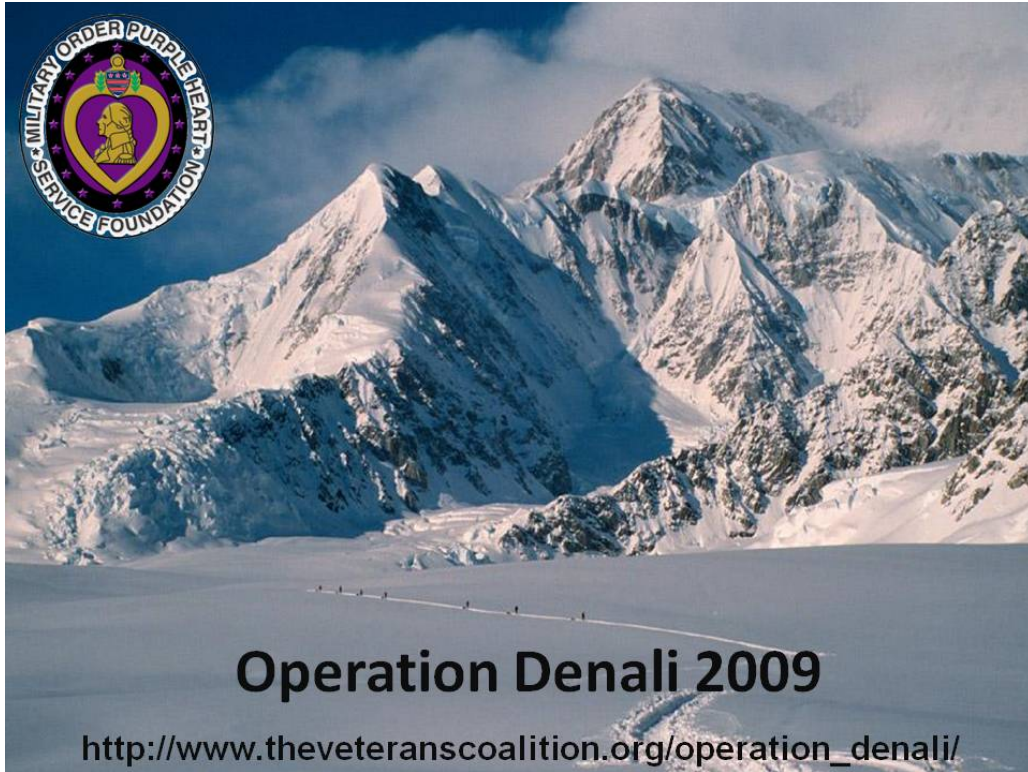


Expedition Journal: OPERATION DENALI 2009

01-19 June 2009

By Marc Hoffmeister



01 June: Day 1 Check in and Base Camp



After a year of training, resourcing gear and anticipating the climb, the day was finally here. Bob Haines, a retired US Army Infantry Sergeant First Class turned firefighter had flown in from Colorado three days prior. Jon Kuniholm, a former USMC Captain who had lost his arm in an ambush in Haditha in 2005 and Matt Nyman, an Army SFC who lost his right leg in 2005 in a helicopter crash during a raid in Baghdad while serving with Special Operations Command arrived the next day. The full team, minus Dave Shebib, an Airborne Combat Medic wounded in Hawr Rajb, Iraq in 2007, had crashed at my

house where the last few days had been a flurry of sorting gear, doing interviews, refresher skills training and picking up last minute needs. Dave arrived early morning from Fort Richardson and we piled into our trucks and headed to Talkeetna. Arriving at the Alaska Mountaineering School (AMS) after the two hour drive north was like coming home. It didn't feel like a full year had passed since we had all sat in the kitchen of AMS, preparing to fly out to the mountaineering course. The team was introduced to our lead guide, Kirby Senden, and two assistant guides, Todd Tumolo and Matt Montavon. My wife, Gayle, and I had met Kirby earlier in the year and the team knew Todd already as he was one of our instructors for the 12 day mountaineering course we had completed in 2008. Matt was a welcome surprise as we hadn't expected three guides. Having a third guide would give us that much more flexibility if we ran into problems on the mountain. We spent the morning much like we had for the course the previous year – inventorying gear, drawing rental equipment and packing lunches. Only this time, we had a whole lot more gear to deal with. We struggled to fit overboots over our mountaineering boots, packed lunches and worked to reduce our load to the real essentials. We had a hearty lunch of pizza and lasagna at AMS then went by the park service for our mandatory pre climb brief. John Leonard, the lead mountaineering ranger at Denali, briefed us and was very excited about our mission.



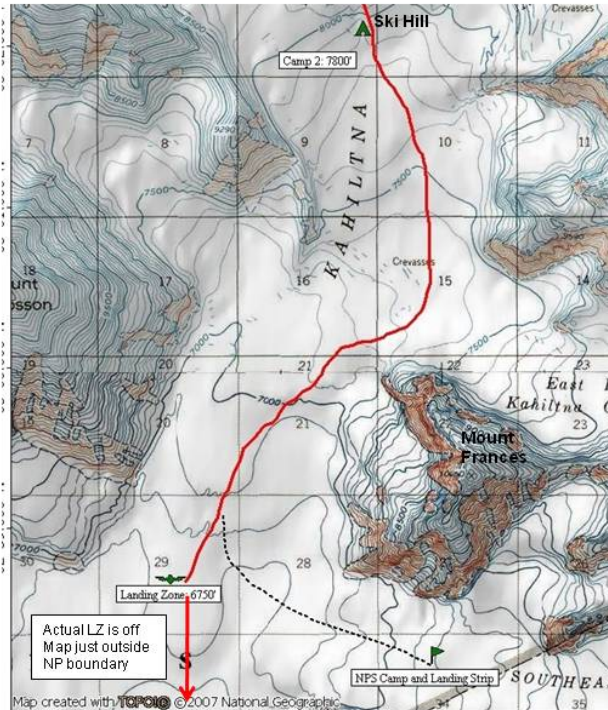
We flew out of Talkeetna at 1800 hrs and made base camp at 6800' shortly thereafter. At last, we were finally on the glacier. We spent some time reviewing anchors, rope management, tent set up, and such and then munched on ravioli's for dinner. We had planned to leave base camp for 7800' that night, but instead opted not to so we didn't burn out right from the start. The first move would be a 5 mile movement requiring 5-8 hours which would have turned our first day on the mountain into a 20+ hour day, so we opted

for a 0630 am departure the next morning.

It was warm, around 30 degrees. It doesn't feel like this adventure has really started...everything feels familiar, natural even. Pack even seems light. I guess that is a product of good training...no surprises!

Day 2

Base camp: 6,750' to Camp 1: 7,800'



Time/Distance: 6-10 hours / 5.5 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 1050'

Route: Move north on gentle slopes up the Kahiltna Glacier to the Base of Ski Hill at 7,800'.

Hazards: Crevasse falls, Icefall (terrain feature) at the base of Mt. Frances, altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.

***NOTE: Map Scale: 1:63,360
1 inch = 1 mile**

02 June: Day 2 Single carry to 7800 ft

Jon let me know that he had tweaked his arm off loading the plane yesterday. Having only one good arm myself from my own wounds, I'm all too familiar with how easy it is to overuse our one 'good' wing. This morning he had some minor swelling and bruising from his prosthetic arm, so he swapped to his old arm for comfort. Matt also mentioned he had a rough night due to his leg and was able to sleep very little...made me feel a bit guilty as I slept like a rock.

We had a 0430 wake up to give us 2 hours to break down camp, pack up and eat to make the planned 0630 departure. The team was slow getting rolling as we were still getting familiar with the loads of gear and best way to pack. We got started a bit late, around 0800 hrs. Our movement was slow but steady as we felt out the best average pace everyone could maintain. Matt had issues getting his leg prosthetic adjusted at first, but after a few tweaks, he was moving great.



The three rope teams stayed relatively close to each other. The loads were a bit heavy. I had about 65 lbs in my ruck and 60 in the sled. We had distributed the gear to try and keep Matt's load light but he

still had a sled. I had extra team gear and Matt's extra leg. It took us 7 hours to cover the 5+ miles to 7800 camp. Kirby, Matt, & Todd, our AMS guides, were great...they kicked it into gear and prepped soup and forced our hydration while we set up tents. I'm used to being the one working stoves and felt very spoiled, though I think I can adjust....



The team is in good spirits, weather is great, with an average around 40 degrees and the sun not too intense. We established a good rhythm today, getting a solid feel for how to cross load gear and what pace worked to maintain the strength of the team. Tomorrow we plan to carry a load of gear to 9800'...about 5 miles and we expect 4 hours up, 2 down at our current pace.

As we progress, we continue to refine our load by caching multiple spare parts and redundant tools for prosthetics. Either growing confidence in what we'll need or sheer desire to drop weight is sometimes the motivator – it's a hard call to make as over prepared equals overweight, but everything we drop brings risk. Jon has 3 arms and tons of parts and tools, making his base ruck easily 20 lbs more than mine. He's dropped a good amount of excess; he even had a full size pair of cable cutters!

Day 3

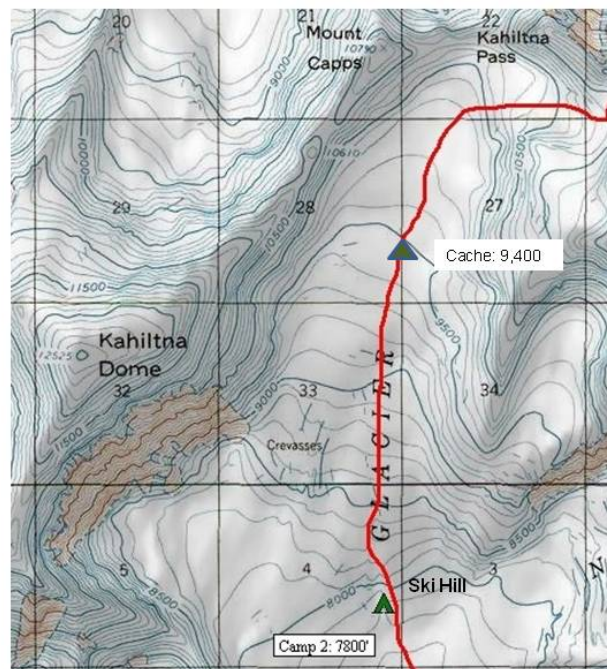
Camp 1: 7,800' to Cache at 9,400'

Time/Distance: 4-6 hours / 4 miles

Elevation Gain 1,400'

Route: Move north up Ski Hill to Kahiltna Pass.

Hazards: Crevasses, ice and snow avalanche hazard, altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.



03 June: Day 3 Carry to Ski Hill



Easy carry today, we climbed to 9400 ft at the top of Ski Hill and set in a cache of food and gear. The cache seemed big, we sure have a lot of stuff...I think it's a product of our inexperience. Jon and Dave were pretty fatigued but Matt kicked ass going up. Descending back down to camp after setting in the cache, however, gave him some issues due to pressure on his prosthetic.

Tomorrow we will head back up to the cache we just placed. If we all feel good at 9400 ft, we'll push on to

11K and set up camp there and then back carry to the cache the next day. I hope we make it to 11K as it will get us higher and buy us another day to acclimate.

The afternoon was super hot...I actually got a sunburn through my leg zips, how embarrassing! I called Samantha Quigley at Defenselink for our first update, pretty cool deal...she is running a live website to track the climb for us.

There were huge lenticulars clouds on the summit of Denali, but the Park Service still reported there were successful summits!



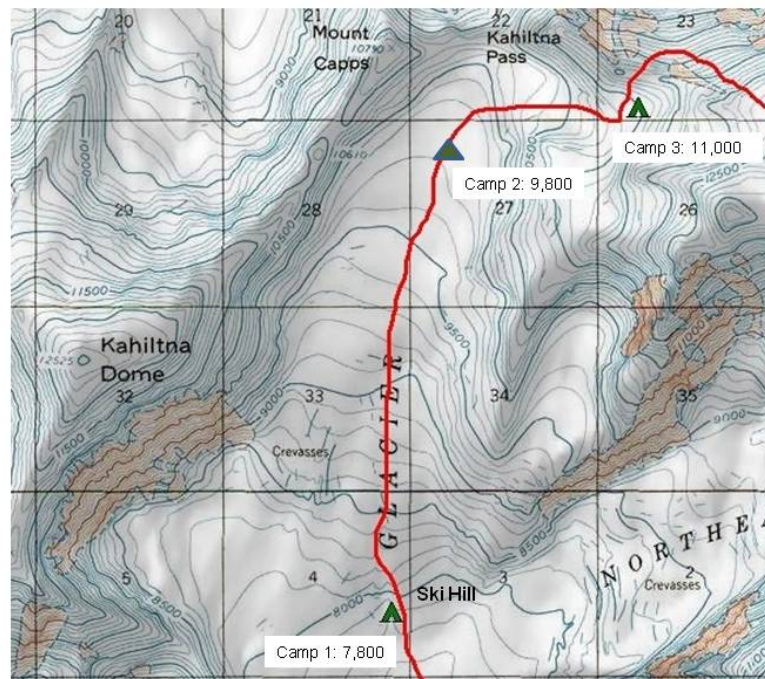
Day 4 Camp 2: 7,800' to Camp 3: 11,000'

Time/Distance: 6-8 hours / 6.5 miles

Elevation Gain 2,200'

Route: Move north up Ski Hill, continue to Kahiltna Pass. Move east up a steep hill to the basin at 11,000'.

Hazards: Crevasses, ice and snow avalanche hazard near the basin at 11,000', altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.



04 June: Day 4 Move to 11K Camp



We moved from 7650 to 11000 ft camp today, bypassing the cache at 9400. We will back carry tomorrow to recover it. The team did great! We even kept pace with several other teams nearly the whole route. Not bad for a bunch of 'wounded guys'. The weather worsened a bit, averaged around 25 degrees with 20-30 mph winds, still a lot nicer out than I ever expected!

Setting up camp required a good amount of digging and wall building, but we inherited a great igloo outhouse! I'm a little frustrated with

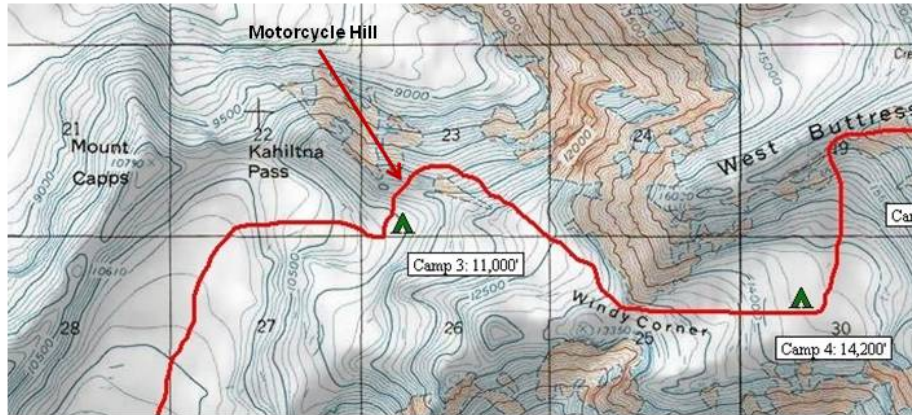
the field craft of some of the guys, they just seem unpracticed in keeping their kit straight, I remind myself to be patient, I've spent the last year in Alaska practically living in the snow prepping for this, and they haven't had that opportunity. Bob is a great asset, as always. He's working hard to help the team as a whole, humping a ton of weight. It's great having him on the team.

Granola for breakfast; Curry rice, turkey, and mushrooms (...more like calamari after rehydrating!) for dinner. Lunch, as always, starts after breakfast and ends at dinner! We all have individual snack bags packed for each week of the climb that we hungrily munch on.

I'm feeling great. I don't feel the altitude much at all, my fractured metatarsal in my left foot is well supported in my Sportiva Spanteks and padded by my Bridgedale summit socks and it's thankfully giving me no issues.



Day 5 Recover Cache, Day 6 Rest Day 7 Camp 3: 11,000' to Cache at Windy Corner'



Time/Distance: 5-7 hours / 2.75 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 3200'

Route: Move 700' up Motorcycle Hill, then move up and right through a rock formation, then up to 12,300'. Move along the base of the West Buttress. Move through a constriction at 13,200 feet known as Windy Corner. Move up and left around large crevasses and continue into the basin to 14,200'.

Hazards: High winds, exposed terrain at Windy Corner, crevasses, altitude, heavy snowfall, whiteout.

40

05 June: Day 5



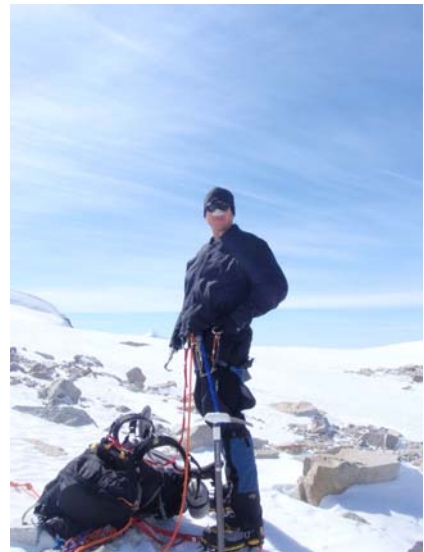
Today we back carried down to 9400 ft to recover the cache. Matt had nausea and tingling throughout his arms and extending to his body. We turned him back 300 ft into the movement and he spent the day in camp at 11000, just to be safe and preserve his leg. It would be a short move anyways. Gayle got on my rope with Jon and Kirby and we continued mission. Jon and Dave both moved well today and we maintained a great pace. We left camp at 1030 hrs and were back by 1500 hrs.

The Alaska Mountaineering School employs Dr Peter Hackett, the esteemed high altitude doctor, for its guides to reach back to for medical consultation. After a brief call with Kirby, Dr. Hackett concluded that Matt just had an adverse response to Diamox. He'll drop to ¼ tablet (75 mg) tonight as he is having some difficulty breathing at 11K. Everyone else seems to be acclimating well. To better acclimate him/us, we'll take a rest day tomorrow

and review crampon use, self arrest and fixed rope movement...no more snowshoes from here on up!

English muffins and Canadian bacon for breakfast and Boboli pizza with pepperoni, mushroom (calamari), cheese and garlic...yes, PIZZA! It rocked; Kirby is a hell of a mountain chef! We had a lot of free time with the short climb today so we spent a lot of time chatting in the kiva, it was fun and relaxing. I called in an update to Samantha's voicemail at Defenselink.

I'm concerned about Matt for both altitude and pace. We go to crampons from here and weather will continue to worsen. We'll see, I guess. I need to stay patient, and remember our goal...he may be slow at times, but he's hard as nails and keeps plugging away despite his pain. The man is an inspiration. We'll try and keep weight off him as much as we can, though he tends to resist the support...hard ass that he is. We've reduced the number of team gear piles laid out so that he doesn't have to carry team gear, which is a good thing to prolong the integrity of the skin on his stump.



06 June: Day 6 Rest Day

Today was a rest day. We reviewed crampon use, self arrest and passing knots, and then walked Motorcycle Hill for practice and to keep the blood flowing. Matt is doing well now that he dropped the Diamox dosage. The tingling is gone and he cramponed well, but we need to adjust rope team strategy a bit. He has been leading his team rope as that worked best with snowshoes. Now we will try shifting him to the middle to better arrest a possible fall.



The team called in on the satellite phone to the Alaska Purple Heart Trail dedication taking place in Delta Junction with the Military Order of the Purple Heart, our title sponsors. We apparently bumped Senator Webb off the podium and were able to speak with Captain Juan Guerrero while he projected the conversation through the PA system. Juan was in my unit in Iraq on an Explosive Ordnance Security Team. He was badly wounded 3 months after I was and it was great to hear his voice. The call was brief as we lost signal and couldn't recover it, but at least they knew we

were there in spirit!

We hung out and I read a lot for the rest of the day. Tomorrow we'll carry a load past Windy Corner and drop 9 days of food for use at the 14200' camp. Several teams have been stuck at that camp for upwards of two weeks this season and we are dreading the possibility, but weather continues to look good.

French toast for breakfast and tortellini for dinner....we're eating like royalty!

07 June 09: Day 7 Carry to Windy Corner

Weather was fantastic as we carried up to 13,700' and set in our cache. Windy corner proved to be windless today, the mountain is being kind to us. We were able to cache well past the corner which is a great strategy in the event the weather turns on you on your back carry day; it keeps you from having to traverse the corner twice or not at all due to bad weather. The heat was actually the worst part of the



descent today. We made good time leaving at 0830 hrs and were back in camp by 1500 hrs. Matt was fast in the ascent but descending was again a challenge. The descent wore on his stump and the extra pressure on his good foot caused it to blister and tear open.

The team was solid on the first crampon section of the climb. Todd put pickets in along Squirrel Hill and short roped Matt for better response time and it seemed to work well. Jon has a little trouble passing the anchors with his prosthetic arm, but that's likely a product of getting back in practice. He still passes knots faster with his hook than many people I've seen with two able hands!

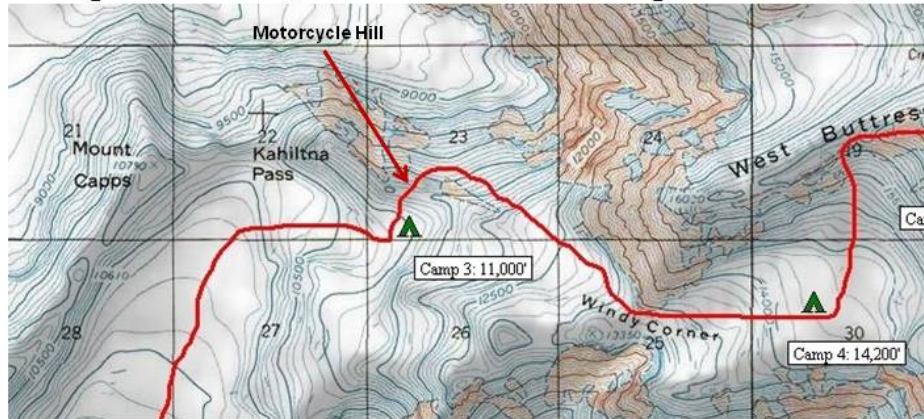
Every team member but Dave has now talked to me about tent arrangements. Currently Gayle, Bob, and I are in one tent and Dave, Jon, and Matt are in the other with the guides having their own tent. Its kind of amusing, but everyone has legitimate concerns. Matt and Jon want to be split up because they feel having two amputees in one tent means they take too long getting everything together. It doesn't help that Dave is slow to get out of the rack and out of their way. Bob is very comfortable with both Gayle and I; we've climbed and raced together for years and we are efficient by familiarity. That gives us the ability to be done quickly and tackle team tasks while Matt and Jon deal with their prosthetics. That is what Bob and I trained for...to work harder and carry more in order to get everyone to the summit, which is the goal. Though I'm sure they don't like it, I opt to keep things as is, and hope that it doesn't polarize the team at all and spoke briefly with Dave in hopes that he can speed up his prep in mornings (...which he definitely did in retrospect)

I did an internet interview by satellite phone with Purple Heart Radio today while on Windy Corner. Technology is so cool sometimes! Not so sure about the extra weight though....

Tomorrow we will move camp to 14,200 feet, two days ahead of schedule.

Day 8

Camp 3: 11,000' to Camp 4: 14,200'



Time/Distance: 5-7 hours / 2.75 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 3200'

Route: Move 700' up Motorcycle Hill, then move up and right through a rock formation, then up to 12,300'. Move along the base of the West Buttress. Move through a constriction at 13,200 feet known as Windy Corner. Move up and left around large crevasses and continue into the basin to 14,200'.

Hazards: High winds, exposed terrain at Windy Corner, crevasses, altitude, heavy snowfall, whiteout.

48

08 June: Day 8



Today was a big move to camp...3000 ft of elevation gain, it took us 7 hrs to complete. Bob and I both took extra team gear to lighten the load on the others. It was a smoker. Altitude kicked in a bit on me today. I got a raging headache while setting up camp, so I'll start Diamox tonight. Diamox assists in holding off Acute Mountain Sickness by speeding the acclimatization process by increasing your respiration rate.



We'll stay at 14200' for at least 4 nights in order to acclimate thoroughly. No problems with anyone on the team despite the challenging move; everyone is in great spirits and happy to be at this altitude. I think the tent issue has been 'put to bed'.

We were going to set up the kitchen in a snow cave that a former AMS team had built...until Todd almost gave himself CO2 poisoning trying to cook in it. Hopefully his head will clear soon.

We'll back carry to 13700 ft tomorrow and recover our cache, then dig in our Kiva for the kitchen and harden camp. There is Park Ranger camp collocated with the climber's camp; hopefully we'll get over to meet them and some of the Air Force Pararescue Jumpers that volunteer on the mountain.

Time to rack, I'm pooped.

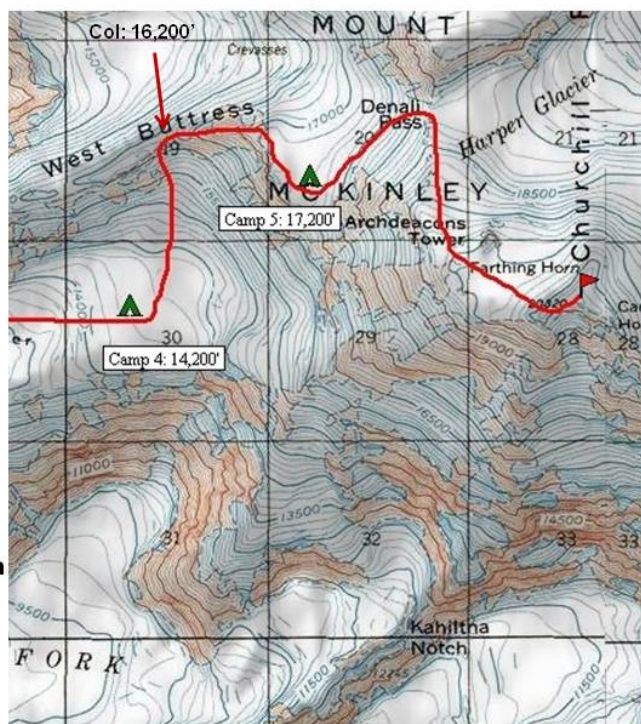
Day 9 Back Carry to 13, 500 **Day 10: 14,200' to Cache 16200'**

Time/Distance: 6-8 hours / 1.75 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 3000'

Route: Move north up a headwall to gain the col at 16,200'. The last 800' are very steep; fixed lines are installed by guide services to mitigate risk. From the col move west along the ridge to a gendarme known as Washburn's Thumb. More fixed lines help climbers negotiate the ridge around this obstacle. Continue along the ridge to 17,200'. May camp at 16200 based upon conditions.

Hazards: High winds, exposed terrain for most of the climb, crevasses, altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.



09 June: Day 9

We back carried to recover our cache this morning; it was a quick walk, took us only 1:34 total time. Matt stayed at camp today; he was feeling a bit sick.

We built the Kiva when we got back, then practiced fixed lines and checked out the “Edge of the World” ...felt like a tourist! Visibility was incredible and scenery was epic. To experience the views, the terrain...it's beyond words; it's why we climb.

Weather has been unbelievably kind to us and we have another good day predicted for tomorrow, then we have some lows inbound. We will carry to 16200 ft tomorrow, up the fixed lines and the headwall. We'll cache 5 days of food and fuel there in the saddle and possibly prep some tent sites in the event the move day smokes any of us beyond continued movement. We'll take a rest day after putting in the cache.



All spirits are high; we've been spoiled by the weather and talk of the summit has increased. A bit of reality showed its face though – two climbers were evacuated after falling at the top of the fixed lines. They had summited yesterday and were spent and simply misstepped before clipping into the fixed line, or so we heard. Both had mild frostbite – a good warning that even in good weather, the summit is damn cold.

Everyone is a bit concerned about the headwall. Its steep as hell and the air is so thin we all feel weak

under a load. It's an odd fatigue. You have the strength, but the lack of oxygen keeps you from summoning it very quickly.

10 June: Day 10

We carried the five days of food and fuel to 16200 and cached it. We started at 0730hrs, 0 degrees, light winds. Pretty chilly, but I dressed light knowing it would be an oven (relatively speaking!) when the sun cleared the ridgeline. Despite the light dress, the cold was bearable except for, shall we say...my groin area... My soft shells had no extra insulation there and I ended up 'wearing' my butter liner gloves down there in order to prevent a frost nipped tip.

We gained the headwall and fixed lines. Movement was slow. We let a team pass before clipping in and then, thankfully, had the ropes to ourselves with no one pressuring our movement. Jon got the knot passing down with repetition but was still slow due to the complicated task of manipulating the ascender and carabiner with his prosthetic



hook. Matt moved great and Dave was okay going up but a bit challenged coming down. Whether it was fatigue or something else, he seemed as though he had never heard any prior instructions on how we planned to move as a team. Matt, usually slowest in the decent due to his leg, descended the fixed lines faster than Dave. Jon and I descended first and our team finished an hour ahead of the other team despite starting at the same time. Dave communicated poorly as he passed knots, had gear hanging everywhere...some of which he lost as it was not well secured. He frustrated the rest of his rope team significantly, and this was with no weight...it'll be rough when we descend fully loaded. Matt practically ran down the mountain until his socket loosened from the sweat. First team closed back at camp at 1500 hrs, the last team was a little after 1600 hrs.

This will be a tough move when he head up to high camp at 17200 ft, fully loaded two days from now. Hope tomorrow's rest day boosts everyone's energy. We have nothing on tap for tomorrow, just gear prep and pack for high camp and the summit push. If weather actually holds, we could have a summit shot in 3-4 days. The weather has been so good that I feel Murphy stacking the odds against us and am just waiting to get slammed. It would be too good to be true to keep the weather for the whole expedition.

Day 11-12: Rest/Acclimatize

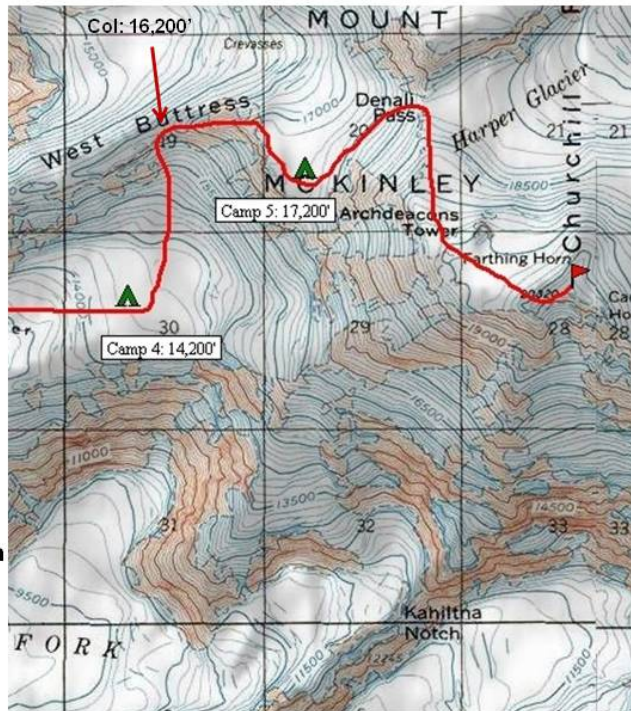
Day 13: 14,200' to Camp 5: 17,200'

Time/Distance: 6-8 hours / 1.75 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 3000'

Route: Move north up a headwall to gain the col at 16,200'. The last 800' are very steep; fixed lines are installed by guide services to mitigate risk. From the col move west along the ridge to a gendarme known as Washburn's Thumb. More fixed lines help climbers negotiate the ridge around this obstacle. Continue along the ridge to 17,200'. May camp at 16200 based upon conditions.

Hazards: High winds, exposed terrain for most of the climb, crevasses, altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.



11 June: Day 11

Rest Day. We chowed on strawberry/blueberry pancakes for breakfast...awesome for two reasons: tasted great and was heavy as hell, so now we don't need to carry it!



We spent the day prepping and repairing gear. Casualties so far: 2 torn overboots from crampons, 1 torn Mountain Hardwear Absolute Zero parka that was easily patched...good thing as those parkas are a good as the sun when it comes to staying warm. We toyed with building a foam overcover for Matt's stump as the cold has been affecting it and he's been wrapping it in Kirby's vest. Jon modified his arm to better handle the cold and the fixed lines by using some tubing and a sawz-all borrowed from the rangers. He also cut down a

portion of carbon fiber which was rubbing.

I called in to Defenselink, recharged everything with the solar panels, aired our sleeping bags out and pounded food and water in prep for tomorrow's move. We stripped down and consolidated gear to make everything as light as possible for the move to high camp. We're all intimidated by the prospect of the weight in combination with the higher altitude. The weather has not been a factor other than protecting ourselves from dehydration, but I think a front will roll in soon.

Two climbers were killed today when they fell around 4000 feet from the Messner Couloir, landing at the base of the West Rib. They came to rest a few hundred feet above and east of our camp. We didn't see them fall, but we could see where they lay.

Leighan Falley, our lead guide from the mountaineering course, was first on scene. We could hear her climbing partner mimic an eagle's cry in an effort to attract the attention of the rangers.

Apparently they then found a radio on one of the bodies and were able to summon help. We watched uselessly from a distance as the rangers worked on them for a good 2 plus hours. I thought that perhaps

one had lived because of the time they seemed to spend on recovery, but was unfortunately wrong. We continued to watch grimly as the bodies were sledged down the mountain to the Ranger camp and then evacuated by helicopter shortly after. It was a scene I had witnessed many times in combat, enough so that I felt oddly distant to the event.



Their fall served as another grim reminder of the dangers we all faced on the mountain. Both climbers were experienced mountaineers who had received an award from the Park Service the year prior for their actions in support of a rescue on the mountain. Now their gear lay scattered down the couloirs which had claimed their lives.

12 June: Day 12



Things changed a bit today. Jon has been nursing a cough and having trouble keeping up the pace. He had a bad night last night and Kirby opted for another rest day to help him recover and acclimate a bit more. As an active rest day, Bob, Gayle, Todd, Matt (who we've nicknamed M-Dog to prevent confusion with the other Matt) and I went ice climbing at an altitude of 15,100'! The rest of the guys did a short walk up the west rib. While climbing, we watched a team of rangers move up the Messner Couloir recovering gear from the fallen climbers. Their helmets and boots had been

ripped off and their gear was strewn all the way up the snow field.

After finishing their walk, Kirby and Jon went by the Ranger Camp and checked Jon's blood pressure - it was 140 over 108. They called Dr Hackett who recommended a few physical tests. Based on the results, Dr. Hackett made the assessment that Jon was demonstrating 'pre-High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE)' type symptoms and should not continue. This meant that Jon's climb was done. I know he's upset about it, but he keeps a stoic face and acts as though he's okay with the whole deal. It's been a long year of prep and training and a lot of investment...no one wants to be turned around for any reason. It also means we could potentially lose M-dog, which will further limit our options if anything else occurs higher on the mountain. M-dog is a great guide and a great motivator; he constantly has the team rolling in laughter at his spontaneous rendition of 'Wonder Wall' which he witnessed at a recent Karaoke in Talkeetna (you had to be there to understand...). None of us want to see him go. It's his first time on Denali as well, despite being a guide. I want him and Todd both to summit as much as I want any of our base team to top out as neither of them has before. They have gone above and beyond to earn that privilege. It is, however, one of the jobs of an assistant guide to help sick or injured climbers down the mountain. We are working hard to figure out options to get Jon to a safer altitude and to keep M-dog climbing with us, but prospects aren't looking good. The weather, however, is still good. Hopefully, we'll find some sort of resolution and we'll move to high camp tomorrow.

13 June: Day 13

We managed to get Jon linked up with Leighan in order to move back down to base camp and back to



Talkeetna. AMS again demonstrated why they are best guide service on the mountain by making that happen for us. We said our farewells, snapped some final pictures as a complete team, then the rest of us headed for high camp. This was a huge move day, covering 3000 ft of elevation gain over 1.5 miles at very high altitude with a hefty load. Bob and I both had extra team gear and weren't looking forward to the burden.

We started strong, even passing a team heading to the fixed lines. The lines themselves felt slow as hell and as the sun broke over the ridge they

became super hot. We topped out at our cache site and recovered three days of food and Matt's extra leg and we cached our helmets. Everyone's oxygen saturation rate was good and we headed up the 16000' ridge. This section was quite steep and rocky, slightly more technical than we had traversed so far and a little more than I had initially expected, which made it far more enjoyable in my book. By around 16,600', however, Matt was having trouble with the load and feeling very fatigued. His rope team decided to cache his pack with the intent that Todd and M-dog would come back and recover it later in the day. My rope team continued on then stopped at the base of Washburn's Thumb. We had built up a large gap with Matt's team. Kirby was concerned about Matt's deteriorating condition on arrival at our location. His O2 saturation was at 67%. Bob, also



an EMT, listened to his lungs with a stethoscope as did a paramedic we met on trail, but both agreed that his lungs were clear. I could tell Kirby's instinct was to send Matt back down, but the proclamation of clear lungs and Matt's intense desire to continue influenced Kirby to allow Matt to continue. We cross leveled gear so that my team had two tents and we continued movement to high camp. It was a rough climb up the fixed lines at Washburn's Thumb and along the ridge. My rope team moved ahead to get the tents set up. When Matt's team arrived, he was smoked. His O2 sat was at 57% and it had taken his team 11 hours to finish the move. We got him into the tent and warmed up. Four hours later, his O2 had dropped even further, down to 50%. Kirby brought over one of the ranger patrol that was on rotation to high camp. They immediately got him on oxygen and they and Bob worked with him until 0100 hrs, trying to determine the best option for him due to his complex medical history. They determined he had severe Acute Mountain Sickness, but not HAPE or HACE (cerebral edema) and kept



him on a 2 liter flow of Oxygen overnight. The recommendation from the base camp nurse was for him to take 4mg of Dex, but the rangers held off out of concern over conflicts with his other medications. The decision was made to evacuate him down to 14200' camp in the morning. Kirby monitored him the entire night to include giving up his sleeping bag as Matt's had been cached at 16,600' where Todd and Matt had intended to recover it before nightfall. Events prevented that from happening and Kirby had a cold night.

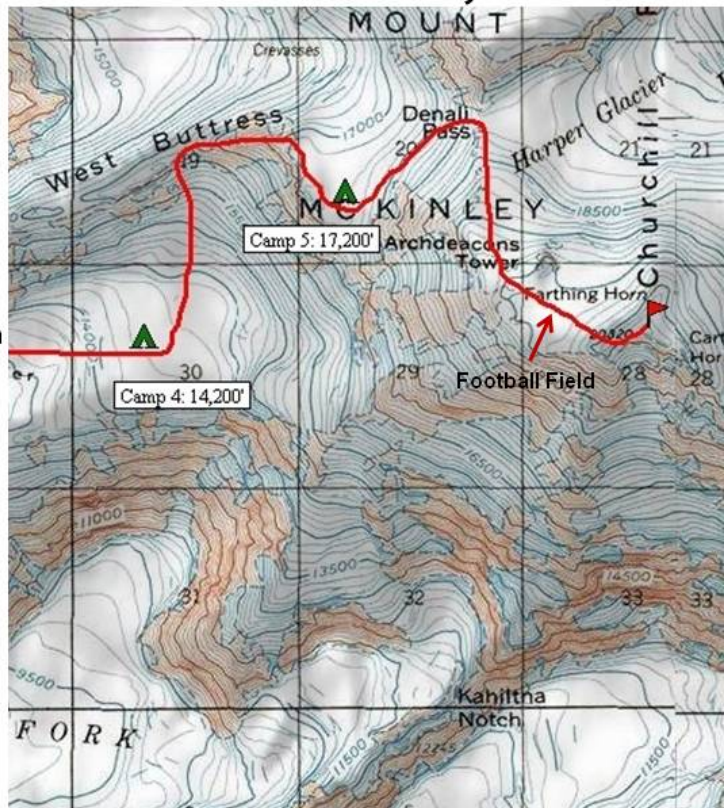
Day 14 Rest, Day 15 1st Attempt Day 16: 17,200' to Summit: 20,320'

Time/Distance: 8-16 hours round-trip / 5 miles round-trip

Total Elevation Gain: 3120'

Route: Move up towards a rock outcropping above camp and make the traverse over to Denali Pass at 18,200'. Climb south up a 40° slope on the north side of the ridge crest and pass Archdeacons Tower on your way to a short descent to the Football field. Move southeast across the football field and climb a short hill to the summit ridge. Traverse to the west to gain the summit.

Hazards: High winds, exposed terrain, crevasses, altitude, intense UV radiation, heavy snowfall, whiteout.



67

14 June: Day 14

We evacuated Matt with M-dog and a Park Ranger this morning. It was definitely bittersweet after all he has put into the climb. But for now, we needed to put that behind us and we needed to focus on the



summit move ahead. Today is a rest day and we are all struggling a bit to acclimate to life at 17,200 feet. We worked hard to continue to eat and hydrate. Our average oxygen saturation percentages are in the mid 70's. The day was a long one...not a comfortable place to just hang out at, not like at 14 camp. Constant screaming headache, elevated pulse, nausea...fun stuff. We did laps around camp to stay active. What a great view though! We got news that Matt made it down to 14 camp after being lowered in a litter down the fixed lines and Jon had already arrived back in Talkeetna.

During the night, Bob developed severe nausea. His O2/BP was great at 85%/64 bpm so we tried to get back to sleep, but then he reawoke at 0220 hrs and vomited intensely. It was so intense it made me hurt to watch as I passed him a bag and helped however I could. He said the worst part wasn't the vomiting; it was the lack of oxygen between bouts...never really thought about that challenge! Like a trooper, he was back up by 0500 hrs, ready to go like nothing had happened. I think all of us feel like crap hanging out at this altitude and just want to get climbing.



Day 15: 15 June

We awoke to decent weather and decided to go for the summit. It was about -15 degrees ambient in camp at the start and we could see the wind building up on Denali Pass, but it looked manageable. Getting moving, however, was tough. We were disorganized, tired, irritable, and feeling the pleasures of mild mountain sickness. Eventually we got our stuff together and we left out around 1000 hrs.



As soon as we passed into the shadow of the ridge looming over the Autobahn route to Denali Pass, we could feel the temperature drop another 10 degrees. Two-thirds of the way up to the Pass, I saw Gayle visually slow and begin to stumble; at one point she fell off the trail and we arrested her fall. I was becoming increasingly worried that she was becoming hypothermic from the cold and the wind. We made the top of the pass in three hours. This was the first chance we had to group up as a rope team. The winds were 30+ mph and temperatures were low. Gayle's mentation was

off, a good indicator of developing hypothermia, and she had a visual cold injury developing on her cheek. The wind higher up only promised to build and the prospect for a continued summit effort was not great. We opted to head back to high camp.

Descent proved more challenging than climbing; Gayle had deteriorated and had trouble passing anchors and keeping balance. At one point, she took a major fall, nearly head over heels off the side of the trail, impacting hard and sliding nearly 15 feet before we arrested her fall. I was worried the fall had caused physical injury, but she seemed okay. We added more clothes on her and continued to move.

We finally arrived back at high camp and immediately got Gayle in the tent and in her bag. We started pushing warm fluids and food on her but she was having some difficulty taking things in. We got her boots off and started checking her out from head to toe for any additional injury or frost bite issues. Her hands were fine and the frost bite on her cheek was superficial. Her feet were another story. She had a band aid around one toe for a rub spot she'd been dealing with and that added restriction had reduced blood flow; the toe was now purple. Her pinky toe and two other toes on



her other foot all had impaired circulatory and sensory response. We set about rewarming both feet by making a bucket out of a folded sleeping mat and a garbage bag and worked hard to get calories inside her to warm her core. She said little, but tears traced her cheeks. She knew what this meant for her summit goal. Going high again with frost bitten toes was inviting amputation and we already had enough amputees on the team. I'm sure that the fact that the climb has been so highly visible to the public only aggravated the issue in her mind. It was one thing if we could deal with this issue intimately between us, but half the world seemed to know about the climb and with that knowledge came the burden of explaining why she didn't summit...this time. I know she'll back, it's who she is. We'll continue soaks until we descend and pray that we can save her toes. The emotional piece of not summing will be more difficult than fixing her toes.

If weather allows, the remainder of the team will make another summit push tomorrow. I'm nauseous and have a ripping headache. Putting down food and water has become increasingly difficult. We'll have to dig deep tomorrow, but we need to make it for the team.

Day 16: 16 June

We woke up to what looked like perfect weather. It's warmer with far less wind than yesterday and it's obvious that we'll go for it. Gayle is immediately determined to climb, and I sure don't blame her. As she silently begins putting on her gear, my words fall on deaf ears and I'm frustrated at my inability to break through to her; thankfully, Kirby has a little better luck and manages to talk her down as it would almost certainly lead to the refreezing and loss of her toes.



Bob, Dave, Kirby and I set off around 0945 hrs. We follow behind fellow AMS guide Melis Coady's slower moving team up Denali Pass, and then manage to leapfrog their team and continue on.

The weather is beautiful, but the air is so thin that we move slowly despite our minimal loads. Dave begins stopping the team repeatedly to catch his breath. We pass around the Archdeacon's Tower and then cross the Football Field. The ascent out of



the football field is steep and grueling. We grind through, step by step, and gain the summit ridge. The ridge is very exposed and fixed protection runs its length. The view is breathtaking, the incredible expanse of endless mountains and glaciers as far as the eye can see, as if man doesn't even populate the earth. Well ahead along the ridge we can see the summit waiting, but the view is disappearing quickly as a weather system begins to roll in. A few more ragged gasps of air and an hour or so of effort and we stand upon the summit. One other team, a group of Italians climbing the seven summits, arrives at the

same time. The weather window is closing quickly and the view that blessed us along the ridge is now gone. We are engulfed in a cloud and swirling snow.

We quickly break out the US flag that I've carried with me on two combat deployments now and I reenlist Dave in the Army...talk about style, what a way to reenlist! We then take several pictures for our sponsors, The Military Order of the Purple Heart as well as Mountain Hardwear and Tee It Up for the Troops. Unfortunately, our Wounded Warrior Project guidon was in Matt's pack when we cached it at 16600'!

We snap a few more pictures and I attempt a satellite phone call to Senator Mark Begich, to notify him of mission complete but ironically I get voice mail the lose the connection entirely. We pack up and begin to head down. Visibility is extremely limited and it's difficult to see the trail...a little disconcerting as on either side of the trail is a straight drop of several thousand feet. As we move along the ridge, we have to pass an ascending team of two. For safety we clip their rope into ours as we are



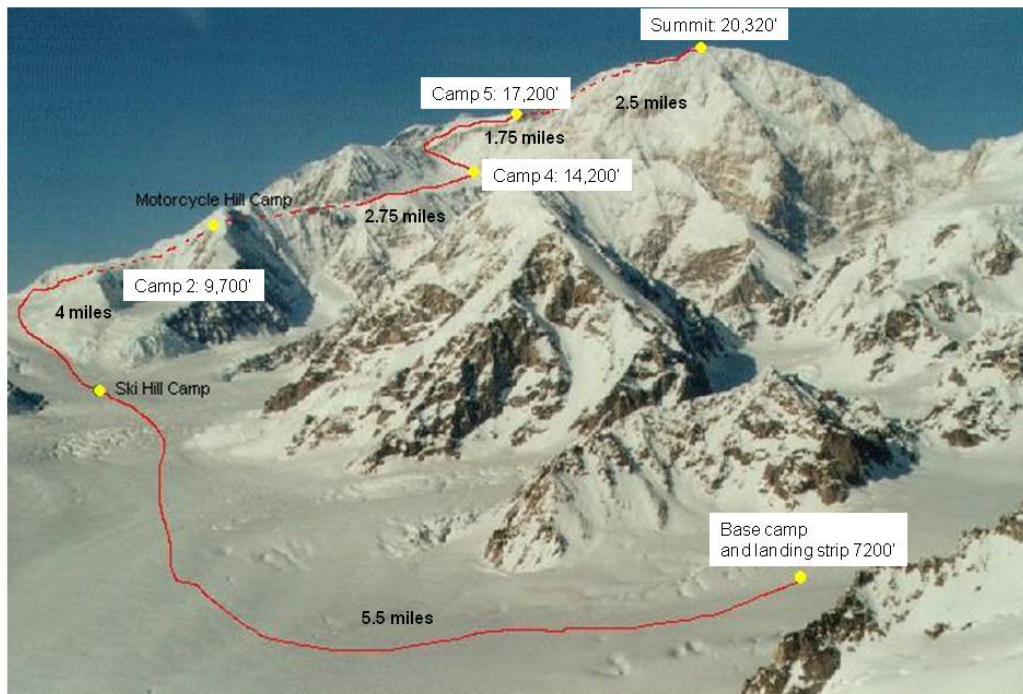
affixed to running protection along the ridge at the time. As I approach the lead climber I step slightly right of the trail in order to pass him and clip in. With my limited depth perception due to the snowfall, I can't even differentiate between snow and cloud. Unfortunately, I choose to step into cloud and in an instant I'm suddenly falling off summit ridge. I struggle to self arrest but my wounded hand fails to force my axe deep enough in the steep snow covered ice. It slows me though and I swap top hands and force my pick deeper, arresting my fall at about the same time I feel the rope tension as my teammates and the fixed anchors drop and catch me. The face is steep and I have to use my pick and crampon to climb the ice back up to the ridge top. Winded but surprisingly unperturbed (maybe I was too tired for an adrenalin rush?), I recollected myself and we moved on. At the end of summit ridge, we ran into Melis' team. One of their climbers, Mike, is in a bad way and is unable to make the remaining push to the summit. We tie him into our rope and continue to descend. He's a mess; his coordination is gone and he's spent. Kirby gives him 4 mg of Dex and we keep moving at a snail's pace, freezing our asses off as a result of the slower pace combined with the temperature drop. Dave had begun to dry heave intensely

on summit ridge and it continues regularly; we begin to stop repeatedly either for Dave to get air or Mike to recollect himself from yet another fall. We easily add around 3 hours to the time required to descend to Denali Pass. Kirby and I self arrest 3 of Mike's significant and precarious falls in the process. Thankfully, Melis' team has summited, closed the gap and is now only minutes behind us at the top of the pass. We hand Mike back over for the descent of the Autobahn, an effort which brings them into camp two hours after we arrive. We cover the Autobahn without incident and as we approach camp, I'm spent mentally and physically. Its been a long years journey to this point, but we did it. Only half the team managed to summit, but it took the entire teams effort to make that happen. It truly saddens me that the full team didn't top out, especially Gayle, my inspiration for the climb. At the same time, I'm struck by the parallel of our team's efforts with that of our wounded warriors and fallen heroes. They may not have seen the fight thru to the end, or finished their combat deployment, but it was their sacrifices that enabled their unit's success and our nation to win its wars and bring everyone else back home. I also think of the 53 Fallen Paratroopers and 356 wounded Spartans of my Brigade's deployment to Iraq and I whisper a prayer for them and those already back out in the fight. This climb was for them in many ways and I hope they will somehow know that two Arctic Wounded Warriors of the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division Spartans stood atop Denali in recognition of their sacrifice, bringing closure to a mission now complete.



I'm wrecked; I crawl into my sleeping bag freezing, dehydrated, starving, and suffering the most impressive indigestion I've ever had. Gayle has few words to say. I feel her frustration deep in my soul and I know our success only further aggravates it. It is a bittersweet end of a very long day.

Day 17-19: The Descent



Day 17 – 17 June

Today is Gayle and my anniversary. I had hoped it would be our summit day...that kind of magic obviously did not work out. We sleep late. Upon wake up, my wish of happy anniversary is greeted with an undecipherable grunt. I silently pray that next year's anniversary will go a bit better. We pack up camp to descend to 14'200' camp, further if possible. I call Governor Palin, Senator Begich, Jeff Roy at the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Samantha at Defenselink and my parents to give everyone the good news. Governor Palin puts her cabinet meeting on hold to take the call and is genuinely excited about our success. I get Senator Begich voice mail again, but I confirmed later he got both calls!

We head out around 1230. Gayle's toes have blistered and cause her significant pain. Our packs are huge due to the reduced team size and our descent is slower than we hoped. The fixed lines prove a major challenge with the big loads and we delay several teams who are descending with no



load after caching at 16200. Several cross over to the up line in frustration, causing a small avalanche to wash over us in the process. We are one rope team of five carrying the load of seven. Just the spacing of five causes constant stop and go to pass anchors along the lines. We've kept Gayle and Dave light on team gear and the load takes a toll on the rest of us. So does the fresh snow and whiteout. Bob's pack is huge and top heavy and he falls several times trying to counter its awkward weight swings. We finally make 14 camp and are pretty well spent so we opt to stay there for the night. Matt and M-dog are

there to greet us. Matt has been on Oxygen nearly the whole time down here as his spO2 wouldn't stabilize and today is the first day numbers have been good. He will descend with us tomorrow but is not happy that we will need to move thru the night in order to reduce our exposure to crevasse risk. He tells us his body will not function during those hours due to the effects of his medication, but he'll do his best. The thought passes through my mind that none of us will do well at the bottom of a crevasse either, but I hold my tongue, we'll sort that out as it comes and do what is safest for the team. We'll head for 9500 or 7800 based upon our pace, crevasse conditions, and how well Matt travels after being depleted by his altitude issues.

Day 18 – 18 June

They say that the summit is only half the battle; it matters little if you can't get back down. For our team, this rings true as descending is a difficult challenge due to Matt's leg.



We took a long time this morning getting gear sorted as we now have John's gear and are focused on keeping Matt light. We started at around 1000 hrs...our target time was 0830. We descended from 14,200 ft to 11,200 ft to recover our cache. Squirrel Hill proved challenging with fresh snow and overloaded sleds. Mine rolled multiple times as it was loaded too high, but we only had three sleds and the gear couldn't be packed any lower. Matt moved slowly, his stump, chronic fatigue and still recovering from his multiday bout with AMS had left him drained, but he kept moving...I actually don't think much would stop him; he may be slowed by his prosthetic but he is hard to stop once he gets moving. Bob and Kirby walked him down. The rest of us moved ahead and arrived at 11K, dug up the cache and split it into seven loads. While there, we ran into a ranger patrol that had volunteers from the National Guard mountaineering school in

Jericho, Vermont. They knew about us and were excited to meet us on the mountain. Matt arrived and while he swapped legs, we pulled more gear from his pack. Tomorrow, we'll take everything off him. We huddled in the Jericho team's Megamid tent for a bit to warm up, and then headed down to 9500 ft. We arrived at around 1630 hrs. The weather had warmed too much to risk crossing the crevasses that had opened up on ski hill, so we pitched tents to eat and rest until the temperatures dropped enough to harden the snow pack. Gayle, Bob, and I watched 'Superbad' in the tent on Bob's I-touch...we rigged a puffy jacket to the tent roof and put the I-touch in its hood to create a very small theater for all to see...it was pretty amusing to say the least. We chowed on tortillas, cheese, bacon, and ham. Being at lower elevation, our appetites were growing again and the food was awesome.

We woke up at 0230 hrs for a 0330 departure to base camp. Despite his previous concerns about the early hours, Matt was good to move without a word of complaint and we headed out for base camp at 0400. It was good we had waited as the crevasses were definitely larger than before and the snow bridges we crossed were sketchy. At one point, despite the cold, Gayle pushed thru a crevasse to her waist, but was able to wiggle out on her own. Half way down Ski hill, Bob post holed and hyper extended his knee. It was a scary moment as thoughts of sledding Bob down the hill passed through my mind. Bob alternated a knee wrap on and off his injury during the rest of the day and was able to continue to move despite the pain.

Ski Hill was sketchy with sleds and gaping crevasses, but after 7800 camp, the walk was uneventful. We hit Heartbreak Hill before the sun in full force; that made dragging my 150 pounds of gear between my sled and ruck a little less painful...so did the thought of real chow and cold beer.



hit

We made base camp around 0930 hrs, recovered our last cache and moved to the airstrip where we munched 19 day old bread and salami and drank Budweiser cooled by weeks in the cache and tinged by the odd taste of Diamox in our system. We just lounged in the sun until the Otter came and extracted us back to Talkeetna to be greeted by an enthusiastic crew from Channel 2 news and plenty of dirty gear. Operation Denali was mission complete.



