading to Rainier kept me daydreaming about those early climbers that I had read so much about. Whatever happened to Mallory and Irving on their fateful 1924 expedition, did they reach the summit of Everest...were they the first?? The story of this expedition has been told many times, but the details have only become available in the past 10 years or so as scientific evidence and new found clues have lead to more conjecture, but no confirmation.

To better understand the mystery we should go back to the beginning of Mallory's climbing career. Mallory's career didn't start with a bang, but a bust. In 1910, Mallory and a friend in a party lead by Sandy Irvine, his eventual partner on the ill-fated 1924 Everest expedition attempted to climb 12,228 foot Mount Velan in the Alps. Unfortunately, Mallory had to turn back shortly before the summit due to altitude sickness of all things. In the following year, 1911, Mallory climbed 15,782 foot Mont Blanc and in an article he wrote some years later about his ordeal asked the rhetorical question: Have we vanquished an enemy?, to which he responded: "None but ourselves." This response clearly underscored the character of this man, a self reliant, unassuming, determined and humble character.

During the 1921 climbing season, Mallory participated in the British Reconnaissance Expedition that explored routes up to the North Col of Mount Everest. This expedition produced the first accurate maps of the region around the mountain, but again revealed Mallory's weakness for the thin air encountered in high altitudes. The debilitating effect of altitude resulted in Mallory and his partners being relegated to the exploration of the approaches to the mountain rather than its upper reaches. However, Mallory with a dozen Sherpas was able to climb several lower peaks near Everest. After circling the mountain from the south side, they discovered the East Rongbuk Glacier, which is now considered to be the highway to the summit for nearly all climbers who start their expeditions from the Tibetan side of the mountain.

Undeterred by his experiences in 1921, Mallory returned to Everest the following year (1922) as a member of Brigadier General Charles Bruce's party, certain that this time he would be able to make a serious attempt at gaining the summit. By this time Mallory was convinced that the only ethical way to conquer this mountain was without the use of bottled oxygen. Despite being hampered and slowed by thin air, Mallory and his partners reached a record altitude of 26,985 feet, roughly 2000 feet short of the summit but again had to turn back, this time due to the late hour and worsening weather conditions. A second team, led by George Finch used bottled oxygen, and was able to reach 27,300 feet and for the first time in climbing history, used oxygen for sleeping as well. The use of oxygen by this team allowed them to climb both higher and faster than anyone who had gone before them, a lesson not lost on Mallory and one which he was determined to exploit on his next expedition.

Not to be outdone, Mallory organized a third attempt on the summit departing as the monsoon began to rear its ugly head. This attempt also ended in failure as an avalanche swept over the climbing party, killing seven of the climbing porters...the attempt was immediately abandoned and Mallory returned home to face much criticism for his poor judgment, a criticism that would follow him to his next expedition.

Although it seems Mallory was able to organize many of these complex expeditions almost at will, his plans for another attempt ground to a halt when the Royal

Geographical Society's Everest Committee barred his friend George Finch from participating because he was not only divorced, but had accepted money for lectures, marring his credentials as an amateur. Politics also entered into the equation. The Secretary of the Society made it clear that they endorsed this expedition as an example of British spirit, meant to lift the morale of the British people. Since Finch was an Australian it was deemed unacceptable that he could possibly be the first to summit Everest.

Mallory felt more certain than ever that his next attempt at Everest in 1924 along with General Bruce and his favorite climbing partner Sandy Irvine, would see him perched on the roof of the world. On June 4<sup>th</sup> 1924, Mallory and Irvine set off from advanced base camp at an altitude of 21,325 feet. Having learned from George Finch's success with bottled oxygen on the 1922 expedition, Mallory and Irvine began to use oxygen as they reached the base of the North Col at 23,000 feet...ethics be damned!! By June 6<sup>th</sup> they had reached camp 5 at 24,000 feet and the following day made it all the way to camp 6 at 27,000 feet having used only 75% of his first oxygen bottle for the two day climb into the death zone. This correlated to a climbing rate of almost 900 vertical feet per hour, an amazing pace at this altitude....so oxygen really helped!!

On June 8<sup>th</sup> at 1pm, Noel Odell, a geologist with the expedition, moving up the mountain in a supporting role spotted what he thought were two climbers on a prominent rock step at about 26,000 feet. Odell reported: "At 12:50, just after I had emerged from a state of jubilation at finding the first definite fossils on Everest, there was a sudden clearing of the atmosphere, and the entire summit ridge and final peak of Everest was unveiled. My eyes became fixed on one tiny black spot silhouetted on a small snow-crest beneath a rock-step in the ridge; the black spot moved. Another black spot became apparent and moved up the snow to join the other on the crest. The first then approached the great rock-step and shortly emerged at the top; the second did likewise. Then the whole fascinating vision vanished, enveloped in clouds once more." This was the last anyone had seen of Mallory and Irvine. The only conclusive evidence of the extent of their ascent was one of their spent oxygen cylinders which was later found just below what is known as the "First Step", while Irvine's ice ax was found nearby in 1933. It's assumed that they died either on June 8<sup>th</sup> or at the latest, the next day. The news of their disappearance was widely mourned in Great Britain, and the two were hailed as national heroes.

So, did Mallory and Irvine reach the summit of Everest? Certainly there's no conclusive proof, but in 1999, Conrad Anker, climbing with the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition found Mallory's body at 26,760 feet on the north face of the mountain, some 2000 feet short of the summit. From the evidence found on and around Mallory's body, it was ascertained that he and Irvine had apparently been roped together when one of them slipped, the violent force of the fall snapped their rope and the two were separated. Irvine's body was never found, but his ice ax was found in an earlier expedition in 1933.

Further analysis would show that Mallory's body had been well preserved, almost like petrified wood. Upon examination the discovery of a serious rope-jerk injury around his waist would confirm that the two were tied together at one point, but the initial fall isn't what finally killed him. At these altitudes the snow usually has a very hard, icy crust and falls often cause a high speed glissade or slide which most often is arrested by the use of one's ice ax. Apparently Irvine slid over the edge to the valley below or into a deep crevasse, while Mallory continued down slope at a high rate of speed probably trying to roll onto his chest to use his ice ax for what is known as a "self arrest" before striking a rock that stopped his final fall. Unfortunately, the impact must have caused him to lose control of his ax as he was found with a severe golf ball size puncture to his forehead; this was the most likely cause of death.

Most mountaineering accidents occur not when one is ascending, but when descending due to extreme fatigue, failing light and the difficulty of keeping one's balance when facing downhill on a slippery track. Circumstantial evidence points to the possibility that Mallory and Irvine had summited because Mallory's snow goggles were found in his pocket, suggesting that he and Irvine had made a push for the summit and were descending after sunset. As experienced climbers they were quite aware of the potential of severe snow blindness caused by eyes unprotected by dark goggles and would only dispense with them if climbing in darkness. If they had not attempted to climb the summit pyramid it is unlikely that they would still be out by nightfall ...but did they make it? No one knows for sure!! Perhaps Tom Longstaff who accompanied Mallory on the 1922 expedition best summed up Mallory's motivation when he wrote: "It is obvious to any climber that they got up. You cannot expect of that pair to weigh up the chances of return. I should be weighing them still. It sounds a fair day. Probably they were above those clouds that hid them from Odell. How they must have appreciated that view of half the world. It was worthwhile to them. Now they will never grow old and I am sure they would not change places with any of us".

Over the next 30 years, several major and minor expeditions were launched on Everest, many of which seemed to have as their sole motivation conquering the mountain for the glory of Great Britain. One of the more ludicrous of these attempts was the Houston Everest Flight of 1933, funded by Lucy, Lady Houston, a British millionairess and ex-showgirl. Lady Houston provided financing for a formation of highly modified two seat general purpose biplanes known as Westland Wallaces, to fly over the summit in an effort to deploy the British flag at the top. Although they failed to plant the British flag on the summit, they became the first aircraft to actually fly over Everest.

A more serious attempt occurred during the 1933 climbing season under the leadership of Hugh Ruttledge. Ruttledge first determined that the expedition would climb with supplemental oxygen, but once they reached higher altitudes, he decided to forgo the use of oxygen due to the incorrect but lingering belief that it was of little benefit to a properly acclimatized climber. After the usual delays caused by inclement weather, altitude sickness and impassable crevasses, the team was able to place their summit assault camp much higher than Mallory and Irvine did in 1924. However after two unsuccessful

attempts using the route established in 1924 which bypassed what we now call the “second step” they could go no further and abandoned their summit attempt.

Everest was not only the playground of the sound of mind and body. In 1934, Maurice Wilson, a British eccentric, stated his intention to summit Everest by himself. After taking only a few flying lessons, Wilson flew illegally from Britain to India hiking through Darjeeling and into Tibet, and with the help of Sherpa guides, began his attempt. Wilson was not a climber and had no climbing equipment. He expected to transport himself to the summit with spiritual help from monks living at the Rongbuk monastery at the foot of the glacier that bears its name. To the amazement of the climbing community, Wilson apparently climbed to almost 23,000 feet before succumbing; his body and diary were found wrapped in a tent the following year by climbers from another British expedition. Due to the difficulty of transporting bodies down to base camp Wilson's body was dumped in a deep crevasse below the North Col, but unexplainably resurfaced several times, the last being in 1960 when his badly decayed body was discovered out in the open by a Chinese climber.

Through the 30's and 40's and into the early 50's teams from Great Britain, Canada, Switzerland, the Soviet Union and China made heroic attempts at summiting to the top of the world. Although many new altitude records were attained, only the Swiss came oh so close to the top. On May 27, 1952 a team of three Swiss climbers, Lambert, Aubert and Flory, and a sherpa named Tenzing Norgay, of whom you'll hear more about shortly, reached what came to be known as Camp VII at 27,500 feet. What was odd about this attempt was that this ascent was to be for reconnaissance purposes only, so only one tent and a minimum of food was taken along. Having reached this great height, it was determined that the tent was too small for all four; so Aubert and Flory were forced to retreat to the relative safety of the South Col leaving Lambert and the sherpa Tenzing Norgay to make a final ascent. Early on the morning of May 28 in very unsettled weather, the two began their climb for the summit, only to be turned back within 500 feet of the south summit.

Everest's summit was finally reached in 1953 by a New Zealander, Edmund Hillary and sherpa Tenzing Norgay; they were members of the 9<sup>th</sup> British expedition organized by the Joint Himalayan Committee and led by John Hunt. By 1953 Tibet, the most typical entry point was closed to foreigners by the Chinese, forcing the expedition to begin in Nepal, using the recently discovered South Col route. This was to be the most ambitious attempt so far, totaling over 400 people, including 362 porters, twenty sherpas and 10,000 pounds of equipment and supplies. Although Hillary had planned to climb with his friend George Lowe, Hunt decided that Hillary, the most experienced climber of the group, should be teamed up with the most experienced sherpa, Tenzing Norgay who had ascended to within 500 feet of the summit the year before with his climbing partner Raymond Lambert. A second summit team of Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans was chosen for their previous experiences. Lowe was left to supervise the preparation of the Lhotse face, a huge and difficult ice wall while Hillary forged a route through the Kumbhu icefall an almost insurmountable collection of towering, constantly shifting ice spires and yawning crevasses which had proven to be one of the most

difficult and deadly portions of the long climb to Everest's upper reaches. Although both teams were highly experienced and fit for such a challenge, they differed in their approach to the use of oxygen. Evans and Bourdillon used the then new closed circuit oxygen system which proved to be their undoing as their ascent of the South summit was cut short by recurring problems with their breathing equipment. Two days later, the expedition made its second and final assault on the summit with its fittest and most determined team. For their attempt, Hillary and Norgay chose to use the more conventional open circuit oxygen and finally reached the summit at 11:30 AM on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1953. To this day, it's not definitively known who actually set foot on the summit first, was it Hillary or Norgay? Although Hillary maintained that they both arrived at the same moment, some theorize that it was actually Norgay, the sherpa, who reached the top first as the only hard evidence of their summit victory is a picture of the sherpa on the top of the world. Since it was known that Tenzing had no idea how to use a camera many surmised that Hillary wanted to record the exact moment for posterity and therefore had the sherpa take the first step on the top. Unfortunately, the climbers had little time to spend celebrating their victory. After months of trekking and climbing they were only able to spend 15 minutes on the summit before turning to one of the most difficult aspects of the expedition, descending safely to Camp 7, 2000 vertical feet below the summit and then on to base camp. As Mallory said prior to his demise, "If you climb a mountain for the first time and die on the descent, is it really a first ascent of the mountain? I am rather inclined to think personally that maybe it is quite important, the getting down, and the complete climb of a mountain is reaching the summit and getting safely to the bottom". This philosophy is echoed by Mallory's son John when he said: "To me the only way you achieve a summit is to come back alive. The job is only half done if you don't get down again". To this day, far more climbers have been killed on the way down than on the way up! However, the British finally got what they had sought over the many attempts to conquer Everest and knighted both Hunt and Hillary for their efforts.

The year 1953 seemed to be a turning point for Everest as just three years later in 1956, a Swiss expedition put four climbers on the summit, followed in 1960 by a Chinese team of three which was the first to reach the summit via the North Ridge. The first ascent by an American was accomplished by Jim Whittaker and Nawang Gombu Sherpa who later went on to become the first man to summit Everest twice, first with Whittaker in 1963 and then in 1965 with an Indian expedition that put 9 climbers on the summit. More records followed in fairly rapid succession: in 1970, a Japanese skier skied from the South Col down to the base; in 1975 Junko Tabei of Japan became the first woman on the summit; later that same year the British made the first successful ascent of the Southwest face. Then in 1978 an Italian climber, Reinhold Messner and his Austrian partner, Peter Habeler attained another first by reaching the summit without using supplemental oxygen. Now that Everest had been effectively conquered it became the playground for all sorts of stunts and records.

In 1988 a Frenchman paraglided from the summit to Camp 2 in 12 minutes, in 1998 a Swede became the first person to ride his bicycle all the way from his home in Sweden to Everest, then scaled the mountain alone without the use of supplemental oxygen and bicycled back to his home, while in 2000, a Slovenian was the first to accomplish a five hour uninterrupted ski descent from the top to the bottom only to be outdone by a 24 year old who snow boarded top to bottom that same year.

As spectacular as some of these stunts were, I find it's the personal triumphs that are more inspiring. The summit has seen a double amputee, a Briton who had broken his back 18 months before his ascent, a blind climber, a 75 year old Japanese and a helicopter that landed on the summit. The most fantastic of all though are the solo climbers who have taken what used to be a several month expedition and turned it into a walk in the park. Most notable of these are the outright speed record set by a 25 year old Nepalese sherpa who ascended the mountain in 8 hours 10 minutes and Apa Sherpa who has climbed Everest 19 times!!

As I slowly come out of my daydreams, my plane arrived at SEATAC; the reality of my adventure now came fully into view. By the following morning I'll be checking into Rainier Base Camp in Ashford, Washington, to begin my orientation including a detailed equipment and gear check. I found to my horror that after years of complaining to my wife, Diane, that she always massively over packs for business or vacation trips, that I've done the same and am carrying at least 10 pounds more than I should! My first lesson on the mountain then becomes how to reduce this additional weight down to the 60 pound pack my guides maintain is optimal. All those years of telling Diane how to pack lightly are eclipsed by the methods the guides suggest to remove the weight burden I've placed on myself. To get an appreciation of how to save weight, I'm told to lose the small tube of toothpaste and put a dab of it on a piece of wax paper, discard the roll of toilet paper and replace it with a few moist wipes...you get the picture. The rest of the day is filled with introductory talks about safety practices, route planning, environmental considerations and demonstrations of knots and anchors and the first steps toward crevasse rescue....and oh by the way, we're in for a special treat. Mother nature has played a dirty trick on us and the fickle finger of weather fate has frowned upon us. Although it's the early Spring, Rainier got hit hard and 6 feet of fresh snow have fallen recently. Now snow covers the classic switchback trails normally followed from Base Camp at 5400 feet to the hut at Camp Muir at 10,060 feet. This trick of mother nature changed our entire game plan, forcing us to climb straight up the mountain in knee deep snow rather than to crisscross across the mountain avoiding steep, extremely tiring verticals stretches of climbing.

Up at the crack of dawn and anticipating extreme cold, I dress in the multiple layers of mountaineering clothing I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: polypropylene long johns, cotton turtle neck, nylon wind shirt, fleece vest, down-filled parka, wick dry and heavy woolen socks and my incredibly stiff plastic expedition boots. Along with this are two pairs of gloves, a woolen cap, heavily tinted mountaineering glasses and my now 59 pound pack having squeezed out every single ounce of unnecessary clothing and equipment from it. Of course the burden doesn't stop there as I must carry two one liter bottles of fresh water, my freshly sharpened crampons and my swami belt for when we rope up in climbing pairs. I've got so much clothing on that I can barely walk, but somehow I make it into the van for the short drive to Paradise, the jumping off point.

As the teams assemble, I come to the realization that at 50 years old, I'm the oldest climber by a good 20 years. As we all get acquainted, I find the supposedly rigorous exercise plan that I followed pales in comparison to my fellow climbers, many of whom were college students or others with plenty of time on their hands whose daily exercise regimens included 25 to 30 miles of biking, 2-3 hours pumping iron in the gym and all sorts of exercises I had never even dreamed of. Undaunted, I take my place near the head of the line of climbers thinking it's better to be up front with the stronger climbers as my ego will force me to keep up with them. So off we go into knee deep snow, it's about 7AM and the sun is just coming up over the mountain...it looks to be a clear, cold day, a great one for climbing. As noon approaches and the sun's rays begin to reflect off the crisp, white snow I begin to sweat, first just a trickle running down my back, but then as we climb higher and the sun is almost directly overhead, we begin to sweat profusely and shed layer after layer of clothing until we're down to long johns and nylon running shorts, thankful that we have a ready supply of fresh snow for water as I'm drinking at least 2 liters every hour or so.

By 3 PM the sun is starting to go down and as it sinks behind the mountain, the sweat begins to freeze making it necessary to start putting on all of those layers of clothes I had taken off just a few hours ago. We're still a good four hours from the Muir hut, our destination for the day. The terrain is getting steeper and my crampons are beginning to bite on the hard packed snow and ice that replaced the deep granular snow we had been climbing through the past 5 hours. My breath is more labored, my back and legs are aching and my toes are beginning to get that tingly, numb feeling as the intense cold seeps through my boots and socks. My head begins to pound as the altitude and my heavy breathing start taking their toll, but it's the monotonous rest, step, breathe, breathe, step, rest, step...that's beginning to wear me down.

As we reach 8500 feet I can see the crest of an ice ledge that we'll have to surmount. I'll need to gather up all my strength for this assault on the crux of the day's climb. But I'm really weary and need to straighten up and stretch out my aching back before we rope up to safely ascend this obstacle. Unfortunately in the process of straightening up, I lose my balance, the weight of my top heavy pack causing me to fall backwards onto the hard packed snow, beginning the out of control glissade that has led to the disappearance and

death of many mountaineers before me. Sliding, tumbling, flailing my arms, kicking my heels and struggling to get my ice ax in position to self arrest, I bounce off of a few rock outcroppings and ice mounds, gaining speed, terrified that I might become another statistic in the annals of Ranier mountaineering. I struggle to roll onto my chest and attempt to drag my ice ax in the self arrest mode we were taught just a day earlier. My thoughts are flowing fast...I've got no time to be afraid, this is where training automatically kicks in. Finally, my ax bites into the packed surface and I slowly grind to a halt. In those few moments as I careened down the slope, my fear turned to depression...how could I be so careless and made such an egregious error. I knew from years of climbing frozen waterfalls and ice walls that the climber's weight must be equally balanced like a tripod with three limbs over the ice and one arm free to place the ice ax further up the climb, followed by alternating each crampon-equipped foot to kick in a fresh step. All those months of training and planning went up in smoke.

A quick look at my watch's altimeter revealed I'd slid more than 1000 feet down the mountain. Every bone in my body is aching, I'm badly shaken up and am frankly confused, not knowing whether I can or should continue or call it quits. By the time one of the guides got down to me, it was getting dark and the temperature was dropping rapidly as the sun descended over the mountain. In typical fashion, my guide explained that I had only two choices with the hour being late and a storm fast approaching: find or dig out a snow cave and wait out the storm for what could be 24 hours or more, or beat a hasty retreat to the comfort of the bunkhouse at the base of the mountain. These critical choices, although not as life threatening as many of the decisions climbers I had read about faced on their climbs, were serious to me. The prospect of bivouacking high on the mountain in temperatures that are sure to go well below zero didn't sound very appealing and would be compounded by the fact that I wasn't carrying a stove for melting snow or much food to tide me over, so I opted for retreating back down to base camp. This was one of the most difficult personal decisions I had ever made. My wife and the few of my friends who had followed my exploits would be disappointed for me, my ego was hurt...would I be the only one of our team not to reach Muir camp and finally the summit? The climb down is much quicker than the ascent as I stumble through the now packed, almost vertical trail we made on our way up earlier this day. Finding my bunk, I collapsed face first into bed only to be woken up hours later, gasping for air as I was so tired I had forgotten to take off my burdensome pack, it was literally crushing me as I lay exhausted in my bed!! I'm extremely disappointed as I'm absolutely spent and can't even consider going back up the mountain as it was hit with another late season storm and no one will be allowed on the mountain until the weather clears and the threat of avalanche is minimized.

On the flight home the following day I can't sleep; initially I felt depressed that after many months of training and planning I had not reached my objective, the summit. What was I going to tell Diane who had suffered along with me through those many months of my obsession? How would I explain this failure to my friends who had kept telling me I was crazy...they never did understand my motivation. But on further reflection, I've lived to climb another day and feel I've pushed my personal endurance much further than I ever had before, I'm pleased that under the worst possible conditions, I made it as far as

I did...and as Jim Whittaker the first American to summit Everest said “You never conquer a mountain, mountains can’t be conquered, you conquer yourself. I found this quote very comforting because it really goes to the heart of my personal quest. I wanted to challenge myself in a way I had never really done before. Business challenges, the challenge of raising a family are all put into perspective when one goes mano a mano with nature.

Will there be another climb in my future...absolutely....and why, because it’s there!!