

## To Climb Rainier

Like an airplane landing, any high mountain climb you walk away from is successful. Our Rainier climb this last weekend was fantastic, absolute eye candy with its massive exposed crevasses, but we did not make the top. With bad route advice, we ended up burning too many precious hours in the wrong area trying to route find around a now non-existent snow bridge.

Other harrowing moments such as crevasse punch-ins and bowling ball sized rocks zipping by will make this climb more memorable than the previous time when we actually summited.

Good to be back safe and sound; glad to have been high on the mountain with such a great team.  
Steve

We prepared for months, climbing BIG peaks like Mt Pugh, Mt Daniels and multiple hikes on smaller hills like Mt Si, Rattlesnake Ridge, Tiger Mountain and others. I held several back yard classes on rope and crevasse rescue until I was satisfied that our little crew had some hope of saving themselves and being of assistance in saving each other.



At any time of the year on Rainier, the possibility of slipping or punching through a snow bridge into the abyss of a crevasse is very real and not at all remote. Because of the training, preparation and negotiating the maze of family logistics, we would be going in August at a time when the snow bridge collapse problem and glacier travel would be at its worst; the end of summer. A lot of crews climb the mountain, all seasons. We could do this. This one would be similar for me

to my climb of Mt Olympus in August – we would expect a spectacularly fractured glacier to negotiate. Truly, just to see and experience that up close and intimate, as we would surely do, alone is worth the intense effort that awaited us.

6pm, Thursday night, 20<sup>th</sup> of August we gathered in front of my house and offered a prayer. For all our anticipation and preparation our crew was frankly a bit shaky. Still fighting a persistent cough from a bout of the flue, my son had just bailed from the team. Suzanne (age withheld, I think 30 something) too was also recovering from a long fight with the flue and still had an occasional cough - though not so severe. Paul, Suzanne's son, not quite 14 years, less than a week ago had had a mild concussion after cracked his head, splitting his hide wide open in a skateboarding accident (yeh no helmet) Funny – wouldn't think about stepping on a glacier without one... anyway, he had just proved himself returning from a 3 day scout backpack trip and he seemed fine today, Eric (still a young buck in his thirties) was still mildly complaining about his feet but he was a lot better with some new contrived variation on his orthotics to try and then there was me,

the tour leader, the old guy (ask my kids!) at almost 53 with my little pharmacy of drugs for coaxing a few more climbs out of my abused knees and elbows!.

One key thing we had going for us that pays more in many real respects is teammanship and heart. A team that cares for each other and has the heart and drive to push past the complaints and pains and minor annoyances, real as they are, is worth everything on these kinds of adventures.

. The back of Suzanne's suburban was stuffed with backpack and various bags of gear. I offered a prayer and we drove off to the White River Campground on the North side of Rainier. With only a bit of daylight left, we found literally the last campsite available and set up the tents. This would be the last "full" night of sleep.

The morning came early and with almost a sea of other campers we quietly cooked up some oatmeal and re-packed our gear. I weighed the people and packs and we tried to divi up the team gear based on ability to carry. This would shift around from time to time as the sojourn progressed.

The route in front of us, leading straight up the Inter Glacier, is simply a huge, long undertaking. It is without competition the hardest thing I have ever done. This would be my second time. 5 years ago I led another team of young folks, up this forever hill for



a June attempt. We went straight up the glacier in the most perfect snow conditions possible. Now, after hiking up what seemed like 5 miles, up past the Glacier Basic camp, over the long hogback ridge and onto the glacier field, at least half the glacier was simply gone and a long steep scree trail replaced it.

Just as we were setting up with crampons to step onto what was left of the icy glacier, we heard that dreadful crack of dislodged rock. Moments later several softball-sized rocks came flying by at freeway speeds not more than about 30 feet off. With several flying by at once, I shudder to think if we had been on the path. It was clear we would have to hug the right side of the glacier where it was rocky and rough enough to

reduce at least the speed of the projectiles. With crampons donned, we shouldered our 40-55 pound packs again and pressed our metal up the crunchy ice. Suzanne remarked of the fascinating beauty of the water-ice at our feet with its many translucent layers of ice, running water and entrapped debris.

Another crack and a bowling ball sized missile went flying down the hill at break neck pace, only bouncing occasionally. We all looked, straining to calculate the trajectory for the last second dodge that could make the difference. It flew by head height by less than 10 yards to the left of Paul. He said 10 feet. I'll believe him as his mother prayed aloud, "Dear Heavenly Father, protect us". We hugged the shoulder tighter and pushed sinew an nerve to their limit trying to reduce our dwell time exposure in what came to be known as the "Bowling Alley."



Eric led the way and topping out above the ridges of the Inter Glacier was a huge relief, not only because of the rocks, but also because the slope rolled off considerable. We crossed several crevasses over snow bridges as we angled up and left traversing the entire expanse of the glacier toward Camp Curtis. This is one of two high camps and lays on the ridgeline separating the Inter Glacier from the truly massive Emmons Glacier. A modest cloud cover that have been thankfully shielding us from the heat of the August sun for much of the hike, now snuck up to us and began to shroud us in whiteout; Out came the GPS's again as we tried to mark locations, We all gave careful note as to the lay of the land in case we had to retire from the mountain in such poor visibility.

Finally stopping for a moment we noticed a red splotchy area on Paul's pant leg near his knee. "Ah I don't think it's much, I must have scratched it with my crampons when I tripped back at the bottom" "Well lets take a look!" someone offered. He raised his pant leg to reveal a real nasty 3-inch gash! "Tough kid," I mused. Susanne patched him up with some unconventional anti biotic miracle salve. I've seen it work on Paul the last time he biffed it badly on Mt Pugh so I'm starting to be a believer. After applying gauze patch, duct tape and vet wrap (my latest 1<sup>st</sup> aid acquisition) we saddled up once again for the final push to high camp at 9400 feet.



This involved climbing up a bit more on the ridge looking onto the spectacular Emmons Glacier. All up, this dry trail continues above Camp Curtis a few hundred feet until a saddle where it forks. One leg on the right goes right up and over steamboat prow with a steep decent to High camp. Favored by rangers, it is not as often used by the occasional climber. Walking left, it traverses about 50 yards above a sloping section that drops off a sheer cliff a thousand feet below. When covered in snow an uncontrolled slide would be the end of you but in dirt, it didn't seem at all vexing now. It eventually drops



via a short steep section to the fractured chaos of the Emmons. This was eye candy that you just have to experience up close. The pictures cannot do this justice and is worth the climb just to look into those icy jaws gaping wide to swallow the unwary. We geared up for the worst now. Eric continued to lead and route-find, zig-zagging in and out around one bottomless cleft after another.

Seeing the Rangers shack now was mental relief just as the physical demands seemed to sap every last ounce of my remaining energy. We rose several hundred feet as I dragged what seemed like wooden stumps behind for legs. My pack, fully loaded as it was for the 1<sup>st</sup> time on this trip, had been a nightmare from the moment I placed it on my back. It was an ultra-light suited for the task, but it turned out to not fit my body shape at all; probably would have worked for a tall fellow like Eric, but it was a nine hour torture chamber mated poorly to mine. If the waist strap I used, it left a 2” gap on my shoulders and cut off all the blood supply below my belly button. If I let the shoulder pads (with uncomfortable creases) carry the weight, then the bottom pad sagged low and pressed and banged incessantly on my behind and fatigued the most important muscle group for getting me up this endless hill. I was not a happy camper as it just sapped my energy and no doubt fatigued the patients of my teammates. Sorry!



At high camp, walls of rocks surround tent sites to give some protection from the gusty winds. I must have been quite wet from perspiration because with the wind blowing considerably with the last of the evening sun I was instantly cold. I am not talking about a bit uncomfortable. This was shivering bone-cold. I straightened up the now filthy rope, helped with the tent and changed every stitch. With my full cold weather outfit head to toe, it still took a good half hour later before I started feeling remotely comfortable,

The high camp ranger was gone and only a couple of friendly masons remained working the cabin. One had climbed to the summit – his 1<sup>st</sup> time only the day before so I did my best to query him regarding the ever changing route, With new crevasses opening up and snow bridges collapsing daily, getting



current route information was mountain gold. I had previously climbed this section, but now it was a very different mountain. Describing terrain features is hard enough with someone familiar with the mountain, but this fellow was a newbie. Still I thought I understood from him how the route would precede ....I thought wrong.

Three other groups of climbers arrived at camp and two led by a Dan and the other by Eric (not our Eric) were planning on the attempt and wanted to hook up to improve safety and share route finding skills. This seemed like a great plan and all agreed to a 1AM departure.

Eric's was working on dinner in a stiff wind, but right off the bat his white gas stove froze up and then, boy was I grateful I had had the group bring two; figured that would be a critical element to success. The Bateman duo had a new fangled "Jet-Boil" That is one sweet piece of gear. Uses practically no fuel, is immune to wind and is as fast as a microwave. We are all totally sold now and you can bet I'll put that one on my Santa's list! Nothing like hot tea and a warm meal to put life back in the limbs. Topped off with Berry Crumble and yummm I was VERY ready for a good long 4 hr rest! We gathered and thanked the Good Lord for our safekeeping as the sun rested behind the object of our quest.

I know 4 hrs sounds like nuts, but I was sleeping on a new down filled Exped 3" thick ultra light mat that a good friend Jimmy from work let me try. Add earplugs and I was in feather heaven. I probably still woke up a couple of times but each hour seemed like an evening and truly my body renewed at remarkable pace.

12:40 AM arrived and the camp began to come alive. One of the teams seemed to be getting a slow start and the minutes ticked away such that in fact it was closer to 2am

before we finally started up the tangled web of crevasses and bridges; 2 teams of 4 and one team of 3. My headlamp seemed like a weak candle compared to the searchlights that donned the other team leads, so led my team up last letting Dan pick the best path.

Dan seemed to choose wisely and all proceeded at a steady pace; sort of. Since the path was literally strewn with treacherous chasms it was more like walk 20 paces wait a few seconds and then proceed. That's just what it took to scratch out a path. Worked for me.



After a while of climbing the “Corridor” we began to vector hard left just shy of a vast crevasse that seemed to extend both left and right about 100 feet above us.. I was surprised and questioned the move. The line of 11 people stretched out on rope made any kind of communication a bit tough. Dan hollered back down to me that the boot track clearly worked in that direction. We reached a wall demarking the left edge of the Corridor and now I was quite perplexed. This maneuver was not at all in my expectations for the route but it was also hard to argue with the clear boot track. Dan worked up that ridge for a while and then backed off. “It’s nasty,” he said, “Only a icy narrow bridge across exposed crevasses and a steep icy landing on the other side of the bridge.” He questioned if this could possibly be the right way. From my conversation with the one fellow that had climbed it, days earlier, I thought we should have stayed in the Corridor farther and found what I had hoped would be a wide bridge across the chasm, He agreed to try it and so the entire group rotated the line and headed up and back right. He probed

with this bright lights the edge looking for some passage. The morning ticked on as we traversed until he concluded that there was no reasonable bridge. It was gone. The only way was going to be up thought the ridge on the left and somehow shirt the cleft and allow us to get back on the corridor above this gap. Without any better information this seemed the best shot. We were wrong again.

For each team an experienced lead climber would cross the icy bridge and set up on the other side belaying his teammate. Teach the next in line the hip technique. It was tricky and was really only useful to give just a nudge of help if the crossing person slipped a bit. All crossed safely as Dan probed far up ahead. We could occasionally hear some sailor cursing the obstacles that only he could see. Not wise to curse the mountain gods, I mused to myself! Finally after what seemed like an interminable time he expressed strong doubts to the rest of the teams below that we were on route. We had spent the better part now of 3 hours searching in the dark for the passage and the day and the challenge simply does not allow for putting that much time for so little distance gained. There appeared to be crevasse after crevasse to negotiate, I was now below and Eric and Susanne above me suggested we should call it. The other leads agreed, that this would be as high on the mountain as we would go and I began the decent. I crossed over one bridge and noted how just 10 feet over that the snow as Swiss cheese and shuttered to think if anyone crossed there, I called out loudly "Snow Bridge!"

Continuing 30 feet or so down and I heard the cry of Susanne, "Falling!", In an instant I was in the air diving down hill to stretch out any slack and plant my axe. I spun around on my axe to see 2 hands and Suzann's head poking up from the edge of the Swiss cheese section collapsed she had managed to get some purchase on the far side and used her ice axe to gain some more traction. She wretched and wormed her way up and over the side. Paul had done just the opposite, and had instantly doven uphill into his ax and had taken most of the fall keeping his mother from harm. I could not have been prouder of both of them.





It will be fascinating to hear the tail told by the others. The team below us had set up a sturdy ice screw over the nasty icy bridge and each one belayed the next back to the corridor and we wandered easily back to camp with our group in the lead. We stopped for



a while to see the sun rise. There really is nothing quite like it but the sun would not cooperate whilst our behinds began to freeze into the packed snow. Lest we freeze solid and become part of the receding summer glacier, we rose and descended to camp where we were treated to a glorious sunrise at Camp Schurman.



Only a very few, the weary, the intrepid get to experience this.

You cannot stay on the summit forever. You have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this... What is above knows what is below. But what is below does not know what is above. One climbs. One sees. One descends. One sees no longer. But one has seen. There's an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see. One can at least still know. – Anonymous

Back in camp I slept a bit and woke to a brilliant sun cast mountain.



It was just glorious and a real pick me up. Crawling out of the tent and an idea struck me - not to waste such a precious opportunity, I suggested, then cajoled and coaxed my rather subdued team to try and rescue me from a crevasse. Baker and Schurman are popular places for this exercise. Then we tossed Paul into the Pit of Despair and let the crew try and exercise him from the wet pit. I think it was a real lesson as he hung getting wet the crew learned what happens when they tried their own way rather than by the book. There is a huge difference when a live body is hanging in the balance!

As we were packing I encountered the other carpenter fellow. He actually seemed modestly knowledgeable about the routes and commiserated a bit with me over our mornings disappointing venture. I was asking about the alternate route out of Schurman over Steamboat Prow that several climbers seemed to be struggling on. It really looked nasty. "Come on, It's really not hard. They must be off the right route," and off he bounded with me in tow. He was practically a cat as he sprang up hill from rock to rock with me scrambling like mad trying to play catch up. This really was a nice way out if you knew which was the route. Hmm, Sounds like a metaphor for our primary disappointment. Well the chance to learn from someone with experience is like gold and I eagerly followed. I would master this hill yet.

From atop we canvassed the Corridor and the bordering ridge and he showed me the route - It was so clear. If I had only talked to the carpenter rather than the mason yesterday - You just got to laugh. What else can you do! Once we had crossed that icy

bridge we needed to keep going left almost to the end of the ridge overlooking the Emmons and then dogleg up – that was the recipe. We vectored up too early thinking we needed to skirt the huge corridor crevasse and return above it. In fact, the established route stays on the ridge all the way up the mountain and rejoins just as the corridor ends an long ways up, Oh for that little tid bit last night!

By the time I returned a ½ hour later I had a very impatient crew chomping at the bit to depart and Paul was not too warm to the idea of a vertical rock exit, so we donned our crampons once again and ran the fractured gauntlet.



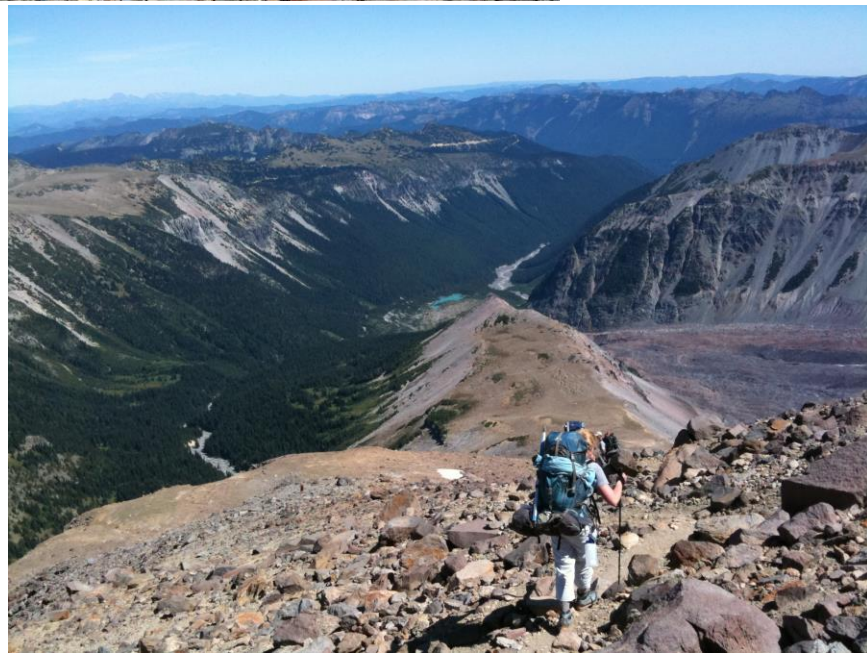
This time I did the leading zig zagging down the slope towards Camp Curtis at the base of Steamboat. We ate lunch and readied for the final long push down Mt Ruth.

We had gotten good scoop that we could avoid the Bowling Alley by staying on the ridgeline from Camp Curtis. As a down route it was super. There was however one spot



just at the end of the saddle below Curtis that has a small rock scramble. There is some exposure( a thousand feet of so) on a 15 foot section but it didn't seem like much to me. Eric said his heart just stopped as I stepped out into scree overlooking a shear drop off. It just seemed easy to me, but maybe I failed to see how close I was to real trouble, because it takes a lot to stop

Eric's heart! We helped Paul and Susanne with their heavy packs up this section and then it was just smooth sailing – still there were several slips and minor butt skirmishes with the scree laden trail but after several hours of endless decent, we finally did see the end and more grateful pairs of feet would be hard to find as soaked our



tired abused dogs in the glacier fed creak near Glacier Basin Camp.



We waded across the small river (that was fun- really) and we continued down to the cars. That part of the trail just seemed endless and my ill-fitting pack taunted my sinews till they squealed. Suzanne was having significant toe pain now, and I was concerned. She is a very tough lady and you could see the pain in her face, I believe in drugs so mine pains were annoying but somewhat muted, but Eric was simply numb from impact-induced neuropathy. Paul was transforming into a battle hardened soldier making a forced double-



annoying but somewhat muted, but Eric was simply numb from impact-induced neuropathy. Paul was transforming into a battle hardened soldier making a forced double-

time march to civilization. Suzanne had the keys and was last so I'm not sure what the rush was but as a horse owner I know that it is hard to get in the way of a barn sour horse and civilization was beckoning..

I too was mentally savoring our traditional "after mountain climb" restaurant meal. At



the car, we all changed into travel clothes – oh that felt so good. I said a prayer of thanksgiving and we left our mountain. In some tiny town Suzanne, who at this point could barely stay in our line, found a fantastic country restaurant that I will definitely return to next time I make my bid for the summit. Next July I'm thinking. Yes July would be just fine Lord willing.

We laughed and ate and drank and reminisced of the good

times in our lives. We will not forget such bonds of friendship that are forged in the crucible of high adventure.

Ps July 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 Steve regains the summit. Oh heh baby....that's the attitude I'm talkin' about!