

September 2005

This was planned to be a dual adventure, with a climb of Washington's Mount Rainier and a three-day yacht cruise on Puget Sound. We flew from Detroit to Seattle and spent a day with Rich's brother David, sister-in-law Lori, niece Hope and nephew Mark. We enjoyed a relaxing cruise on David's Catalina 22, followed by a hike to the Red Hook brewery. For some unknown reason, after the beer tasting, the hike back seemed considerably more difficult.

On Sunday, we drove to Mount Rainier National Park. Rich checked in with Rainier Mountaineering Inc. (RMI), the guide service he would be using for his three-day summit climb. We stayed at a National Park lodge built in 1917 at 5400 feet of elevation. We chose this to help with acclimatization to the thin mountain air. Unfortunately, the walls were also thin and the crying babies on both sides of our room awakened us hourly. Not a good omen of what was to come.

The first day was a climbing school. There were ten people in my class. The guides and most of the students were in their 20's. There was one other middle-aged guy. Everybody seemed to be in excellent physical condition. The one exception was a girl who showed up wearing a denim skirt. This was amazing given the extensive equipment list that we had been given well in advance. The first day was a training session on walking on ice and snow wearing crampons (spikes on the bottom of your boots), how to use an ice axe to stop a slide after a fall, and travel as a group roped together. Along the way, we were to be evaluated for our skills and physical fitness. The first test was a fast one-hour climb with our packs up to a glacier for training. Anyone who could not keep up would not be permitted to join the summit attempt. Everyone did fine except for Miss Denim Skirt. Cheryll followed along and took pictures of the next five hours of spiking, falling, slipping and sliding. One drill involves the instructor yelling "falling". Everybody is expected to immediately fall face-down on his or her ice axe and crampons, dig in for self-arrest, or for group arrest when roped together. Near the end of the day, one instructor yelled "falling" when his group was bunched up too close. One guy was accidentally spiked in the face by a fellow student's crampons. Out came the rubber gloves and the gauze to slow the bleeding. He finished the class, but had several stitches and a tetanus shot before returning the next day. Another bad omen.

The next morning, our class was down from ten to six climbers. Miss Denim Skirt and three others had not returned. We were assigned a different set of guides. Olivia, the lead guide, had an open wound in her face of unspecified origin. I didn't ask. Another bad omen. The plan was to climb to Camp Muir at 10,000 feet, spend the evening, and then depart in the middle of the night for the summit. Ropes and ice axes are not necessary until the difficult sections above Camp Muir. My pack was full of the specified equipment and weighed around fifty pounds. The first section of the climb took five hours. It was conducted with military precision. RMI had developed their system over the decades. One guide set the pace and the other marched alongside the tight group formation with comments about our footwork and breathing technique. There were four breaks in prescribed places. Each was precisely 15 minutes. We were given time to

relieve ourselves, adjust our boots and quickly eat and drink something. There was definitely no time for relaxing, enjoying the view or taking photos. There were a half dozen crevasses in the snowfield, all of which were narrow enough to just step across. The guides kept their radios to themselves, but I overheard that someone higher on the mountain was being treated for snow blindness. I had no problem keeping up, but was not enjoying the experience.

We arrived at Camp Muir at about three o'clock in the afternoon. I was a little tired, but still feeling strong. Camp Muir has a wooden hut that looks like a big shoebox with a single window. The area for the climbers is 12 by 24 feet. Packs had to be left outside due to lack of space. The hut accommodates 25 climbers on three levels of wood racks in slave-ship style accommodations. Today, there were only two groups with fourteen climbers, so I shared a three-person rack with one other guy. It was luxury living, Rainier-style. There is an outhouse and six tons of waste are lifted out in 55-gallon drums by helicopter each year. Nature calls higher on the mountain were answered into a "blue bag" that has to be packed out by the climber. The weather was wonderful, or so I thought. It was clear and bright and relatively warm. The mountain is usually frozen at this altitude. The freeze-thaw cycles were causing the rock and glaciers to shift and crack. There were spectacular views of Mount St. Helens and Mount Hood, over 100 miles away. We watched as Mount St. Helens put out a puff of smoke to confirm that she is also very active. For dinner, the camp cook brought us hot water for our not so delicious dehydrated meals, which were eaten standing up. We learned that the guides were sitting down to a feast of pork chops and fresh fruit.

In the evening we were given a briefing for the following day's climb. We would be awakened at a time that the guides would not provide in advance. We would then have one hour to use the outhouse, eat breakfast and otherwise prepare. We had to wear helmets and avalanche beacons to transmit our locations if we were buried alive. I learned a new term; "objective hazard." This means a hazard such as rock fall or icefall that we can do nothing about, apart from minimizing our time in the dangerous area. In case of rock fall, we were instructed to turn our headlamps to high beam to try to spot the rock and run the other way. Of course, if you are roped together, and one guy runs right, and the other guy runs left, the guy in the middle is stuck. At 6:00 PM two independent climbers passed through the camp, descending with a ranger. It was odd to be heading down with only two hours of sunlight left. I later learned that they had been the victims of icefall. One had fractured ribs and a broken arm in a sling. A second had either a dislocated shoulder or a smashed collarbone, or both. Another bad omen. I figured that there were around 40 people high on the mountain that day, and at least five of them were seriously injured. As we listened to the briefing, there were lots of noises around us. The guides told us which were glacier noises, and which were rock fall.

I got little sleep. I was weighing the relative risks versus the rewards of climbing a 14,400 foot peak, and I had promised Cheryl that I wouldn't do anything stupid. Cheryl and I have climbed Kilimanjaro at over 19,000 feet, so my tolerance for risk for a 14,000 footer was relatively low. The wakeup call came at 12:30 AM. I told the guide that I did not feel the need to go any higher. She asked if I was comfortable with that decision, and

I said yes. I got up to see the group off and watched their headlamps disappear in the distance. It was a beautiful, clear night and the stars were incredible. But the normally frozen mountain was rumbling, creaking and groaning.

After sunrise, I found that one of my boots was missing. It appeared that the guide, in an extreme act of unprofessionalism, had taken it to assure that I did not descend without the group. They were expected back in the early afternoon, so I settled in to wait for the next group down. At 8:15 AM, I was sitting outside enjoying the view and a coffee. There was a huge rumble. I looked behind me and there was a huge rock fall on the same path I had seen my fellow climbers depart a few hours earlier. I could see individual boulders tumbling from a half-mile distance, and then the area was covered in a huge cloud of dust. Even though we heard on the radio that the rest of the group had reached the summit, my decision not to ascend was validated. The other group from RMI made it back to Camp Muir around 1:00 PM. I asked the guide to return my boot and allow me to descend with them. He refused. It got heated with the result being my dismissal of the guide service, my boot magically reappearing and a pleasant and informative descent with a ranger who was going off duty.

The conversation with the ranger was fascinating. Out came the full story. She told me that 7 people have died on the mountain this year out of 6500 attempts. This was about an average death rate. I asked about how many injuries, but she said that they don't keep track. She did volunteer that she had rescued 21 climbers in 21 days. Only 100 people are allowed to climb each day. To put this into perspective, there are around 1000 flights out of Detroit Metro each day. This level of risk would be equivalent to one of those planes crashing every single day and many more landing full of people with serious injuries. This was definitely a humbling experience. I've cancelled my 2011 attempt on Everest.

The next several days were much more pleasant. My brother David generously lent us his Catalina 22, and we cruised Puget Sound. We called in Port Townsend for the wooden boat festival and enjoyed an evening in Port Ludlow. The only exciting moment was when we had to dodge the Washington State Ferry after a lunch stop in the quaint town of Kingston. The boat did great and left the trip as an overall positive. Back with David, Lori and the kids, Cheryll and Lori decided to go wine tasting at the local wineries. Cheryll thinks that this place is great. There are a dozen wineries within walking distance, and they returned very happy. I'm not sure if it was just the wine, or they were toasting the end of my mid-life crisis.

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