

On Snow and Ice

By Pastor Mike Lowe

A very thin layer of rip-stop nylon is the only thing standing between us and freezing to death. Howling winds, with gusts up to 70 mph, are hammering against our tent threatening to tear it and us to pieces. The outside wind chill factor is 80 below zero. Exposed skin freezes in less than a minute. And I have to relieve myself; dude, talk about bad timing. Just when I thought things could get no worse all hell broke loose. Now we're in big trouble. Dear Lord, please save us!

In May 2001 I hooked up with Alaska-Denali Guiding, Inc. (ADG) to climb the West Buttress of Mount McKinley (20,320 ft), also known as Denali. It's considered to be one of the world's most challenging mountains to climb. Strong winds, extreme cold, deep crevasses, and avalanches are continual threats. The climb requires peak physical fitness, a sound mind, and an intimate knowledge of glacier travel and crevasse rescue. Ropes, harnesses, ice axes, ascenders, prussic knots, carabiners, crampons, snowshoes, gear sleds, and a wide variety of specialized equipment are daily aspects of the climb.



Our adventure began with seven strangers and three professional guides. We are as different as sand and snow. Our only common denominator is a desire to stand on the summit of North America's tallest peak. We cram our gear and ourselves into two very red fixed wing airplanes equipped with snow skis. Powerful props cut the cold arctic air rapidly purchasing the altitude necessary to clear the tiny town of Talkeetna. Zillions of zigzagging rivers crisscross millions of trees and ponds creating a matrix of lines that resemble a dream catcher. Moose, elk, caribou and bear watch as we pass by overhead.

Not long after takeoff the forested terrain below gave way to snow covered ragged rocks. Now looming ahead like King Kong slapping airplanes out of the air lay the formidable rock walls and towering mountains of the Alaska Range and Denali National Park. Our fearless pilot announces the aircraft is struggling to gain enough altitude to clear the craggy ridge ahead, but that he thinks we can squeak through a small gap. The gap, however, is not wide enough to allow for safe passage, and just seconds before our wings are sheared away he tilts the little Cessna and we slip through unharmed. Whew!

We tumble down the other side of the narrow, death defying passage, and it takes everything I have to keep my guts inside my stomach. But once we regained level flight, and my frantic fears were assuaged, the view outside was spectacular. Massive white mountains stabbing the deep blue sky with jagged peaks, ancient glacial arms cracked with crevasses snaking down deep and wide valleys, gigantic frozen seracs crashing and churning, fluffy clouds suspended in midair, and sunlight reflecting off ice crystals glittering and glistening like a parade of dancing diamonds. It is stunningly beautiful.

Colorful speckles, which turned out to be a veritable tent city, were scattered below near the glacial runway. Our pilot gently brought the airplane to a full stop on the snowy airstrip, and we immediately began unloading our stuff. Within minutes our pile of gear and equipment became a mountain not unlike the peaks all around us. We hauled everything uphill to where we were going to spend the next two days practicing glacier travel and crevasse rescue techniques. We cut and carved snow blocks and built a wall around our tents to protect against possible hurricane force winds. We camped on the Kahiltna Glacier, a long frozen river approximately 2,000 feet thick.

Seracs, which are humongous chunks of ice as big as shopping malls, periodically fell from the 10,000 foot face of Mount Foraker, and sounded like the stuff of war – bombs, grenades, rockets and Gatling guns. And even though the seracs were crash landing 7 miles away they generated winds strong enough to blow the hat off my head. It was not uncommon to watch newcomers chasing their untethered, wind driven tents across the glacier. Nor was it uncommon for them to take one look at the stark surroundings and hop back on the plane without unloading so much as a snowshoe. Alas, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, or the beholden.

After two days of orientation and training we finally began our ascent. Between group and personal gear each one of our backpacks weighed 60 pounds and our sleds weighed 50 pounds. We set out wearing snowshoes, and we followed a super highway paved by hundreds of hikers who had already gone ahead of us. At first the trail descended several hundred feet, and then it began a gentle, gradual rise to Camp 1, a few short miles away. We were roped together in teams of three, which made for difficult walking. The threat of falling into a bottomless crevasse was ever present, and being roped together decreased our chances of disappearing forever.

Our guides probed our campsite for hidden crevasses, and upon finding none we went about the arduous task of building snow walls and pitching our tents. Meanwhile, our guides melted snow for water and cooked meals worthy of royalty. It was 9 pm and time for bed, yet the sun was still hovering at high noon. In fact, the sun didn't set until close to midnight and rose again around 3 am. But it never did get truly dark outside. As soon as the sun dipped behind a peak the temperatures plummeted dramatically causing the mercury to retreat 50 degrees below zero. Daytime temperatures approached 25 degrees above zero when the wind wasn't blowing or clouds weren't obstructing the sunlight.



The next few days required shuttling our gear two trips at a time. The terrain was too steep and too dangerous to carry all of our stuff in one haul. We would cache our things one day; spend the night below, and then the following day hike back up with the rest of our gear. In this fashion we hiked much of the mountain twice. Sunburn and snow blindness were constant concerns, so we wore glacier goggles to protect our eyes from the relentless glare, and we covered our faces with a pasty white goop called zinc oxide, which made us look like Casper, the friendly ghost. One guy, who always breathed through his mouth, ended up with a severely sunburned tongue. He had to go home early, so the rest of us started breathing through our noses.

It took us a week of hard hiking to climb Ski Hill, Motor Cycle Hill, Squirrel Hill, and to round Windy Corner in order to arrive at Base Camp (14,200 ft). We made a gruesome discovery along the way. As we were rounding Windy Corner one of our rope teams fell into a crevasse. The rear guy lost his balance and rolled sideways into the crevasse. The force of his fall dragged the middle man into the gaping gorge with him, and had it not been for the skillful self arresting maneuver of the lead man all three would have vanished forever. He saved his team by driving the point of his ice axe into the hard packed snow and hanging on for dear life. We hurriedly set up two 3:1 pulley systems and began hauling up the survivors and their gear. Fortunately, nobody was seriously injured. Thank you Jesus!

But the same cannot be said for the unexpected victim who was already in the crevasse. In fact, as it turns out, he had been in there for some 6 years. He was part of a Korean Expedition which ended in disaster during a freak blizzard. The frozen expression on his perfectly preserved face looked as though he was about to ask for help. It was truly a sad moment for all of us. The rest of his body, however, was horribly and impossibly twisted and mangled. We were unable to free him, and reported our discovery to the rangers. We later learned that his family and country had requested that his body remain entombed where he died in memory of his heroic efforts to climb Denali.

Some people say, "What a waste of life." But is it really? It is true, climbing potentially dangerous mountains is not a requirement, but since when do we need excuses to pursue adventure? Who says taking a calculated risk is foolish? There is naturally inherent within all of us a desire, even a need, to explore the unknown. Those who dare to deny this instinctive need to discover new challenges are least the enviable and most miserable. When we seek to discover, in a safe and sane manner, the hidden secrets of our vast and marvelous universe, I believe we can expect God, notwithstanding sometimes we die, to bless our good intentions and best efforts.

Few things are more satisfying than exploring the many books of nature, especially as we read between the chapters of adventure and peruse the pages of discovery! And so we continued to hike and climb. At Base Camp we built snow walls and pitched our tents. The ranger reported that inclement weather was on its way

and might go down in history as one of the worst. But for now the sun was shining, and the hundred plus campers were as contented as hogs in a corn field. We took a leisurely stroll to the Edge of the World and marveled at the stupendous view – a 3,000 foot vertical drop amid monstrous mountains and ghostly glaciers. The inconceivable size of everything is astonishing. I feel so small, so minuscule, so inconspicuous cradled in the bosom of these majestic mountains.



The setting sun and subsequent freezing temperatures forced us to seek refuge between the lofty layers of our minus 40 degree goose down sleeping bags. And then for the next 9 days and nights we regretted the day we were born, and cursed the day we set foot on this inhumane, inhospitable wasteland. Before the fierce storm exhausted her unholy anger dozens had suffered severe frostbite and one poor mother would never awake to kiss the brittle brow of her precious children. It was such a time as only hell can imagine! No one heard my loud lamentations or discerned my bitterness of soul as the storm raged disinterestedly like misguided soldiers in a Nazi death camp. Between beatings we only had time to wonder if we would survive the next round of dispassionate torture.

The minutes, which seemed like days, turned into hours, which seemed like years. Day after day the unending blizzard never seemed to tire of tormenting us. The incessant rattling and flapping of the tent fabric nearly drove us mad. The gale force winds threatened to flatten our tent, so we took turns sitting with our backs against the windward wall. On two separate occasions an unusually strong gust of wind dislodged snow blocks and hurled them against the tent and our unprotected heads. We started leaning forward to avoid sustaining a possible concussion, which made the whole ordeal even more unbearable. I have been on many mountains, but never have I had to endure such unimaginable circumstances. It is only by the grace of God that I am telling this story now.

One morning we were startled by a sudden silence. We had been reduced to a dangerously dazed state of mind. Reality had forsaken us; we were mere zombies, functioning on auto pilot. The storm abated as quickly as it had begun. Soon the sun began shining and temperatures inside our tent soared above 70 degrees. It was like a heat wave and, as you can imagine, it felt wonderful. Thank you Jesus! Outside everything looked different. I was unable to recognize anything. News quickly spread that a man was missing. After hours of futile searching it was determined that, during the storm, he had accidentally walked off the Edge of the World. Yet another unfortunate casualty of what has gone down as one of the worst storms ever to wreak havoc on Denali.

During the next two days we attempted to summit the mountain. We actually survived the perilously steep fixed line on the two thousand foot Headwall, and even spent one night at High Camp (17,200 ft), but another impending storm warned us to relinquish our summit bid. Defeated, but not discouraged, we retreated without bagging the tallest mountain in North America. It was a long and tedious return journey home. But we made it back with our limbs, legs and lives. And so with that consolation we pacified our wounded pride and dashed dreams. We parted ways in Anchorage, and after weeks of surviving unbelievable hardships, it seems strange that no one keeps in touch. But if they're anything like me I'm afraid that the sound of their voice or the look in their eye might elicit memories I'd rather not remember or relive.

Every once in awhile, just out of the blue, I hear Denali calling my name, beckoning me to finish what I started not so long ago. Perhaps someday I will answer her call and return to stand on her summit. But this time it will not be for my own glorification. No, if I ever climb Denali again, I will carry in my heart the names of those people who died during that terrible storm, who will never get a second chance to stand upon her lofty summit. By the grace of God, I shall camp and climb in honor of those who perished with their hopes and dreams, who will never reap the fruits of their hard labor and earnest efforts. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

To view pictures of someone climbing Denali via the West Buttress check out the following site on the Internet. Click on the photo titles in the left hand column one at a time.

