

CHAPTER 2

FIRE AND ICE

Mt. Rainier

Before I became a dedicated state highpointer, I had been a mountain climber. However, I became a mountaineer somewhat unintentionally.

Six state highpoints require technical climbing skills—the need to rope up, ascend vertical rock faces, traverse steeply angled snow and ice, or rappel sheer cliffs. A decade before leaving the emergency department to begin my yearlong highpointing odyssey, my goal was not technical climbing or state summits, but an ascent of Mt. Kilimanjaro, the legendary volcano that towers three miles above the east African savannah.

To prepare for this six-day trek—a rugged walk during which porters and animals carry most gear—I began jogging, lost twenty-five pounds, and hiked nearby trails carrying a pack weighted with water bottles, books, and sand bags. Despite intense conditioning, however, I felt it necessary to test myself at altitude before attempting such a lofty and remote peak.

Altitude illness—ranging from mild headaches and nausea to life-threatening fluid accumulation in the brain and lungs—is the greatest risk confronting mountaineers. It is impossible to predict who will suffer or how severely. Symptoms may occur at 8,500 feet above sea level, but both the likelihood and severity of problems increase with altitude. Highly conditioned individuals such as runners and triathletes seem most susceptible; men have more problems than women; and younger adults are more prone to this condition than middle-aged climbers.

To experience the effects of altitude and determine how my body would adjust to low oxygen levels, I enrolled in a five-day

mountaineering course offered by Rainier Mountaineering, Inc., hoping to learn basic camping skills and introductory climbing techniques in a high altitude environment. The printed itinerary didn't sound difficult—four days of “skills” followed by an ascent of Mt. Rainier (14,410 feet).

But only later did I learn that Rainier Mountaineering, Inc., known also as RMI, is the premier training organization for aspiring Himalayan climbers. Founded in 1969 by Lou Whittaker, an accomplished alpinist and twin brother of Jim, the first American to summit Mt. Everest, 34 RMI guides have reached the planet's tallest summit.

When the equipment list arrived I was stunned. I read the page-long list: two fleece or wool sweaters; two pairs of fleece or wool pants; two capilene shirts; two pairs of long capilene pants; waterproof, but “breathable” jacket and similarly designed pants; three pairs of wool socks; three pairs polypro sock liners; heavy, warm, waterproof gloves; thin, lightweight gloves; wool hat; balaclava; glacier glasses; leather hiking boots; plastic, double-shell mountaineering boots; crampons, ice ax, climbing harness, carabiners and belay device; winter-rated sleeping bag; sunscreen—and a backpack roomy enough to carry all these items.

My local outfitting store helped. The knowledgeable associates located each item and, when necessary, demonstrated its proper use. I borrowed what I could, used what I had, and bought the rest.

I paid more for one set of fleece clothing than for a business suit. Rain gear cost more than a cross-country plane ticket. Capilene underwear, a quick-drying, high-tech fabric that wicks perspiration and moisture from the skin, retailed for \$100—a huge increase in price and technology from the cotton “long-johns” of my youthful summer camp days. Then the salesperson told me that I needed “stuff sacks” to organize, compress, and protect these items. In all, the bill exceeded \$1,000.

At home I spread it out. The clothing and gear I was expected to carry up Mt. Rainier nearly covered the living room floor. I looked at the aging external-frame Kelty backpack I had borrowed and wondered how all these items, plus five days of food and a “small amount of assigned group gear,” would fit into this small green canvas sack.

After a few feeble attempts to fit everything into the pack

and with little time before departure, I gave up, instead placing it all into a suitcase and large duffel and hoping it would somehow fit when I arrived at the mountain.

On the southern flank of Mt. Rainier, nineteen clients and seven guides met at a place called Paradise, an aptly named location 5,420 feet above sea level. Inside a small chalet, each climber spread their gear onto the floor. Prompted by a checklist, a guide reviewed each piece. My gear passed inspection; I did not. I was wearing blue jeans, flannel, and t-shirts—all cotton garments. Cotton, the guide chided, was a dangerous fabric, one that quickly becomes wet from perspiration or rain. When damp, this natural fabric loses all insulating ability, potentially allowing hypothermia.

Chastised, I retreated to change. As I stepped into my capilene, I realized that at least this was one less set of clothes to fit into the backpack. When I returned, a bulging Ziploc bag filled with candy, nuts, meats, and cheese—lunches and snacks for five days—topped my pile. Meanwhile other climbers were loading their packs easily and efficiently. I began tentatively, placing items into each of the pack's compartments, filling these pouches until zippers strained and the thin fabric stretched. But after all compartments were full, many items remained on the floor. Then I hung climbing gear and water bottles from the pack frame, draped assorted clothing over the top, and tied two sweaters around my waist.

As I tried to heft this hopeless mess onto my back, we were instructed to come forward and receive our share of "group gear"—cooking pots, lightweight gas stoves, climbing anchors, ropes, and more food. Nineteen roughly equal allotments were stacked atop two tables. Each climber was expected to carry one of these piles in addition to their own gear and food. I was last in line. As I stepped forward, I faced an unwieldy collection of oddly shaped items, topped by a loaf of bread. A stern-faced guide stood behind the table.

I looked at the bread, then at the guide. He looked at my bulging backpack, then at the bread. Thankfully, he carried the entire pile.

I hoped that enthusiasm and fitness would overcome my inexperience. Starting near the head of the line, I kept pace

easily. As we ascended the well-maintained Skyline Trail from Paradise, we remained unroped, instructed to walk single file an arm's-length apart, maintaining a steady pace. If one needed to rest, adjust their pack or even take a picture, they were to step from the line. If other hikers approached, and many did this late August weekend, our group moved in unison to the side of the trail, allowing others to pass. Like a long snake, twenty-six climbers, each a yard apart, ascended the winding path.

But the scenery was spectacular, and marching singly-mindedly through such beauty seemed a sacrilege. I stepped from the line to snap a photo, then re-entered near the snake's belly. Twice more I stepped out to photograph the expansive view, eventually reaching the line's end. There, despite keeping up with the group, I was scolded by a junior guide to "quit taking pictures and just walk."

As we ascended, the altitude and physical exertion each took a toll, and by early afternoon the tightly regimented line had disintegrated. While the strongest climbers forged ahead, others lagged, panting and coughing, struggling from the lack of oxygen in the thin mountain air. Guides helped the slowest clients, taking backpacks and strapping them atop their own, one guide carrying 150 pounds up the steep slope.

I kept my pack—and maintained a steady pace. Conditioning had helped, at least this first day.

After supper, we crowded into the bunkhouse at Camp Muir 10,800 feet up the mountain, and each person told of their mountaineering experience and climbing goals. One couple had just returned from their honeymoon, a month-long trek in Nepal. An athletic-appearing young man had completed the "Colorado 14'ers," climbing all fifty-four of that state's mountains that stand more than 14,000 feet high. Most participants had rock and ice-climbing experience; one had ascended to the South Col, 26,000 feet high on Everest. When my turn came, I related that I was a hiker, adventure traveler, and photographer, here to learn mountaineering basics. Only one other climber had so little experience.

During the next three days I learned to use an ice ax, tie climbing knots, and walk on glaciers while roped with others. Sliding down icy slopes, our group practiced self-arrest, rolling



The Making of a Climber

The author practicing technical ice climbing on Mt. Rainier.

and twisting our bodies to firmly implant long metal axes into the frozen surface, thereby stopping or arresting a fall. After learning crevasse rescue, a technique employing ropes and pulleys to lift a climber from an icy abyss, each participant was given the dubious opportunity, while double-roped for safety, to jump into a crevasse, experiencing the sensation and full force of a fall.

The course was fascinating. I found living and climbing in a glaciated mountain environment exhilarating. Rainier, however, is a dangerous peak, a mountain of many moods with weather that can change quickly and topography that can be unforgiving of even the slightest mistake. Eighty-four climbers have died on Mt. Rainier since 1887. A week before our seminar, two men fell to their deaths after an ice storm coated the upper mountain with two inches of clear, hard ice, rendering crampons and standard glacier travel methods nearly useless. Since then, no one had summited. As a course finale we would try, but were told we would probably turn back far short of our goal.

Hours before our summit attempt, the calm weather we had enjoyed began to change. Cirrus clouds thickened during the afternoon, and shortly after sunset the wind intensified. Strong gusts shook the sturdy bunkhouse throughout the night. Between the wind's roar and the anticipation of the upcoming summit attempt, sleep did not come easily.

At 1:30 a.m., a typical time for an alpine start, we awoke. Snow and ice-climbing is safest during cold, nighttime conditions; sun and daytime warmth allow melting, markedly increasing the risk of ice and rock falls. Ideally most of an ascent is completed before daybreak, sunrise enjoyed from the summit, and the descent completed by noon.

On this cloudy night, our only light was from individual headlamps, small battery-powered units worn by each climber. We dressed, ate, and packed, then tied ourselves to the climbing rope—all by these small cones of illumination.

By 3:30 a.m. everyone was outside, roped up and ready, a rapid preparation for a large group. However, the wind raged unabated. Low dense clouds obscured all light save for the thin headlamp beams that pierced the murky darkness a mere twenty feet. The wind-driven cold bit deeply despite many layers of clothing.

Then we began to move. One climber at a time; one rope-team at a time. Waiting until the rope in front was nearly taut, each climber would step out, walking at the same pace as his forward teammates, leaving minimal slack. As one team of six climbers moved away, evenly spaced along a 160-foot-long rope, another team stepped up and repeated the process, leaving one climber at a time and walking with a uniform and steady pace.

Minutes after leaving Camp Muir, we crossed a small ridge and into the wind's full force. The gusts that had shaken the bunkhouse all night had been attenuated, partially deflected by the mountain's topography. I was stunned by the storm's fury. Spoken commands could not be heard over the wind; communication was by tension and tugs on the rope as we ascended a thin path packed deeply into firm snow. In the dense darkness there was no sense of location or direction, only the feeling of steadily climbing—sometimes gradually, sometimes steeply—always buffeted by the gale.

Darkness yielded to faint morning light as we suddenly climbed above the clouds, a layer of overcast that hugged the mountain's flanks and extended to the horizon. Valleys and hills were obscured by this foreboding gray layer, but at 11,000 feet the area's two tallest peaks, Rainier and Little Tahoma, jutted ice-streaked rocky heads above this vast gray sea.

Despite the clear sky, the wind raged. The intensifying orange band of pre-dawn light, although beautiful, offered no warmth. Bent low with only faces exposed, our cheeks felt the constant sting of wind-driven ice granules stripped from the glacier's surface. One petite climber was lifted off her feet and blown to the ice, the rope held by others stopping her fall. Another gust ripped glasses from a near-sighted climber's face; the following team found the eyewear despite the darkness. Still we advanced.

At Ingraham Flats we stopped to weigh our options. Weak climbers often turn back here, groups rest and occasionally wait out storms here, and some alpinists even camp here. It is one of the most protected places on the mountain.

It is also the site of the worst tragedy in American mountaineering history. In 1981, twenty-five climbers paused at this level expanse. Although generally a safe location, a huge mass of snow and ice slid down the mountain that day, the avalanche sweeping eleven people to their deaths. A photograph devel-

oped from the film found in one victim's camera hangs as the centerpiece of a simple yet poignant memorial in the park's visitor center. I did not see the photo nor learn of the tragedy until after our climb. But the image is dramatic, showing the pyramidal summit of Little Tahoma jutting through a sea of clouds, a scene strikingly similar to the view now before us.

Discussion was difficult over the roar of the wind. Few words, however, were necessary. Even if the upper mountain hadn't been dangerously icy, this storm alone would have necessitated retreat. The discouraged looks on the guides' faces and the howl of the wind said enough. Our summit bid was over.

We turned and descended back into the clouds and reached camp without incident, despite the stormy conditions. Below Camp Muir the wind eased and we unroped, descending first the snowfield and then the winding trail. The first day's regimentation was forgotten; we walked down in small groups, chatting with new friends.

Although far from an accomplished mountaineer, I had become enamored of the high mountain environment, and during these five days had discovered that I could acclimate and perform well at altitude. Stories of great mountains in the Andes, Alaska Range, and Himalayas enthralled me. I indefinitely postponed trekking up Kilimanjaro; instead I would attempt other technical climbs.

Poor weather, however, plagued my efforts. In Mexico, I endured the biggest snowstorm in forty years. On Popocatepetl (17,887 feet), the climber's dormitory, normally a thousand feet below snowline, was closed—buried beneath six feet of fresh powder. Again we retreated without summiting. Three days later we attempted Pico de Orizaba (18,701 feet), Mexico's tallest mountain. Our luck was no better.

As we descended, Channing Hall, a friend I had met on Rainier asked, "Doug, where do we go next?" I was too discouraged to answer. In fact, I thought myself finished with mountaineering. After the first four days on Mt. Rainier, I had experienced little but wind, cold, snow, and failure on the mountains. Despite paying hefty fees for outstanding guides, purchasing the best equipment, and pursuing a vigorous conditioning program, I had yet to reach a summit. I thought of many places

to visit and other activities to enjoy, pursuits that seemed far more enjoyable than freezing in a tent pummeled by snow and wind.

Channing's persistence is the reason I continued climbing. An unstoppable optimist, he organized another northwestern excursion, this time to both Mts. Baker and Rainier. All I needed was to buy a plane ticket and food, pay guide fees, and show up with gear, ready to climb. Sheryl, my friend and confidante, urged me to accept the offer. So encouraged by others—and wanting to reach at least one summit during my mountaineering “career”—I gave climbing one more try.

In August, a high-pressure system brought blue skies and light breezes to the Pacific Northwest. We first summited Mt. Baker (10,775 feet), a snow-covered volcano deep in the rugged North Cascade Mountains. Our guide was prophetic when, after congratulating me atop the mountain said, “May this be the first of many summits.”

On Mt. Rainier, Channing had arranged for Jason Edwards, our course leader the previous year, to again guide us. This time Jason also invited Nawong Gombu, a colleague and Sherpa from Nepal to join our team.

Gombu, as he preferred to be called, had participated in many Himalayan climbs. At age sixteen, he had joined the 1953 British Everest Expedition as a high-altitude porter. On that historic climb his uncle, Tenzing Norgay, and New Zealand beekeeper Edmund Hillary summited Everest, the first documented ascent of the world's tallest mountain.¹ Ten years later Gombu returned to Everest and, with Jim Whittaker, reached the summit, placing the first American flag atop the peak.

¹ In 1924 George Mallory led a British team to Everest's north side. Famous for his quip about climbing mountains “because they are there,” this was the veteran climber's third Everest try. Mallory and his partner, Andrew Irvine, were seen by teammates 1,000 feet below the summit. The men were ascending strongly, but clouds moved in and blocked further telescopic views. The two climbers never returned. In 1999 Mallory's body was discovered by an American expedition (led by a senior RMI guide), but Irvine's body—and Mallory's camera—have yet to be found, prolonging the debate as to whether either man reached Everest's summit before perishing.

At fifty-five, Gombu remained strong and trim. Barely five feet tall, he carried huge loads at high altitude yet moved easily across difficult terrain. Residing much of the year in the Himalayan foothills near Darjeeling, India, Gombu had spent many summers on Rainier. In fact, if successful, this climb would be his eightieth ascent of the mountain.

With experience I packed my recently purchased, internal frame backpack easily and efficiently. We reached Camp Muir in early afternoon, slept early then arose at 11:30 p.m. for the summit bid. With mild breezes beneath a star-filled sky, we crossed the Cowlitz Glacier past Ingraham Flats, where a year earlier we had turned back, to the base of Disappointment Cleaver, an appropriately named ridge that is the climb's most physically demanding portion. One of nine teams on the mountain that day, we ascended this long rocky spur along a poorly marked path then stepped again onto snow and ice which we followed to 14,000 feet and the crater rim.

Here, many climbers stop. RMI awards summit certificates for reaching this point. However, the true summit, Columbia Crest, barely a hundred feet higher, lies across the quarter-mile-wide crater. Crossing this high-altitude expanse is time-consuming and therefore risky. Last year the weather had changed quickly and deteriorated rapidly, and we knew any extra effort at this altitude weakens climbers for the descent.

Yet, I had never considered reaching any point short of the true summit. Thoughts of turning back stunned me.

A steady wind blew across the crater—not the howling gale of a year earlier but a wind strong enough to lift ice crystals and carry them in ever-changing white wisps half a foot above the frozen surface. It was midmorning, late to be still short of the summit. Six of the day's seven previous teams had "summitted" here; only one had crossed the crater.

Jason and Gombu congratulated us then asked how we felt. We had been slow but felt strong and wanted to continue. Despite the wind, the sky was clear with no signs of approaching storms. In an oxygen-starved environment nearly three miles above the ocean, we pled our case.

The guides conferred, and our determination and persistence were rewarded with a qualified yes. Yes, but only if we maintained a steady pace across the crater floor. Slowing or delay would necessitate turning back.

We started across, taking one breath with each step. Progress was agonizingly slow, but we advanced steadily.

Geologists classify Mt. Rainier as an active volcano even though there is no molten lava flowing down its sides or great plumes of ash rising above it. Instead its crater is a shallow bowl—cold and windswept, buried year-round beneath snow and ice. A few rocks are exposed around the crater rim, some windswept free of their snowy mantle, others kept clear by warm gases escaping from volcanic vents.

At the base of Columbia Crest we briefly stopped. Here the ground was free of snow, the exposed rocks heavily weathered. Two small holes, openings little larger than a fingerbreadth in diameter, perforated the granular surface. The surrounding area was warm; wisps of steam rose intermittently from each vent. With each burst a faint sulfurous odor filled the air before the breeze dissipated the unpleasant smell.

I moved closer for a better look. Between wisps of gas these holes seemed unremarkable. In other regions and at lower altitudes they might have been formed by insects or small rodents. But here, looking into these holes, I stared down the gullet of an active volcano.

Mt. Rainier has not always been this docile. It is a young mountain, less than a million years old. During a geologically brief lifespan, this volcano has erupted many times, the last event 1,000 years ago. But today, and for much of the two centuries since British Captain George Vancouver first saw this peak and named it for his friend and colleague Rear Admiral Peter Rainier, the mountain has been quiet. Yet Native American lore tells of fire and molten rock high near the summit they call Tahoma, and geologists today warn that it is only a matter of time before another major eruption occurs.

Although intrigued by gas belching vents and amazed at standing on an ice-covered mountain born of hot magma, we could not linger. The summit stood directly above.

We began up the final crest. Step. Breath. Step. Breath.

Then we could climb no higher. To the south we looked down upon snow-covered Mt. Adams and the jagged silhouette of Mt. St. Helens, scarred from its 1980 eruption. Seattle, partially hidden by haze, lay to the west; Mt. Baker, the highest mountain in the North Cascades where we had stood four days earlier, was below us to the north.

We were on top, atop the most heavily glaciated peak in the “lower 48”—and the highest point in the state of Washington. Channing sported a beaming smile despite his fatigue. I was ecstatic. Reaching a summit made the process fun—a wonderful achievement following a challenging but enjoyable ascent. We took celebratory photos then images of the magnificent scenery below. I could have stayed for hours, savoring the accomplishment and enjoying the view.

But climbers are transient visitors to these lofty heights. Each step, each breath drains precious energy. One must descend before weakness, dehydration, or altitude illness begins. As we prepared to leave the summit, Jason reminded us that, “Guys, we are only halfway there.” Then we retraced our steps down the summit crest, across the crater floor, down the Cleaver, and past Ingraham Flats, reaching Camp Muir thirteen hours after our nighttime departure.

There would be many more summits. I returned to Mexico and scaled Popocatepetl, Orizaba, and Iztaccihuatl, the three highest peaks in that country. I climbed Ecuador’s Cotopaxi, the world’s tallest volcano—two feet taller than Mt. Kilimanjaro (which I have yet to attempt)—and summited South America’s Cerro Aconcagua (22,861 feet), the highest point in the western hemisphere.

However, climbing never became an exclusive pursuit. My interests in photography, kayaking, human culture and history never waned. As I traveled and climbed, I occasionally recalled my high school teacher’s goal of reaching all fifty state highpoints. I even summited a few myself—if I was near them—in case I ever became “serious” about highpointing.