



Watercolor by Dee Molenaar, legendary American mountaineer and artist. The inscription reads: 'To Terry—who pioneered a new route of descent down the Mountain—and in record time.'

A 1,300 FOOT FALL, BUT WHO'S COUNTING?

Your sophomore year is always the most dangerous.

In any venture—schooling, business, misadventure—you are at highest risk to yourself just after gaining sufficient experience to think you know what you're doing.

Your sophomore year. You could die.

Example: My second year in climbing started, and stopped abruptly, on February 7, 1981. On the steep ice slopes of aged Mt. Rainier, I fell a quarter of a mile and lived to tell about it.

The newspapers reported a distance of 1,000 feet; it was actually over 1,300 feet, but after the first few yards who's counting?

I'd spent the months after my first climb—the Charity Mountain Radio Marathon ascent of Rainier--reading everything I could on the annals and science of climbing. Of course, probably no endeavor is less based on book-learning than mountain climbing. There is, however, a rich literature of mountaineering, and I steeped myself in its history.

I fantasized. Mallory. Herzog. Unsoeld. Bonnington. Whymper. Hornbein. MacDonald. Which name didn't belong in this list ?

I spent the summer of 1980 exulting in the great outdoors. KYYX even reprised Charity Mountain. It was a crashing anti-climax, but I didn't care. Rob Newsom and I reached the summit of Mt. Rainier in five hours from Camp Shurman on the north side of the mountain, and were off enjoying fondue and mint juleps in Silver Spring before anyone knew we were down.

It was great! I fancied myself an evolving climber--planned to be one the rest of my life. Given the history of mountain climbing, and my proclivities in the great outdoors, this was potentially an extremely short calling.

It nearly ended in the winter of '81.

November, 1980 through January, 1981 were standard issue Seattle gray-and-wet. Even the ducks and slugs went undercover. No one was masochistic enough to head into the mountains during those months, not even a gung-ho sophomore such as myself. Only the heartiest, or most foolhardy, go anywhere near Rainier in winter, even when it's clear.

I could hardly wait.

By the time a two-week high pressure ridge settled over the Northwest in late January, I was aching to get to altitude. My week-long winter vacation started the weekend of January 31. I planned to spend the first days painting walls at home, and the remainder climbing walls of ice.

Did I not know how to enjoy a vacation?

It was stunningly clear and cold that first Thursday in February as I packed for a winter 'assault' on Rainier. The mountain stood an icy sentinel on the southern horizon, blissfully unaware of my planned 'offensive.'

The use of the words 'assault' and 'offensive' are further examples of the sophomoric mind-set. Later, one might hopefully learn to show more respect for Nature, but not a sophomore.

As I drove to Paradise, no warning buzzers went off at park headquarters in Ashford; the full-scale alert I expected the National Park Service to initiate anytime I came within five miles of Mt. Rainier never materialized. The park ranger at Paradise didn't recognize me when I registered for the climb.

So far, so good. I might sneak this one in yet.

The ranger told me only two other climbers, Barnes and Warren, were on the south side of the mountain, headed to Camp Muir at 10,000 feet. I could meet them at Muir that night, and if they agreed, join them for the climb to the summit the next day.

Perfect. I wouldn't have to risk soloing. This thought undoubtedly kicked off an avalanche of laughter in the alpine netherworlds.

Here's what it's like hiking to Camp Muir in mid-winter:

You strap on your snowshoes in Paradise and step off into the deep, frozen white. Up slopes that in the summer burst with flowers and streams you trudge through air so clear it shines. The wind streaming down glacier-cut valleys composes solitary musical patterns for your ears. Over the first hill, you realize you've entered an enchanted crystal-sea ringing with winter birdcalls. The scene only lacks summer's whistling marmots--safely tucked away in winter burrows.

All burdens evanesce to a rhythm of lifting and planting, lifting and planting. Your webbed footgear moves in offset concert with the cross-country ski-poles looped around your wrists. It is high life, and the reason you go out there time after time. You're so much richer breathing such air, seeing such beauty, feeling so alive.

You say to yourself, 'Take away my job and all the money, let my family and friends reject me, but don't ever take me away from the heights above Paradise.'

Three-quarters of a mile out, you begin negotiating the slopes to the safe side of Panorama Point, leading to the Muir Snowfield. These slopes are avalanche-prone in winter and have swallowed several reckless spirits; you stay in the trees well to the right. Here your snowshoe technique is tested on the suddenly steeper terrain. The damned things can quickly make you feel like a drunken seal trapped in wet cement with broken cardboard boxes taped to your flippers.

You emerge onto the lower slopes of the Muir Snowfield, and the great mountain is arrayed before you. To your far left, the Nisqually Glacier leads to the gully called 'the Fan,' Wapowety Cleaver, and 'the Turtle'. Camp Hazard and Point Success tower above. The south-central face of Rainier is cleaved by the Wilson Headwall, Fuhrer Finger, and the awesome Nisqually Icefall--even then warming-up for a day spent falling apart. Straight ahead, four miles beyond and a mile above, 'the Beehive' rises beyond Camp Muir, bordered by Gibraltar chute on the left and the volcanic massif of Gibraltar Rock towering over Camp Muir itself.

Tucked away in an outcropping above Moon Rocks, Camp Muir is barely visible seemingly a dozen miles away—it's only four, but will surely feel like a dozen by the time you arrive. Completing the picture, to your right are the rugged spires of Cathedral Rocks, on the 'standard route' heading toward Disappointment Cleaver.

It's a massive mountain--thirty miles in diameter, two full miles of exposure covered by thirty-five square miles of ice and millions of tons of ancient pumice

grinding toward the sea. The place has a spirit all its own. No wonder primeval Indians feared its power, and thought if you went up on it, 'you must surely die.'

When you're a sophomore, you plod on with no thought for the wisdom of the ancients. Besides, on the Muir Snowfield no thought is necessary; you put one snowshoe in front of the other, and eventually you get to Camp Muir.

Eventually. This translates from the antediluvian Chinook tongue to mean hours later--many hours later, after you've spent most of the day wondering if you'd ever arrive. Your mind says you make no visible progress.

Camp Muir? It's 'off there in the distance.'

You eat lunch at Pebble Creek, and it's 'off there in the distance.'

You stop a dozen times, covered in icy sweat (which, of course, immediately freezes) and Camp Muir is 'off there in the distance.'

You begin to think that your poor brain is playing discouraging games with you, but then remember you were the one who decided to come do this fool climb. Your brain had nothing to do with it. Before the weekend is over, your brain wants no association whatsoever with what happens. And, truthfully, you can't blame your brain because it is so apparently absent.

Just about the time the sun tilts toward the Pacific, you begin to think Camp Muir looks like it's getting closer. It is an illusion. Sixty miles behind you, Mt. St. Helens laughs at the silly idea that you think you'll ever get to Camp Muir. Of course, St. Helens blew its top the summer before, so what does it know?

Look here, Muir is getting really close! Hell, only another hour or two!

It's easy to fall into a black humor wearing snowshoes, each loaded with an extra five pounds of snow. The lactic acid buildup in your quadriceps promises a night filled with horse-cramps as you come over the last rise and finally arrive at Camp Muir.

Whew! Good Lord! Did you remember to pack the oxygen tent? Can you get some morphine? It's a good thing you're an evolving sophomore climber with illusions of doing the Eiger next winter after you do Rainier tomorrow, or you might think this is too much of a good thing.

Overhead, a crow at an incredible winter height looks down and caws derisively. Isn't there a pizza parlor somewhere down below where an icy beer makes a lot more sense than the rapidly plunging temperature up here?

No! Mallory. Herzog. Unsoeld. Bonnington. Whymper. Hornbein. MacDonald. None of the above would want any sea-level pizza and beer right now. Except maybe one.

Camp Muir is a large, protected site at the end of a ridge called The Anvil. There are several permanent buildings at the camp—climbing huts for the professional guide service and their summer clientele, plus a solar-powered outhouse to process the waste of hundreds of climbers who make camp here in the summer.

Technology never takes a nap. A crap, yes. A nap, no.

Most climbers bring their own tents in summer. A climbing hut for the general public fills rapidly in peak season. There are a lot of good reasons to camp in a tent rather than the hut—public health and the rat races being just two.

More about the rats in a minute.

When I arrived at Camp Muir on Friday evening, February 6, 1981, I was met cheerfully by Matt Barnes and Jeff Warren. They were cheery because they had been there for more than two hours, and hadn't borne a pack the whole time. They had been enjoying watching my drudgery for almost an hour.

Throwing my pack off made me much happier, too.

One of the attractions of climbing for the masochist, you see, is that you get to be a beast of burden; but this has its limits. Many South American Indian tribes laugh at silly American climbers. The fools! Why do they think there are llamas—do they believe the beasts exist just so there'll be wool for goofy hats?

My first impression was that Matt Barnes and Jeff Warren were goofy-hats climbers. Matt was tall, red-haired and wiry. Jeff was medium-sized, muscular, and dark. They were, they told me, graduates of the Mountaineers advanced climbing course, where one of the prerequisites is a secret pledge to protect the sanctity of bean sprouts and granola. And wear goofy hats.

Sorry, a little personal prejudice coming out there.

I was sure they were both good guys, as both Mountaineers and bean-sprouters. I thought that undoubtedly somewhere in their pockets, you would find Swiss Army knives, waterproof matches, and tiny, folded ponchos which you could eat in an emergency.

You would certainly rather eat folded-up ponchos than the freeze-dried cardboard we all soon brewed inside the shelter. As any climber knows, the quality of climbers' food is not one of the reasons we go to great heights.

Somewhere in Hell, in fact, there is a special spot reserved for the guy who perfected the freeze-drying process. He may be there right now, forcing down the last of his daily quota ten-thousandth mouthful of freeze-dried Chicken a-la-King, while along a conveyor belt on the other side of impenetrable double-paned glass, every imaginable fresh fruit on Earth rolls by for eternity. Oh, he does get a monthly dollop of freeze-dried ice-cream, washed down with Folger's crystals, but then it's back to cardboard peas, shrimp and rice, tasteless turkey Tetrazzini and ersatz blueberry cobbler which are, for all time, so justifiably his daily fare.

One thing I have noticed in the mountains, however, is that climbers who eat freeze-dried food usually get to the summit, while climbers who care enough about their menu to pack-in real pasta, sauces, and spices undoubtedly sleep late and never get on top. The freeze-dried victims can't sleep at all; their stomachs are in revolt all night; these unfortunates undoubtedly figure that a summit is small recompense for the crappy consumables.

After pouring a couple of pounds of re-constituted cement into our mouths, we spread our sleeping pads and four-season bags onto the platforms in the shelter. These rickety assemblages seemed to be surplus salvaged from several prisoner of war camps after the Korean conflict—only not quite as comfortable.

We were then kept awake for hours by the warped, creaking wood beneath the nightly rat races.

It is one of life's ironies that on Mt. Rainier—the place you go to escape the rat race—late nights in the climbers' hut are plagued by racing rats. You're

never sure whether the little rodents dash about with spilled coffee crystals coursing through their veins, or whether they're simply holding their hairy-legged speed festivals to irritate the freezing insomniacs overhead.

On this particular night, they careened out from under the platforms and shot into overdrive through the darkness, oblivious to the death and dismemberment lurking around the next bedpost. They squealed, cheered, and probably quaffed celebratory beers. We were helpless to retaliate. As soon as we turned on a headlamp, the little bastards disappeared, leaving only burnt umber skid-marks everywhere in evidence.

Finally, we slept fitfully, undoubtedly visited in the dark by whispering rodents warning of the dawn.

Before we could say, 'I climbed all the way to Muir yesterday, I don't think I want to go on today,' Jeff Warren's alarm clock went off. Sensible beings would have thrown the damn thing into the snow outside and gone back to sleep; the 'sensible beings', however, were snuggled warmly in down comforters miles below the old volcano, recovering from a night of pizza and beer.

We rose and stepped from the climbers' hut to face a dark winter summit. Ice winds howled in our ears. Looking up, the only obstacles between us and all the stars in the universe were the lurking half-circular slopes of slumbering Rainier.

Orion gazed down from his eternal journey, sword raised in admonition. Cassiopeia threw her arms up in despair at our awaiting fate. She looked like

she wanted to be the “W” in a big cosmic “WHOA”, but couldn’t get the other stars to cooperate.

No waning moon would illuminate our crunching ascent of Gibraltar Ledge that morning; we were alone with a black icy breeze, our struggling muscles, and one climber’s suppressed ineptitude. Hubris ran in loud whispers through the false dawn. It warned of an overweening self-image about to meet its leaven.

You’ve heard the words. That morning, I was the words—the fight song of the sophomore class.

“Pride goeth before a fall.”

I was feeling great, invincible, groggy. It was a slam dunk. Eight hours of step-kicking and I would be on the summit of Rainier in winter—considered the equivalent of a Himalayan ascent.

“I’m a young climber. Hear me roar. Conquest--my most important product.”

I filled my lungs with expectations and frigid air and watched my companions’ aging head-lamps write weak-beamed, indecipherable light-code in the snow as they put on their crampons. They both wore old-fashioned ice-claws which required a precise looping of leather straps through forged steel-hoops. I had recently purchased a pair of Lowe Foot-Fangs™ which simply snapped onto the bottom of my boots using an ingenious crossing toe-piece and heel-lock.

Barnes threw their old rope into his pack, reminding me that I could leave mine at the hut along with my snow-shoes and the rest of my extraneous gear.

Grabbing our ice-axes, we were off; Matt and Jeff, dressed in traditional 'climbing bum' motif, sported heavy steel axes; I carried a super-light titanium model, wore a one-piece Gore-Tex™ action suit with matching over-mitts, top-of-the-line full-support seat-harness, silken balaclava and under-mitts, expensive plastic climbing boots, a spare red down hood for extra warmth--I had it all. Just like any category of boy-toy, mountain-climbing equipment makes the sophomore think that 'if you can't play the game, maybe you can buy it.'

Camp Muir sits on the left extremity of an icy cirque which rises from the climbing huts up toward 'The Beehive', extends rightward to the rounded prow of lower Gibraltar Rock and curves downward, past Cadaver Gap, to the ridgeline topped by Cathedral Rocks. Beyond 'The Beehive' ridgeline is Gibraltar Chute, which separates the Gibraltar massif from the frozen chaos of the Nisqually Icefall.

Gibraltar Rock is cleaved on its left side by Gibraltar Ledge, the historic standard-route to the summit of Rainier. The ledge rises almost a thousand feet to a high ice wall at the crux where Gibraltar Chute and Gibraltar Ledge meet.

In modern times, Gibraltar Ledge is seldom used as a path to Rainier's summit because of summertime rock fall danger, and because decades ago a giant section of the ledge collapsed, leaving a thirty foot hole in the ledge which requires a time-consuming rappel and re-climb, which can be especially nerve-racking in bad weather.

A winter climb of the Ledge makes more sense, however, because of the route's directness and relatively low wintertime rock-fall. Once you're on the Ledge, the lack of snow depth is also attractive in comparison to traversing over Cathedral Rocks, plunge-stepping through Ingraham Flats, negotiating several dicey sections of Disappointment Cleaver, and dealing with snow depth on the leeward slopes on the new 'standard route' to the top.

"Ready? Here we go." With this brief genesis, Matt and Jeff began the effort. Before I had taken my first step, they were thirty yards up the line.

Given our planned Gibraltar Ledge route, I was surprised when my companions began the day trudging out toward Cathedral Rocks. Instead of climbing the firmer and shallower snows on the perimeter of the cirque, they were 'hiking the radius'. This would require an ascent of a long snow slope from the center of the valley up to Gibraltar Ledge.

Maybe they knew something I didn't. I was a sophomore, after all, despite my delusions. Wordlessly, I fell into step, and quickly dropped further behind.

These guys were animals. They were flying! Fifteen minutes later, they had reached the center of the cirque and began their ascent of the snow slope. By this time, I was a hundred yards to the rear and huffing heavily. I was going to have to bust a gut to stay up with these two.

Soon, though, we were all cursing the exertion. The snows on the slope were neck-deep, making the climb more of a slow-motion uphill swim--like three gasping salmon negotiating a frozen flow. You'd step uphill, and your foot would

cut through the snow and come to rest inches above where it began. You'd step up again and feel fortunate if you weren't back in your original boot holes.

Normally, you might expect the third person in line to find firmer snow in the path already traveled by the other two. But Matt and Jeff each weighed between 175- and 185-pounds. I checked in at over 215, which meant I sank to new depths. Eventually, I moved over and began forcing my own route through the crystal frustration.

Sloughing through this morass, we all soon removed our crampons; the only purpose they were serving was to spike the back of our legs and rip our climbing pants. We were having enough fun going nowhere without getting all bloody about it.

In the first fifteen minutes of our journey, we had traveled almost a half-mile. The next mile seemed to take hours. Finally, Matt and Jeff called out that they were on firm ground a couple of hundred yards above me. By this time, I was drenched in sweat. My triceps were cramping from the Tyrolean crawl; my teeth were markedly smaller from the gnashing.

"You know," I yelled up angrily, "this slope might be the reason we should have gone straight up from Muir!"

I don't think they appreciated my critique. When I reached the firm ground leading to Gibraltar Ledge, the two were already making quick time up the combined rock and ice.

Now our real climbing began. Before, we were stuck in dark snow holes sweating in the night. Suddenly, sunlight and wind gusts began to bathe the south face of Rainier in cold exposure.

The majesty of the place awakened before our eyes. Our perches were snow-covered canopies spread randomly across lower Gibraltar Rock like gritty cheesecloth ripped by clustered pumice. Across the valley into which we climbed, the Nisqually Icefall began its daylight dissolution—the eternal dance of glacier and gravity which feeds Northwest rivers.

Up we went, avoiding the rock outcroppings, axes acting as moving banisters. We were in no danger of plunging from our aerie, but if we pressed the case, a bergschrund five hundred feet below waited to swallow us. Soon we reached Gibraltar Ledge and worked our way along a glistening line toward the ice-wall a thousand feet overhead. Warren and Barnes remained well ahead; since we weren't roped together, we didn't communicate. They climbed side-by-side; I was alone with my exertions.

I might as well have been soloing.

I caught them at the Ledge's old collapse site; as I approached, Matt Barnes's head disappeared into the rocky abyss. Jeff Warren followed him down. The descent wasn't nearly as bad as I always heard—thirty feet of scrambling down to a twenty foot wide snow platform followed by an equal scramble up to the far side of the Ledge.

“Because of this they started going all the way around to Disappointment Cleaver to get to the top of this mountain?” I asked ruefully.

“That and the fact that within the next hour or so, major rockfall will start showering down from the top of Gibraltar,” Jeff answered. “Gibraltar Rock is pretty unstable. I think it’s part of the old summit or something that blew off and landed here hundreds of years ago; it launches a lot of missiles into the Chute over there.”

Looking left, we could see Gibraltar Chute snake down the mountain and disappear behind the buttress below the Beehive. A waterfall in summer, winter found it a narrow, frozen channel--the quick route to the lower Nisqually.

Following the line beyond the buttress, we could make out the bergschrund at the bottom of the Chute; one of the largest on the mountain, it was forty feet wide, untold hundreds of feet deep. Stray rocks and giant ice chunks littered its upper lip; thousands more had plummeted over the abyss, screaming unheard into the darkness below.

A sudden low wind howled up the Chute and blew frozen crystals into our faces, urging us on toward the ice-wall at the top of the Ledge.

At this point, we could have been a Japanese wood-block print—

Climbers struggle upward.

Nature accepts them,

ice-winds whipping.

Frozen smiles.

Our minds mused on the scene, keeping our thoughts from struggling muscle and sinew. The rhythms of Vibram™ sole and ice-axe carried us into a surrealistic morning sky. High above, cloud wisps curled into complex Moorish designs, like ocean-foam in a turquoise vortex.

None too soon, we were at the base of the ice-wall marking the end of Gibraltar Ledge. When I arrived, Matt Barnes was leaning against the giant rock outcropping which, like a ship's prow, separated the Ledge from the Chute.

The wall was in no way formidable. Fourteen feet high, eighteen wide, forty-five degrees at its steepest. The ice, dappled by volcanic scatterings and grooved by meandering melt water, was a weak rampart blocking the way to Rainier's upper shoulders.

It was, however, ice. And we still weren't wearing crampons; yet my partners began to ascend the wall with aggressive pick thrusts and equally forceful kicks with the edges of their climbing boots.

I'd never seen ice-climbing that didn't involve crampons, but I wasn't about to question their technique. They were far more experienced, and if they could do it, so would I.

Of such sophomoric thoughts come mountain fatalities.

Barnes and Warren watched me follow their steps clumsily; any success in the next seconds could be credited to sharpness of my ice-axe, the non-verticality of the wall, and a series of inelegant purchases provided by the overmitt on my free hand pushing down on the ice.

Gasping for air after lumbering to my feet, I grasped a simple truth: descending that same ice-wall would be a dicey proposition.

Matt and Jeff had already begun to trudge toward the summit of Rainier, still more than two miles away. I fell into a slow rhythm behind them, following their shallow boot-carvings as they tacked the wind-blown plain. Up here, we might have expected to find deeper snow and better footing, but the spindrift had scoured the upper slopes nearly clean. Again I wished for the secure bite of crampons, but I didn't want to stop to put them on and risk losing sight of my climbing companions.

We gained another eight hundred feet before--from a hundred fifty yards away--I saw them disappear into a serac. Surely my mind was playing games; but the two were gone.

Hurrying to see if they had plunged into an invisible snow-hole, I came to the serac and saw them inside. The wind had cleaved the ice-tower vertically, leaving a retaining wall with an entrance on the right. The two sides of the serac formed an ice-hut with a view to the south.

Inside, Barnes and Warren had carved us three seats, and were hungrily devouring their lunch. I gladly joined them. We sat silently gobbling Triscuits™ and sliced turkey, and watched Mt. St. Helens throw up a steam-plume sixty miles away. Behind us, eighteen hundred vertical feet above and over a mile away, Rainier's summit gleamed unseen in the winter sun.

"Time to go down," Matt Barnes said matter-of-factly, picking up his pack.

"Excuse me?" I asked, not believing what I had just heard.

“We have to go down,” Jeff Warren repeated. “We’re meeting a friend tonight at Sea-Tac Airport.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You guys started out for the summit of Rainier knowing you were going to turn around at noon? You knew you faced a six hour descent and a three hour drive? Now you’re this close, and you’re going back?”

“That’s right,” Matt confirmed. “We thought we’d be able to summit a lot quicker than this, and didn’t count on the deep snow below the Ledge. We couldn’t leave you behind, so we went as far as possible. But now we have to turn around.”

“You can go on,” Jeff assured me. “It’s an easy trek to the summit from here, and as long as you watch yourself on that ice-wall back there, you shouldn’t have any trouble getting down.”

A winter solo of Rainier! Wow! Visions of glory briefly danced behind my eyes, but it was only the altitude. Shaking my head, I realized we all three had reached our climb’s high point.

“I don’t think so guys,” I said. “If something goes wrong up there, or if I have trouble descending, I wouldn’t have any backup. I think we better stick together.”

Finally, a glimmer of mature judgement.

It was fleeting.

Barnes and Warren were gone before I began to pack up, racing delicately down the volcano’s icy crust. Once again afraid of falling behind, I decided to forego my crampons and raced off after them.

So much for mature judgement.

The ice gave my steps a tin-man mien as I moved as fast as I could down the slippery slope. I kept my weight balanced over my boots and tried not to think about making a mistake.

Below, I could see Barnes and Warren already arrived at the ice-wall. I expected to see Matt pull out the rope and set up a belay, but these two were in a hurry. They had no mind for security.

I was shocked to see Jeff step onto the ice-wall and ski down it in a standing glissade. Arms akimbo, adjusting his weight side-to-side, he bounced slightly on the ledge at the bottom, but gained his balance with a laugh.

Matt joined him in his humor. He stepped out and glissaded the wall, his boots cutting unseen swirls in the ice like skis rolling across a slope. He lurched onto the ledge at the bottom of the ice-wall, knocking himself and Jeff momentarily off balance toward the prow two feet behind them.

They both laughed.

From afar, I had just seen the vast difference in our experience levels. Accomplished climbers can do stupid things knowing the exact measure to the edge of the void. Sophomores see only the broad, undefined line between safety and excess, without sensing the fine gradations—the shades of gray called salvation.

Standing in the white light of winter, I was about to journey into the great black chasm where sophomores die.

Coming to the top of the ice-wall, I gazed down on Barnes and Warren waiting impatiently on the ledge. They had the rope but were fresh out of patience. Silent eyes and pursed mouths spoke volumes about my incompetence.

If I had been sensible, I would have demanded that one of them climb back up to where I stood and belay me down that short but dangerous stretch of ice.

Note the word 'sensible.'

Hell, they'd glissaded down that ice-wall. I could probably do it, too. Besides, if I asked them for a belay, they would probably snicker. Nobody wants to be the object of a snicker, especially a sophomore. Better almost anything than a snicker.

'Almost anything' is what happened next.

"I don't know about this, guys," I said as I stepped out onto the top of the ice-wall. Then, for some unknown reason, I decided that a standing glissade was a really bad idea. Maybe I would climb down the wall like I climbed up it.

I turned to face into the ice, and immediately fell off.

"Oh, God!"

Before I had a chance to even try a self-arrest, I was gone.

"Oh, God!"

I was falling. Past Warren and Barnes. Off the rock behind them. Ricocheting down into Gibraltar Chute, where the only things that could stop me would be luck or death.

“Oh, God!”

Along with the concussive blasts of my body hitting ice, the first guttural words out of the mouth of a believer seeking solace or an infidel facing death rang in the ears of my companions as I fell past them.

“Oh, God!”

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

I began...

BAM! BAM! BAM!

...“Oh!”...a frantic burst...

BAM! BAM!

...a blasting, spinning rag-doll drop...“God!”...

BAM!

...where every return to earth was a jolt spaced further apart...

BAM!

...by the speed and distance generated by each succeeding concussion.

...“Oh!”... I’d hit and spin...

BAM!

...and more and more of my growing consciousness was enveloped in pain. ...“God!”... An excruciating awareness...

BAM!

...that I was probably doomed. “Oh, God!” The speed and distance of my rag-doll tumbling increased the g-forces working on my bruised body and mind...

BAM!

...until the little voice in the back of my head--that internal center which always advises one's situation--scanned the rapidly deteriorating conditions of my descent and...

BAM!

...let me know I should abandon hope. I was going to die. "Oh, God!" My body was going to be ripped apart and wouldn't stop until it was ground to the consistency of melt-water somewhere down there in the darkness. I gave up...

BAM!

...and immediately crashed face-first into the icy fist of Rainier. My chin was split open at the lip by a bloody, teeth-ripping impact equivalent to the force of a dozen uppercuts from a chorus line of vicious Alis, Fraziers, Foremans, and Sugar Rays swinging in their primes. I was knocked nearly senseless...

BAM!

...but I didn't give up again. "Oh, God!" This was life itself—a head over heels tumble to oblivion; but now I didn't want to let go--it hurt too much. As I continued to plunge toward the bottomless bergschrund at the foot of the Chute, I gaped at the mountain spinning by and decided to try and take each subsequent blast on my left shoulder. I was stronger there, and it gave me a point of reference...a target in an attempt to regain control...

BAM!

..."Oh, God!" It was a joke trying to check something so unbridled. My speed had increased until now I was approaching fifty miles-per-hour. I had, however, tucked myself into a near fetal position while doing the one thing the

experts tell you not to do--I kept my ice-axe with me. Convention says 'to avoid being punctured discard the thing in a fall.' In the fragments of thought interrupted by high speed crashes, I couldn't bring myself to part with my axe. I might need it down there. I would wager the breach...

BAM!

...hundreds of feet now. Over a thousand. Beyond fifty-five, sixty miles-per-hour. Drowning in pain, but still looking for an out. "Oh, God!" Two kids, too young! What a stupid way to die! A future ripped apart by a foolish mistake on a frozen, collapsing pile of nature's spew.

There was no sound now but my agonizing grunts each time I came to earth, and screaming supplications to a God barely served in a bouncing descent down death's ice-chute. My body was ripped limp by the physics all around me; my ice-axe flew out of my left hand, but somehow I grabbed it with my right. As I was thrown violently into my next collision with the earth, my left arm flew straight out...

BAM!

...and as if aimed by some well-practiced dart thrower, came down in a small crevasse. The crack in the ice was barely eight inches across; my arm stuck there momentarily.

Inertia quickly tried to rip away the offending appendage and resume my speeding plunge. Here the muscles in my left shoulder and upper back repaid years spent strengthening them. All the weight-lifting and basketball. All the pull-

ups and swimming strokes. They were just strong enough to keep my left arm from being ripped from my torso, but they paid a terrible price.

The energy of the fall shredded my rotator cuff, ripped multiple muscles in my upper back, severed nerves feeding my hand, broke and dislocated my shoulder. It also stopped my uncontrolled tumble, sending me into a slide toward the bergschrund not two-hundred feet below.

I had kept my ice axe with me; now with my left arm dangling like a torn shirt, I used my right arm to swing the axe into the thirty-degree slope. Not wanting to fall any farther, a violent fright welling inside me, again and again I tried to repay the mountain for some of the damage done above. My rage actually lifted my upper torso off the surface as I fought to stop the slide. I slammed the axe with determined madness, and finally came to a halt.

Breathing like a dying bull surrounded by the icy eyes of picadors, bloody foam pouring from my mouth, I was a beast trying to clear my ruptured head and face another battle.

Slowly, recognition washed over me; from within came a scream echoing through the encircling ice.

“I’m alive!”

I swung my limp body into an imitation of a seated position and howled.

“I’m alive! My God, I’m alive!”

The surrounding amphitheater amplified my agony. The winds blowing down the Chute carried the reverberations all the way to the Muir Snowfield a mile below.

“I’m alive! I’m alive!”

Climbers and hikers ascending to Camp Muir heard sepulchral echoes cascading from the icy heights. The sound lasted for several minutes, and scared many of them into a return to Paradise.

“I’m alive!”

I cried.

And then, from the same depths which moments before spawned my rage and horror came the realization that if I didn’t quickly control myself, I might go into shock and die. Blowing the air from my lungs in several violent exhalations, I breathed deeply, and deliberately relaxed within my pain.

I sank my ice-axe into the crusty snow, reached into the top of my pack for my red down hood, zipped it around my bloody head and folded my senses in on themselves in a painful imitation of Zen.

I couldn’t move. I sat exposed on one of Mt. Rainier’s main avalanche corridors; just as I had tumbled out-of-control down Gibraltar Chute, so would hundreds of rocks and frozen chunks projectiles speed toward me in the hours ahead.

As if sensing my precarious state, the great mountain released a small wall of ice from the upper reaches of the Nisqually Icefall. It immediately began to disintegrate in its rush to its next level, taking even more frozen material with it as it sped down its path.

The sound of the oncoming avalanche filled the back of my head, but raised no real concern. I was more focused on shutting down my sensory systems than in worrying about anything that might come along to destroy them.

As I tried to breathe slower and slower, the ice fall picked up speed but lost mass. The changing slope of the upper chute now began to play in my favor, grabbing hundred of pounds of tiny ice chunks and bits of volcanic rock and spreading them over the slopes.

The mountain had as much survival instinct as I. If it gave up these things too quickly, it would simply melt away; the more it kept, the more it remained. By the time the avalanche reached me, it was reduced to a schussing layer of particles and two small rocks which bounced off my pack as I had bounced off the prow above. They came to rest a few feet from me—survivors sitting in the sun.

Down the chute next came Jeff Warren and Matt Barnes. They flew down that thirteen hundred feet—down-climbing facing in, furiously cramponing and plunge-stepping--in less than fifteen minutes—six to seven times slower than me, but still too fast.

“Man, Terry, are you okay?!” Matt screamed as he dove into a seated position beside me. “Are you okay?!”

“Talk to us, Terry, don’t go into shock now! Talk to us!” Swinging into a standing position to my right, Jeff gasped like he might well go into shock any second.

“Hey, man, look at me,” Matt said in a softer tone while fighting to catch his breath. He gently spread the opening in my down hat trying to see what my pupils were doing.

I looked up at him in dumb appreciation.

“Hey, Matt,” I muttered. “Sorry I fell. But I think I better just sit here and be quiet now.”

“Yeah, that’s it!” Jeff agreed. “You guys sit here, I’ll go down to Muir and use the emergency radio. Get us a rescue up here right away. I’ll be back.”

With that the young climber lunged off down the slope, gingerly by-passing the giant bergschrund not sixty feet below us, and headed for Camp Muir.

“Don’t worry about the fall, Terry,” Matt said gently. “Hell, everybody makes mistakes. I just can’t believe you’re alive! Now we’ll sit here together and wait for Jeff to bring us up a chopper.”

And we sat. For two hours, then four, then more. Altogether, we waited seven hours for deliverance.

Small rocks and chunks of ice continually strafed us. We kept our packs on the entire afternoon, and were each hit by more than a half dozen projectiles.

We didn’t talk much. Matter of fact, I didn’t talk at all. Matt only said about four sentences that first hour and a half. Finally, he saw Jeff heading back up to us.

“He’s just coming around the buttress below the Beehive headed this way. Should be here in about forty minutes. Oh, Jesus, he fell into a hole. Oh no!”

Alone and unroped, Jeff had fallen into a crevasse right above the elbow of the buttress. Gone. Not a trace. Possibly dead.

Minutes went by. Matt was distraught. First, a guy he doesn't even know almost kills himself. Then trying to help, his partner falls into the maw of the mountain to an unknown end.

"God, Jeff, get up out of that hole! You can't be dead! You've gotta be alive. Wait! I see him! He's crawling up out of the crevasse! He saved himself! He's alive!"

Almost a half-mile below, Jeff Warren struggled to his feet, his battle to live evident by his instability. He waved up to his friend, and Matt stood joyously returning the gesture.

"My God, he's alive!"

Jeff slowly wobbled up the Nisqually Glacier toward us. When he finally skirted the bergschrund so that we could see his face, it was evident he had looked death in the face and didn't like what he had seen.

"Good Lord, you just never appreciate the power of prayer until you fall into a crevasse," he mumbled to us when he finally arrived. "Fortunately, I fell onto a shelf about ten feet down and was able to work my way over into a corner and climb out. The top was the worst. It was overhung. Really tested my ice-climbing technique; I wished for a second ice-tool."

"Any luck getting help?" Matt asked.

“No, thanks to a group of buttheads at Camp Muir. I asked them to come up and help us, but they told me they were too tuckered from humping to Muir. They plan to go to the summit tomorrow and don’t want to blow themselves out.”

“Real mountaineer spirit, eh?” Matt shook his head in disgust.

“But the rangers are coming our way. They can’t bring the helicopter up here until the chief ranger gets back from shopping in Tacoma, but they said they’ll try to have us out by sunset.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Matt responded ruefully.

And so we sat.

It is indeed true that the Park Service rangers are paid extra overtime whenever there is a rescue on the mountain. It is also true that they would not go into rescue mode that afternoon in February, 1981 until the Chief Ranger returned from a shopping trip in Tacoma.

In a phone conversation with his subordinates from the mall in Tacoma, the Chief Ranger actually forbade anyone to make any move until he was in place. He then finished his shopping and drove back to Paradise. Upon arriving, he authorized the ranger corps to enter rescue mode and finally called up the helicopter from Fort Lewis.

By the time the Chinook landed in the parking lot at Paradise, the winter sun was rapidly sinking in the West. The Army crew picked up a team of climbing rangers and lifted off for Camp Muir. Twenty minutes later, the chopper was resting on the snow at Muir, where the rescue party waited another half hour before coming up to Matt, Jeff and me.

I don't know exactly why it took them so long to effectuate the rescue. I just know I'm happy they finally came, and that they got me off the mountain before the sun went down. Spending the night on that exposed slope high up on the Nisqually Glacier would not have been a joyous experience.

Worst of all, my frozen shoulder--even then atrophying to a dangerous degree--would have been in even sadder shape by the time we got it to a hospital.

But finally, my ears were once again treated to one of the sweetest sounds known to man—the 'whop-whop-whop' of a rescue helicopter coming to the rescue. They expertly landed the chopper on the flat snow below the big bergschrund, and four climbing rangers jumped out with a rescue sled.

Heading up the team was Gary Olsen, who had jumped out of a similar Chinook two years before to rescue me from the Charity Mountain Radio Marathon. I was innocent in that first disaster—my climbing team had been marooned by a rogue storm which dumped eight feet of snow on us just as we reached the summit of Rainier.

This time I wasn't innocent.

"Let's see, MacDonald," Gary Olsen muttered to himself as he kicked steps to where I sat. "MacDonald. That wouldn't be Terry MacDonald, would it?"

"The same," I answered. "Sorry, Gary. I really didn't ever want to see you again, but I sure am happy you're here."

"Oh, that's okay, Terry," Olsen answered. "This is what I do for a living. Pull boneheads from the snow. Where'd you fall from?"

“Up there—from the ice-wall at the top of the Chute,” Matt Barnes responded.

“You fell to here from the ice-wall at the top of the Chute?” Olsen repeated incredulously. “Jesus, that’s beyond luck. A man like that deserves to be saved. Let’s get him out of here boys.”

And with that, they strapped me to the rescue sled and—using a complicated pulley system--lowered me gingerly past the bergschrund to the lowered rear door of the Chinook.

“This is as far as we go with you, Terry,” Gary Olsen said smiling down at me. “The Army will take you to Ashford and transfer you to a Huey for transport to Harborview in Seattle. They’ll take good care of you there.”

“Gosh, Gary, thanks so much. I owe you one,” I said, real emotion in my voice.

“No, MacDonald, you owe me two,” came the answer. Gary Olsen stuck out the first two fingers on his right hand. “Don’t ever make it three or we won’t be friends any more.”

With that, they slid the rescue sled up the slope of the Chinook’s dropped door, and we lifted off toward the setting sun.

The shock-trauma unit at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle is world-class. They wheel you in, and you’re immediately swamped by the sounds of a thousand electronic miracles. You’re surrounded by a dozen highly-qualified

providers, each capable of saving your life. They check your vital signs, entering several critical bits of information in your file before your gurney halts.

You're poked and prodded from all sides, quizzed and investigated like you were a new truth. They have a blood sample out of you faster than a healer at a holy-roller tent-revival can say 'Hallelujah!'.

You're the center of their world, and they want their world to live.

'Hallelujah!'

Once the doctors determined I was stable, the first order of business was to deal with my shoulder. It had been dislocated for more than nine hours, frozen like a rock in volcanic ice. The muscles torn away in the fall had already atrophied. Those holding the arm onto the body were rigid, still traumatized by the wrenching injury.

No one doctor was going to be able to pop that shoulder. No one shot of morphine would relax my muscles enough to allow them to relocate the ball into the socket. It was going to take a team of six white horses and all the poppies in China. Okay, maybe not all the poppies. Let's just say the amount of morphine pumped into me that night drove up the street price of heroin like an '80s bull market.

Six hits of morphine and six strong young doctors pulling on each other like a health club pyramid finally put the shoulder back in place. It would take six months of intensive physical therapy for the joint to act halfway like a shoulder again.

Now I was left alone to await the next procedure.

I'm not sure how long I was lying there with enough morphine in my blood to turn Dracula into a crazed day-tripper; the poppies and pain were still a grapple inside the ring, struggling to pin each other, when a distinct Australian voice appeared in the gauzy overhead smoke.

"You're one lucky bloke," the voice said.

I opened my dopey eyes and saw a fifties doctor smiling at me upside down.

"I'm going to save that face, mate."

My face. In the ensuing hours since Mt. Rainier had ripped it open, I had forgotten about my face. There were so many other things that hurt worse. But none looked any more grotesque than my lower lip, split all the way to my chin and spread like a deer shank in mid-dressing.

"I'm Doctor Culligan," the Aussie voice said as he began to clean the wound that used to be a passable lower jaw. "I'm the resident on call here tonight. That's what makes you so lucky. I'm doing my residency to get my license here in Washington State. I've practiced in Australia for twenty-five years; my specialty is sewing up bar-fight faces. That's what you've got, mate. A bar-fight face."

Before I could speak, Doctor Culligan grabbed my lip and filled it full of even more dope. Then he began grabbing chunks of flesh and stuffing them back in place. Kind of like shoring up an overstuffed turkey, but not nearly as appetizing.

There he was sewing and stuffing, sewing and stuffing. People who watched him said it was like witnessing Picasso at work. Indeed, some would say the result—my face—has the look of a Picasso.

At the end of Dr. Culligan's procedure, I again had a lip that went from one side of my mouth to the other, with no avalanche blow-out in the middle. Stitches drew a fish-hook shaped line to the center of my chin.

The Australian resident had indeed saved my face, although I don't think he'll use this kisser in his promotional brochures. There is a curving scar from the right side of my lower lip to my chin, but it's much better than I should have expected.

It's made me a lot more sensitive to people with face scars. By the way, have you noticed all the movie stars with face scars? Harrison Ford has a doozie. He's made millions with his. I catch pudding on mine. It all balances out.

"Fair dinkum that, mate," the doctor from down under nodded as he walked out of the room. I still don't understand what he meant. It could have been the morphine, but at that moment I had no ear for dialects. Tarzan would have made the most sense.

My last opiate-soaked medical memory from that night occurred about ten minutes later. I was swinging through the poppy trees listening to the drums beating native rhythms behind my eyes when I distinctly felt a soft feminine hand lift the sheet on my gurney and grab my—how do I say this tastefully while staying in a jungle idiom—my...banana.

Lifting my head groggily, I looked down toward my...banana tree...and saw the most beautiful nurse in the world beginning to insert a catheter up into...the plantation.

On a scale of ten, she was a fourteen. She was gorgeous. Brunette, buxom, and, of course, a real professional. I'm sure it had nothing to do with the morphine, but here was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen suddenly studying the vital signs of life stirring, or not, in the luckiest banana plant this side of Surinam.

"Peel it," I wanted to say. But no, there must be a more appropriate introduction given the situation.

So, somewhere in my drug-addled brain, I inhaled deeply of her antiseptic lusciousness and found the wherewithal to make the ultimate inquiry:

"Tell me, what's a beautiful girl like you doing in a place like that?" I slurred.

"Don't make me laugh,' she laughed. "I could hurt you."

Two days later, my ugly stitched-up mug graced the front page of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The headline read:

Disc Jockey Survives Fall

Of 1,000 Feet on Mt. Rainier.

Actually, it was 1,300 feet. But who was counting?

Fortunately, as you see, I survived my sophomore year in climbing; but luck alone propelled me. I'm not proud of what happened. But the years have eased my embarrassment; my shoulder is even a little better, despite the surviving bone chips and the hole in my rotator cuff.

And the equally large hole in my ego.

There was no skill involved, as evidenced by the result. But would I let this stop me? No way. I was hooked. Six months later, I was back on the summit of Rainier. It was my third ascent of the mountain; I've since climbed it a dozen times.

I became a much better climber—more conservative, more safety conscious. I'd come as close to checking out of this world as I wanted without actually departing. If anything ever hits me again as hard as Rainier hit me, I'd just as soon take my leave, thank you.

In the intervening years, I became an Altoid (see *The Altoid Chronicles*). To me, that is my doctorate in outdoorism, my advanced honorarium in the art of misadventure.

After you read all about The Altoids, it may prove to you that 'pride goeth after the fall', as well.



P-I PHOTO BY BOB MILLER

"FOR ABOUT three minutes, I screamed and screamed, 'Hey, I'm alive, Hey, I'm alive,'"

remembers Terry MacDonald from his Harborview hospital bed.

Disc Jockey Survives Fall Of 1,000 Feet on Rainier

By Evelyn Iritani

Seattle disc jockey Terry MacDonald screamed and prayed as he tumbled head-over-heels more than 1,000 feet down an ice chute on the southern face of Mount Rainier Saturday.

"I just fell and fell and fell and did a lot of praying," the 32-year-old KYYX radio personality said yesterday from his Harborview Medical Center bed. "While I was falling, I prayed that it'd stop because if it didn't I knew I would die."

MacDonald — who suffered a dislocated shoulder, a sore knee, a cut lip

and bruises and lacerations — also was rescued on Rainier in September 1979 during an ill-fated charity climb. On Saturday, he was airlifted out shortly before nightfall by a Fort Lewis helicopter squad and taken to a nearby airfield where he was transferred to a Medivac helicopter for transportation to Harborview.

Neither MacDonald nor his two climbing companions, whom he had met on the mountain the previous day, were roped up or wearing crampons at the time of the accident. Park rangers said Matt Barnes, 22, of Seat-

tle, and Jeff Warren, 20, of Bellevue, had climbed down the icy part of the chute successfully when MacDonald slipped and cartwheeled over and past them.

It was MacDonald's fourth assault on Mount Rainier, two of which have been successful. He said he is an advanced beginning climber who survived the 1,000-to-1,500-foot fall on the ice chute near Gibraltar Rock partially because he remained conscious and

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