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# THE SUMMIT BECKONS

As in life, Mount Rainier is about challenges and triumphs.

BY JAMES L. DOTI



**E**arlier this year, my 28-year-old son, Adam, called me and said, “Let’s do Mount Rainier.” Last summer, Adam and I scaled Mt. Whitney and had a terrific time doing it. But Mount Rainier is different. It has glaciers, crevasses and avalanches. More to the point, people die there.

But Adam caught me at a weak moment. A respite from everyday life to courageously battle the elements and conquer a snow- and ice-covered peak sounded like the stuff of a great adventure. Already, I could imagine myself standing on top, victoriously waving my ice ax high in the air. Besides, it would be a terrific way to get into shape. So I agreed to go, not quite sure what I was getting myself into.

That became a bit clearer when I received in the mail my first information from our guide service, Rainier Mountaineering Inc. (RMI). In addition to requiring that I sign away all my rights in an “Acknowledgment of Risk” form, the accompanying literature was not quite as inviting as a Club Med brochure. This is what it said:

“Mount Rainier is considered to be one of the toughest endurance climbs in the lower 48 states. At 14,410 feet, Mount Rainier is the most extensively glaciated volcanic peak in the continental United States. It is NOT an easy climb. Significant

elements of risk in mountaineering such as avalanche, ice fall, rock fall, crevasse fall, inclement weather, high winds and severe cold can be managed, but not eliminated. The two-day climb is 18 miles round trip, with an elevation gain and loss of 18,000 vertical feet. On summit day, be prepared to climb for 12 to 18 hours while carrying a backpack. Mountaineering is a physically demanding sport and conditioning is the single most important way you can help ensure a safe and successful climb. Remember, you cannot overtrain for this trip. You've got to be in the best shape of your life."

So began the most intense conditioning to which I've ever subjected my body. In addition to my usual staple of goodies like running, weightlifting and Nordic Track, I added walking around with a backpack weighted down with 60 pounds of cat food, a task that was particularly challenging for me since I weigh about 130 pounds.

To give you an idea of how challenging it is, I don't think I'll ever forget an early experience I had on a practice walk with my wife, Lynne, and dog, Cindy. (Named "Cindy" because her big brown eyes and a mole on the right side of her mouth give her an uncanny resemblance to Cindy Crawford.)

As is her wont, Cindy (the dog, that is, not the model) took a dump on the side of the walking path. As I leaned over to bluebag her business, the weight of the backpack caused me to topple over on my back. I never gave much thought to how a turtle feels on its back, but during the next few moments, as I struggled to right myself, I had a pretty good idea. Thankfully, Lynne was able to help me up, at least after her hysterical laughter ran its course.

The three of us also climbed Santiago Peak ("Saddleback" to us locals). At an altitude gain of 4,000 feet, rising from about 1,700 feet to 5,700 feet, it isn't much of a practice run, but it sure is a beautiful trail with its abundance of waterfalls, streams and oak trees, right here in our own back yard. There's also an element of danger. With 60 pounds of cat food on my back, I suspect I was being stalked by every mountain lion in close proximity.

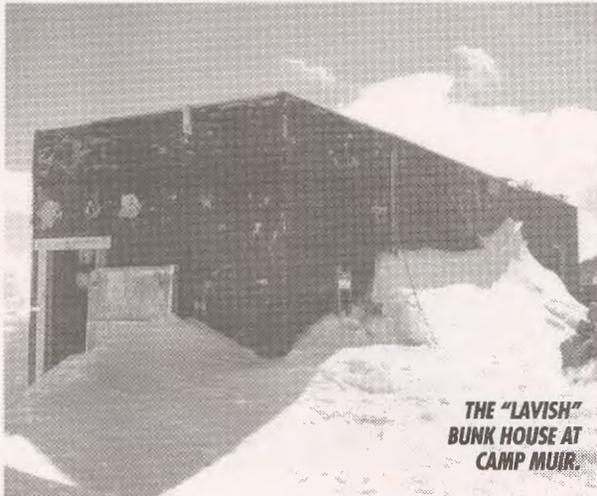
When we finally made it to the top for a spectacular 360-degree view of the haze and smog that envelope Orange County, I was particularly proud of Cindy. At 10 years old, I like to think that she is the oldest dog to have made it to the summit. If you're wondering what this powerful dog's breed is, I should tell you that Cindy's a mutt we adopted on what we were told would be her last day at the pound. To impress my friends who own exotic dogs, I've invented a breed name. Cindy is a "Santiago Mountain Shepard."

About a month before our Rainier trip, I decided to go for a practice climb on Mount Whitney, along with Adam and his fiancée, Brenda. Our plan was to climb from the Whitney Portal at 8,500 feet to the Trailside campsite at around 12,000 feet and spend the night before going on to the summit at 14,494 feet. Adam and Brenda decided to stay at a lower base camp. Because I wanted a head start in going for the summit, I decided to go on alone to Trailside.

Normally, in the summer, this camp is like the spaceport Mos Eisley in "Star Wars," so I fully expected to have the company of plenty of similarly deranged



**LEARNING  
RESCUE  
TECHNIQUES.**



**THE "LAVISH"  
BUNK HOUSE AT  
CAMP MUIR.**

fellow climbers. Not so. As I approached the campsite late in the day, I realized I was the only one there. It was an eerie feeling.

This meant I had to camp all alone – well, not quite all alone. We had been warned that bears were just coming out of hibernation and were likely to be very hungry. As I lay zipped in my sleeping bag, every rustle of wind against the tent sounded like bear claws tenderly sizing up dinner. I didn't sleep much that night.

I wanted to test my mettle in snow and found plenty of it. So much, in fact, that without the crampons, ice axes and other special gear that we would be renting at Mount Rainier, I couldn't reach the top of Mount Whitney. Still it was a great training climb, and I had just enough time to fully recover before our attempt at Mount Rainier. Adam and I met in Seattle on June 7 and headed to Ashford to meet the RMI group.

### **Breathing Lessons**

One of the great advantages of being on an RMI expedition is that everyone is expected to attend a one-day climbing school before making a summit attempt. So I became a student again and learned the basics of ice/glacier climbing with crampons and the techniques of climbing on a rope team. We were told an altitude gain of around 9,000 feet from the base to the summit of Rainier is like walking up the Empire State Building almost eight times.

If that wasn't bad enough, we were reminded that we would have to do it carrying heavy packs while continually ascending into thinner air.

Because of the lower air pressure at high altitudes, every breath of air at the summit of Rainier results in 40 percent less air and oxygen than at sea level. It's the thin air and lack of oxygen that sometimes lead to acute mountain sickness or the more serious and potentially fatal high-altitude cerebral edema. Because of these maladies, we needed to climb as efficiently as possible, and that meant learning how to maximize our oxygen intake by a technique called "pressure breathing." This involves sucking

air in and then exhaling as if you're blowing out a thousand candles.

To climb most efficiently, we also had to learn how to do the "rest step." This technique involves shifting one's body weight to the resting forward leg when it is in a vertical position, and then raising the trailing leg to the next step while keeping it as close to the ground as possible. It sounds complicated, but after you get in the groove, it's easy to see why this is the most efficient way to climb.

We also were rigorously tested on safety techniques, the most important of which is to quickly get into an anchor position to save a roped teammate who may have fallen. When you hear someone yell "falling," you drop to the ground, plant your ax into the snow about an inch away from your face and hold on at all costs.

Only the week before three experienced climbers had died on Mount Rainier and thus our safety lessons took on heightened importance.

Although only about half of those who attempt Mount Rainier make it to the summit, the ratio is lower in May and June because of erratic weather patterns and particularly high winds. Mount Rainier's microclimate mirrors Himalayan climbing conditions, albeit at a much lower altitude, which is why it is often

# THE SUMMIT BECKONS

used as a training ground for those preparing to summit Mt. Everest. To summit Mt. Rainer in the summer is no picnic.

## Beginning the Climb

When our big day finally arrived to start our ascent, the weather at the 5,400-foot base camp seemed pleasant enough. We knew anything could be happening on top, however. That first day involved a seemingly relentless, slogging, 5 1/2-hour climb to Camp Muir at 10,000 feet. When we arrived late in the afternoon and got settled in our unheated, three-level bunkhouse, I quickly recognized the accuracy of Bruce Barcott's description of Camp Muir in his wonderful book, "The Measure of a Mountain: Beauty and Terror on Mount Rainier":

*"Muir is a micro soviet of cranky, tired, nauseous, scared, anxious, angry, cold and often-paranoid human beings whose brains are not receiving as much oxygen as they should. They smell bad. Since walking in plastic climbing boots is awkward and taxing, the main activity at Camp Muir is sitting."*

I should also add eating. Because our next day's climb would involve 12 to 18 hours of climbing, we needed to work on some serious carbo-loading. Rather than consume the freeze-dried stuff that some people generously, but I might add inaccurately, call food, Adam and I decided the best source of carbohydrates was pizza.

Because Camp Muir is not the kind of place with a Pizza Hut around, we needed to plan for this in advance. The previous night, the proprietor of Ashford's general store told us there was a pizza place about a half-hour drive away in the town of Eatonville. When we got there, we found that the pizza place was actually named the "Pizza Place." From the front, it looked like somebody's garage. But as my mother often told me, don't go by appearances. It turned out that the "Pizza Place" rated near the top of pizza places I've known and loved. The owners, John and Tammi Bratholm, are Rat Pack aficionados and have plastered the walls of the Pizza Place with photos of Frank, Dino and Sammy. As Dino could be heard in the background singing "That's Amore," Adam and I wolfed down John and Tammi's "Special with the Works" that included as toppings sausage, prosciutto, meatballs, artichoke, pepper, onion, asparagus and spinach. After we ate our fill, Tammi took our leftover slices and carefully wrapped them in aluminum foil and sealed plastic bags so that the pizza could be easily transported in our backpacks.

At Camp Muir, we ceremoniously unwrapped the pizza and dug in. I felt the jealous eyes of our climbing mates as they sullenly ate their boil-in-a-bag versions of beef stroganoff and Hungarian goulash.

When we finished eating, about 7 p.m., our lead guide Matt Farmer told us we needed to get in our sleeping bags and get some sleep before his wake-up call in about six hours – at 1 a.m.

Leaving at that ungodly time of the morning is called an "Alpine Ascent" and is necessary in order to reach the summit while the snow is still firm. This also made it possible to climb down the mountain the same day. Matt then supplied us with earplugs so we wouldn't be disturbed by our bunkmates' sleeping sounds.

In spite of the earplugs, the cacophony of snores, wheezes, grunts and groans came through loud and clear. I took them out and resigned myself to staring all

night at the ceiling (I had a top bunk) while listening to my bunkmates' symphonic interpretations.

## 1 a.m. Ascent into a Blizzard

At 1 a.m., Matt came into the bunkhouse to tell us the summit attempt was a "go." At the same time, he was concerned as he had gotten word that two more climbers (not RMI-related) had been killed the previous day.

They were blown off a ridge and fell down a steep part of Ingraham Glacier – the very glacier we'd be negotiating in a few hours. Matt added that "the weather is a little squarely out there."

With all of that on our minds, when we got outside to start putting on our crampons it was a beautiful evening with stars all aglow. While the temperature was in the teens, it didn't seem too cold.

And it wasn't as dark as I expected. When we took our first steps, I not only felt good but marveled at the surrealistic sight of our three separate teams of four walking in unison across the Cowlitz Glacier. The sight of an ant-like line of headlamps on the helmets of all my rope partners and the other two roped teams ahead reminded me of the seven dwarfs, and I felt like singing "Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go." Bruce Barcott described those first steps on the Cowlitz Glacier beautifully:

*"There are few more thrilling moments in life than the first steps of a summit day ... Even the satisfaction of topping out cannot match it. Under a brilliant moon you step onto a shadowy glacier, matching your rope partners step for step, your heart pumping equal parts apprehension and adrenaline to the ends of your fingers and toes, and all you hear is the sound of your boots shattering thousands of crystals."*

Unfortunately, we began to hear more than the sound of boots. The sound of wind began to grow. Every so often unsettling gusts of wind would rip through the glacier, making it difficult to continue our trek. But continue we did, and quickly too, since we were warned that the Cowlitz Glacier is a rock slide area,

a warning that was shown to be well-founded by the presence of large rocks all around us.

As we proceeded up the steep Cathedral Gap leading to the Ingraham Glacier, the wind steadily picked up and began to howl. Maintaining our balance proved increasingly difficult in the rocky crags of the gap. Hobbling over rocks and stones, our crampons created sparks that flashed through the night.

When we arrived at the Ingraham Flats at around 11,500 feet, the wind increased to about 50 mph with gusts hitting 70. At that point, all we could do was protect our eyes and faces from air-borne snow and ice crystals by turning our helmets directly into the wind. Our training paid off as we planted our axes in the snow and held on for dear life. As I peeked out, I saw my son and his rope-mate in anchor positions, holding onto a teammate between them who had fallen off the trail.

We were hunkered down in the middle of a blizzard worse than any I could remember growing up in Chicago. I began to ask myself how I ever got into this predicament. The British climber George Mallory justified his ill-fated attempts to summit Mt. Everest by saying, "Because it is there." A friend of the psychologist

*Continued on page 61*



JIM AND DOG CINDY  
CLIMBED SANTIAGO PEAK  
AS A PRACTICE RUN FOR  
MOUNT RAINIER.

# THE SUMMIT BECKONS

Carl Jung had another rationale for the allure of climbing. He told Jung of a dream he had where, when reaching the top, "my happiness and elation are so great that I feel I could mount right up into space."

Hanging on for dear life I didn't quite see it that way. In the ghastly situation in which we found ourselves, hope centered not on the happiness and elation of reaching the top, but on the safety and security of reaching the bottom. Finally, Matt circled his hands in the air, indicating a retreat from this living hell.

After two hours of retreat, we tromped into the friendly confines of our bunkhouse at Camp Muir. We all, I'm sure, shared the same bittersweet feelings. Happy to be out of a howling blizzard, we hadn't accomplished our goal to "bag" the summit. Matt did the best he could to boost our spirits by telling us we gave it our all and, more importantly, made it back safely. "Rainier will be there when you want to try again."

## Sunk Costs

Our final descent from Camp Muir to Paradise gave me an opportunity to pass on to my son, Adam, one of the great laws of life: The law of sunk costs, one of the most practical and useful economic laws out there.

Matt told us we would need only one quart of water each to get down. But Adam and I had two quarts each. Because no water is readily available at Muir, it must be made by melting snow using very expensive, short supplies of propane gas. Obviously, water is a precious commodity at 10,000 feet. As a result, we were told to be careful in our use of it.

My response, though, in hearing we needed only one quart of water to make it to the bottom, was to immediately begin dumping my extra quart into the snow. Adam was aghast at my wastefulness and ranted over my profligacy. But why should I add weight to my pack when that water, at anything near sea level, was of no real value? When Adam remonstrated that the tremendous costs of producing the water justified schlepping it down, I was able to illustrate the law of sunk costs. That is, the costs of producing water at 10,000 feet have no relevance in determining the value of water at a different time and location.

When it comes to costs, forget about the past and look to the future.

This led me to a different conclusion about why climbers strive for the mountaintop. I don't think Mallory or Jung's friend had it right. I see mountain climbing as something akin to the purpose of education. That purpose revolves around the search for truth.

A former professor at Chapman University by the name of Quintin DeYoung described that search for truth as follows:

"The vision dims ... I grow weary. I am old and tired now ... Will you seize and grasp my flickering flame? Oh! ... Love truth! Seek knowledge! Not because I implore you. But seek you knowledge and truth for its own sake. Try it! Test it! You may find, as I have found, there is no truth ... only the quest. But if you find the truth, please spare me. Don't let me know. While I breathe, I prefer to seek."

Striving for the mountaintop, I think, is like the search for truth. It's not the allure of the summit, but rather the allure of the quest.

It's about getting in shape by carrying a heavy backpack around the neighborhood and local hills with my dog, Cindy, close at my side. It's camping alone at 12,000 feet under the stars while imagining what it's like to be grasped by the claws of a hungry bear. It's learning the techniques of rope climbing and anchoring. It's being caught in a brutal blizzard the likes of which I'd never encountered. It's about having an opportunity to impart the law of sunk costs on an unsuspecting soul. Most important, it's about setting goals and striving to accomplish them.

P.S. About a month later, an opportunity came along for me to make another attempt on Rainier. This time, I made it to the top. How was it, you ask? I believe Professor DeYoung was right on: "There is no truth... only the quest." OCM

*Editor's Note: For more on the dangers of climbing peaks such as Mount Rainer see "Heroes of Mt. Hood," National Geographic Adventure (Cover Story, September 2002).*

James L. Doti is president of Chapman University in Orange.

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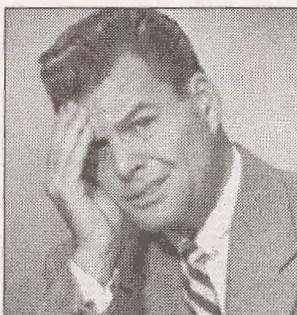
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