

Mt Rainier

August 4-7, 2012



Introduction

The first of my 2 alarms beeped way too early as I awoke a bit groggy-eyed and got ready to head to the airport for an early 6:50 flight to Seattle. I had been anticipating this trip for many months and already thinking about Rainier for a couple years now. It had turned into somewhat of a "bucket-list" thing - to experience the climb of a big mountain. It was hard to believe the trip was finally here.

It felt like a dream and a fantasy, and even the night before I was leaving, it felt like a far-away adventure. Although it sounded so interesting, I felt a bit disconnected from reality - it would turn out to be a bit of a lonely challenge - many of my friends felt more distant since I knew they would have a hard time relating to the difficulties that lay ahead. I felt few people could truly relate to and validate my efforts. This would turn out to be one of the hardest things I have ever done, and I was glad to have Nisha and my family in close touch and I knew those were my most valuable relationships.

Although there was a lot of material preparation for Rainier, booking the trip, flights, rental car, meal plan and rental gear, and there was much physical preparation to get in shape for the climb, I felt the toughest aspect of the

preparation to be the mental one. I knew there were many risks and on average only about 52% of the people who attempt the mountain make it to the summit. I had been on several trips in the last couple years that were foiled by weather, group dynamics and other events beyond my control - I realized in the end the most important thing was to be at peace about whatever the outcome, and that I should not have any regrets if I did my best.

I had been thinking about Rainier for several years by now - my friend Ed and I attended a friend's wedding in Seattle back in 2008, and we spent a couple extra days to visit the mountain and hike around a bit on some of the lower slopes, exploring the waterfalls, snowfields and meadows. It had been a beautiful weekend and I remember at Paradise seeing some tired-looking people with large packs, but with subtle smiles - they were folks who had come back from a successful summit that morning. I quietly envied those people, hoping that someday I could be coming off the mountain after a successful summit.

Rainier, being the most heavily glaciated of the Cascades, gave a glimpse to what the earth might have been like in its younger days when the mountains were flanked with thick glaciers and ice fields and green flowering meadows and old growth forests lay at their base. Although much of the wilderness has been affected by industrialization and global warming, I looked forward to having a glimpse of creation unspoiled by humanity. As the ancients had climbed mountains to attain a sort of spiritual "enlightenment", I sought to gain a new perspective on God's bounty in creation and His mercies and faithfulness.

I had called RMI shortly before the holidays last year and talked about booking the 4-day trip to attempt the summit (I never mentioned to anyone I was "going to Rainier" - I would only say I was "going to attempt Rainier", knowing full well I might fall short of the top). The trip was a bit expensive, but I knew it would be an excellent introduction to a big mountain. Since that day, I had enjoyed clicking the weather reports and webcams from Paradise (they have some great links and photos online). At one point during the holidays after enjoying dinner at home with my folks in PA, I clicked on the site - just curious what the conditions were. The report gave a synopsis of a deep trough passing through the west coast, bringing heavy snow and rain to the lower elevations. The winds at the summit were only 80 mph from the SW but were forecast to kick up to 120 mph overnight and "back off" to just 95 mph the next day. Whew - I couldn't imagine being there in those conditions. I searched for the word "sun" anywhere in the 10-day forecast, but the best day was just "mostly cloudy with a chance of showers, snow level 2500 ft" - every other day was

equal or worse. Rainier experiences extremes of seasons - I knew I had many months to wait, so I hoped for the best. The webcam showed the mountain socked in and snowing most days that I looked. On this trip many months later, however, the forecast was much different, with a mostly summer-like pattern, no rain in the forecast, freezing levels at 13,500 feet or above, and winds of just 15 mph at the summit at the maximum over the next several days. The webcams showed a gleaming mountain with clear blue skies, busloads of tourists at the visitor center and beautiful green meadows and trees at the base.

August 4 - Travel to the Mountain

It was an early go to get to the airport and thankfully Nisha was able to get me a ride to the airport at SJC, mitigating some of the pain of the early flight - I felt I had enough stress and anticipation going already! I felt like she was "commissioning" me - as a church commissions a missionary. Following my usual routine at the airport I enjoyed a chocolate muffin and Starbucks coffee (getting ready for Seattle). Any distraction to take my mind off the tension was welcome - I thought about my family, Nisha and my recent trip to Mt Gayley in the Sierras which I really enjoyed. A girl next to me was playing Jetpack Joyride on her iPad and I was reminded of one of the kids playing the same game while waiting at my niece's gymnastics practice just over a week ago. It was hard to believe I was just with my family back east and now I was a totally different world. Being in already a sort of fantasy world, disconnected from much of my reality of friends and family, I felt even these small connections soothing. My mind was finally at ease when my Southwest boarding range was called and I got in line to board. It was nice that after several flights over the last couple months I had developed a bit of routine with traveling making things quite less painful.

Once in the air we did our usual circle around San Jose gaining altitude efficiently before heading north. As on several trips in the past, my house was visible almost directly below! As we headed north, we got a grand tour of the Cascade range - starting with Mt Lassen, mostly barren and snow-free this time of year. Shasta just had traces of snow on the south side. Crater Lake was almost directly below us, giving us a panoramic view into the grand crater and Wizard Island, flanked by snow-capped Mt Thielson to one side. The peaks further north became snowier and more glaciated - the 3 Sisters, Mt Washington, Jefferson, Hood, Mt St Helens, impressive Mt Adams, and the finale was the grand Mt Rainier. Mt St Helens appeared to be having a steam eruption - misty clouds billed up from the crater, filling in many of the valleys

around. I hoped it wouldn't become a full-blown ash eruption - that would make things interesting for nearby Rainier.

Rainier was head and shoulders higher than all the other peaks - at 14,410 feet and with 26 glaciers flanking from its slopes is the most heavily glaciated peak in the lower 48. It was a rather intimidating though beautiful sight as we descended into Seattle. This would be my first attempt on one of the "big mountains" - it would make Shasta and Whitney seem trivial. Although I had been to higher elevation in Peru last summer at the 15,200 ft Salkantay pass, even that would seem like a walk in the park. I felt relieved to be going with a professional guide service (RMI) who have been leading climbs for decades.

Rainier (also called "Tahoma", meaning "snow peak" or "great mountain" by early settlers) is the highest volcano in the Cascades - formed by the subduction of the Juan de Fuca plate under the North America plate. It is still active, as evidenced by steam vents on the summit. Signs nearby the mountain indicate an evacuation route in case the mountain decided to unleash its fury someday. I hoped it would stay quiet for the next few days!

Being a "La Nina" year, the storm track had persisted to the north of the west coast, casting much of California into a drought, but dumping generous rain and snow in the Pacific NW. In fact a friend had attempted Rainier just about 6 weeks ago and got turned back due to avalanche conditions. I wondered about the timing of climbing Rainier and I realized I was fortunate to wait until a little later in the year during this high snow year up there.

The weather forecast for the next couple days involved a "weak disturbance coming from the SW, then high pressure building with summer-like weather returning" - looked like it should get nice in time for our summit day. I kept my fingers crossed for good weather - I had been clicking on the webcam links (which are very good) and had often seen "The Mountain" buried in clouds or "wearing a hat", being capped with lenticular clouds. My fingers were developing cramps from being crossed so hard and so long! The mountain was clear as a bell on the flight, and I hoped for the good weather to continue.

After landing in the airport, I came to the realization that this was the "real thing" - no turning back now. I had gotten over a stomach illness just a few days ago (which even caused me to have to throw up on my flight back from the east coast), and even though I felt fine in Seattle, I knew I couldn't take anything for granted. I knew I would have to take things one step at a time - it was overwhelming to think about too much at once.

My bag seemed to be one of the last ones arriving at baggage claim - I started to have doubts if there was a problem getting it through, with many loose straps, sharp ice axes, crampons and poles inside! But I was immediately relieved when it showed up and I started heading to the rental car counter - whew! If the bag hadn't showed up, that would have made things quite interesting! (My friend who went to climb Kilimanjaro a couple years ago had to do it without his suitcase - he had to rent everything and be creative to turn underwear and t-shirts inside out...)

My car turned out to be a red Nissan Sentra, same kind as the one they gave me when I rented a car in Washington DC (the other Washington) during my family visit just a week ago - I thought of my family while on my far-away adventure. The license plate just like all the standard WA plates boldly showed the Mountain dead-center. Heading south on 161, detouring around sections of 7 under construction, I made it into Elbe around noon. Elbe is a small town near Ashford famous for its historic steam trains, church, and cute shops - reminded me of Oakland in Deep Creek MD a week ago! I felt a little oasis of relaxation wandering through the charming town, watching a historic steam train chugging in from Mineral. An intensely syrupy mango smoothie held me over until lunch in Ashford - I thought Ashford was right near Paradise in the park, which I knew to be about an hour away.

It turned out Ashford was only about 15 minutes away - it was still well outside the park. At only about 1000 ft elevation, it was a toasty 90 degrees or so (they said it's the hottest they've seen it all year!) At the rental counter, I picked up my double mountaineering boots, avalanche transceiver and extra thick pouffy down winter jacket. All these things were hard to think about in the stifling temperatures in Ashford! But they guides know from experience the gear that is often needed and useful on the mountain. Luckily my crampons just barely fit the boots (at the very loosest setting - whew!) I trusted their guidance and I felt a lot more prepared for the climb coming up.

According to the schedule I was to meet up my group at 3:00. With no correspondence ahead of time, I didn't know who all was going to be in the group or even how many would be there. One by one, folks started trickling in from all around the country - some from NY, TX, GA and VT. For most of us it would be our first trip up Rainier, though some people had been up Kilimanjaro recently. The guides said even though Rainier is not nearly as high, it offers many unique challenges not found on many other high mountains - it was much tougher than Kili. I was excited though a bit nervous about the days to come.

We met our guides - Casey and Zeb. They looked like seasoned climbers - trim, well fit and experienced. Meeting a couple folks on our 9-member climbing team, they were talking about some of the marathons and long distance runs they had done. I started to feel inadequate, and that I might turn out to be more of a "liability" to the group instead of an "asset". I knew I did fine on 20-mi day-hikes in the past, had a good time on Mt Gayley, traversing the Palisade glacier and reaching the class-3 summit. A couple folks were a bit older, and one guy was even in his 70's, so I wondered how the group was going to perform once we were climbing together. Rainier was rated as level 2 of 5 (which seemed pretty easy), but that is on a scale where 20,300 ft Island Peak is level 3, Denali is level 4 and only a few peaks in the world including Everest are level 5.

There were 2 groups of 9 going up the mountain on a similar schedule - our group of 9, doing the 4-day summit climb, and another group of 9 doing a 5-day climb. The maximum group size allowed was 12, so RMI typically had 9 climbers and 3 guides for a 3-1 ratio. We both had our orientations at the same time, and would do the mountaineering day school at the same time (we would just be a few hundred feet apart on the mountain), and would hike up to Camp Muir together. The only difference is during our summit day, they would just be hanging out and relaxing at the 10,000 ft camp, acclimating, exploring around the glaciers nearby and soaking in the views, before attempting the summit the next day.

Our first meeting was a simple gear check and introduction to the mountain. I laid out everything I thought I needed, according to the list of recommended gear - as our group started laying out gear, it started to look like a yard sale of jackets, pants, socks, climbing gear, packs and boots. I found a bit to my dismay my climbing pants, gloves and jacket were probably not adequate for the climb. Being at 14,000 feet in the Sierra is a lot different than 14,000 feet on Rainier. Another trip to the rental shop and \$100 later, I thought I finally had the right clothing to stay warm high on the mountain. (Staying warm is a critical key to success - getting chilled requires a lot of extra energy to keep warm, causing rapid exhaustion on the mountain, which could quickly jeopardize a summit bid for not just me, but maybe even for the whole group). I had already spent probably \$1500 on the trip - what is another \$100?



Gear check

The guides showed us a short video on the mountain and the need for staying on "durable surfaces" - trails, rock and snow to avoid unnecessary erosion. We talked in length about the route. On my last trip to the mountain with my friend Ed, we took the Skyline trail up toward Panorama point just below the Muir snowfield. On our climb, we would be following most of the same route, but continuing up the snowfield to Camp Muir. Then we would traverse the Cowlitz glacier and cross Cathedral gap, which would take us to the neighboring Ingraham glacier. Crossing the heavily crevassed Ingraham, we would weave our way to the base of the Disappointment Cleaver (DC). I'm not sure why it's called "Disappointment" - maybe since it looks like it goes to the summit, early parties were disappointed to find the mountain still continues a ways past it. The DC would be the crux of the climb. Some times of year, they use fixed ropes to ease navigation of some icy stretches. Once past the DC we would climb the upper reaches of the Emmons glacier up to the crater rim, and from there cross the crater and scale the true summit (Columbia Crest) at 14,410 feet. It all looked fine on the map, but I knew it would be hard to think about much of the route at once. Once on the mountain, I would be thinking about just putting one foot in front of the other - I would be leaving the route finding up to the guides. I just hoped to keep up with the pace - hopefully they wouldn't set a blistering speed up the mountain where I would be a liability and slow the group down.

We knew the next day to be pretty easy - just a day of "mountaineering day school" on the lower slopes of the mountain near Paradise. It was fun getting to know each other as we enjoyed for dinner - scarfing down pizza and a couple beers from the bar. It was nice to be on a meal plan - I took full advantage of

the free pizza option (if only it covered the alcohol too - but no luck...) The meal plan was a bit expensive, but it gave a good peace of mind and one less thing to think about, since my mind was already fairly saturated with the rest of the preparation for the trip.

After dinner, it was nice to relax and take my mind off the anticipation of the next couple days - there was a nice hot tub out back, where I got to join a family from NY who had spent the last week in the mountains around WA. They really enjoyed Rainier - there was nothing like it back east. They wished me luck on the mountain. The hot water was soothing and I knew I would need my muscles to be as relaxed as possible. My left calf had developed a slight twinge during the last week (might have been from something the previous week - moving the docks at Deep Creek, playing and getting tackled by 3 kids, or maybe even sleeping on it wrong). Getting a pulled calf or muscle cramp high on the mountain would be no fun.

Back in my room around 9, I perused through some of the magazines of nearby attractions - I couldn't get my mind focused enough to concentrate on my book I had brought. I was used to going to bed around midnight, so even 10:00 was tough - my mind was still far too active to relax. I had my alarm set for 6:30 for the day school the next morning and wanted my 8 hours so I shut the lights to call it a night.

August 5 - Mountaineering Day School

Today was the day for the Mountaineering Day School - where we would go up as a team to snow slopes just above Paradise to do a "dry run" for climbing higher. We wanted to all make sure our boots fit and were comfortable, the crampons fit and didn't slide around, we were comfortable with our climbing harnesses, and we had the basic skills for tackling the mountain above.

Breakfast was a hearty bagel with egg and sausage and coffee - I was only able to finish about 1/2 of it. My mind was focused so much on the days ahead, moving into a sort of "survival mode", making thinking about food a bit more difficult (though after the climb I would easily devour large portions without even thinking about it!). I collected my lunch that was waiting in the fridge (as part of our \$120 meal plan which included all the meals for the trip). It was nice to not have to think about what meals to bring (I had enough other things on my mind already) - and last thing I wanted was to not pack adequate calories.

On the bus, we wended our way up the mountain to Paradise, giving me my first real full view of the Mountain. It intensified my nervous anticipation about the next few days – with its sheer size, beauty and majesty. It definitely looked like a paradise as well, flanked by lush green meadows and flowers. The Paradise lodge nearby was built almost a hundred years ago and blended in nicely with the grandeur of the mountain.

Shouldering our packs, we headed up the mountain for about an hour, opening up increasingly expansive views all around us. Although I'm sure the view was grand, I was more focused on learning the skills we'd need later on. On the mountain around 6500 ft, we found a nice snow slope where we could park for the afternoon and work on skills. My boots felt quite a bit loose heading up the mountain, but the guides reassured us that they should be loose - otherwise you can easily end up with shin bangers and hot spots which would quickly form blisters. We learned the advantages of "rest-stepping" on our way up the mountain, where you put your weight on your back foot (you could easily lift your front foot). I felt like we were learning to walk all over again, learning French and American stepping, duck-walking, and cross-over stepping to give different muscles a chance to work and relax, and to save strain on our calves. We would need to conserve as much as our muscles as we could - for a long extended climb, that would be a most valuable skill.

Although the ice axe looked like a special, macho mountaineering tool (and in many ways it was), it mostly functioned simply as a cane as we marched uphill. I had watched a funny video last week about a Van Diesel-like XXX scene of a "brave mountaineer" who had to run and jump over a 30-foot crevasse, then grab the other side with his ice picks to catch himself and avoid falling and dying. All this with heavy-metal rock music in the background! Although Rainier had many 30-foot crevasses (and some much bigger than that), our climb would be slow and methodical and deliberate - there was no room to look "macho" and show off. This kind of mountaineering was a very different sport than one where you act quickly. As in the difference between ultra-marathon running and sprinting, it was about endurance, moving slowly but steadily and continually monitoring your body. There wouldn't be room to "burn out" halfway up the mountain. My background music would be a calm ballad song to keep my mind focused - The Fray's "How to Save a Life" had been playing on the radio in the car on the way to Ashford, and it was stuck in my head - but the soothing tone was a good way to keep my mind relaxed.

The interesting part of our training was learning self-arrests. I had only practiced these on Mt Shasta for maybe 1/2 hour when we had reached our

camp at Lake Helen (a just-in-time skills training since we were already on the climb!). Here I was glad the guides emphasized skills before the climb, and for me it would reinforce good practices. I had remembered a self-arrest to be "dig in your axe as hard as possible, hold it and and pray as hard as you could". On Rainier, it was actually more about using your feet to help stop your slide than just relying on your axe. If the snow wasn't icy, your feet would do far more in preventing an uncontrolled slide than your axe could. (And if it was icy, even the axe would probably not help all that much anyway - parties would actually resort to using pro like pickets or ice screws to prevent a slide from even starting). We practiced slides on our back, belly, head-first and feet-first. On your back, head-first was pretty scary at first, but once we learned to pivot on our axes we could quickly get to a safe position for self-arrest. We also learned team arrests – if anyone on our rope fell, he would shout FALLING, we'd repeat FALLING, then all dig in our axes. Doing this quickly would assure that he wouldn't drag the rest of the team down with him into a crevasse!

Then, on one of my runs, a guide took my axe but promised to hand it back to me as I was sliding to see if I could get it into position quickly for a self-arrest. But just like how Lucy would swipe the football away just before Charlie Brown was about to swing, the guide swiped away the axe to see how I would react. It caught me totally off-guard, but I managed to still flip myself around as if I still had the axe, bury my head and kick my toes in the snow. I managed to stop in about the same amount of time I would have with my axe - it seemed a cruel joke but it turned out to be an interesting experiment and a useful thing to know. I was also surprised to not be using the leash on my axe – I had always trusted having one in the event the axe would slip out of my hand, but the guides warned that the axe could bounce around my face potentially causing a greater hazard than if I had otherwise lost it. Since I could still stop myself decently without it, it would be safer to just forget the axe if I dropped it.



Learning roped travel

We learned a bit of roped travel - it would become an essential aspect of moving across crevassed glaciers. Clipping the rope into our harnesses, we would walk about 20 feet apart in a zigzagging fashion up the mountain. Zigzagging would be key not only in weaving around crevasses, but it would significantly lessen the slope, saving our thighs on the way up and making the descent much safer. I worried a bit that the guide would leave me in the dust, pulling on the rope and dragging me up the mountain (I would end up "water-skiing", hanging on to the rope pulled taut). But I actually usually had the opposite problem - moving too quickly, creating slack in the rope and stepping on the rope with my crampons. I learned pretty quick to keep the pace! As we zigzagged, we would switch our axes (to keep them on the uphill hand) and we had to step over the section of rope behind us and toss it to the other side in order to keep it on our downhill side (to avoid it sliding in front of our feet). Nothing too difficult, and it all seemed common sense, but it was good to build some muscle memory low on the mountain during a warm afternoon, since

these skills would become critical at 4 am at 12,000 feet while we were still quite groggy and tired on summit day.

Finally we learned passing anchors. The lead on the rope (usually the guide) would clip the rope through a carabiner attached to a picket, and as each person passed the anchor, they would shout ANCHOR so the whole rope would stop to let him re-clip the opposite side of his harness to the anchor. Then they would shout CLIMBING and the party would continue to the next climber. This would be a useful skill in crossing snow-bridges and crevasses where the danger of a fall was imminent. We also discussed if we needed to cross a ladder, how we would clip into the anchor and slowly make our way across the ladder (again no "macho" moves - we would be moving slowly and deliberately). I started to think about the ladders on Everest through the Khumbu icefall - parts of the Nisqually glacier right in front of us looked pretty treacherous - I wondered what lay in store for our summit day!

The rest of the skills were pretty simple - pressure breathing, efficient means for descending, and how to use our breaks efficiently. We would practice exhaling in short but powerful bursts every few steps - this would increase the partial pressure of oxygen as we were high on the mountain. Also "belly breathing" was more efficient than shallow chest breaths - I guess with many years of singing, belly breathing came more naturally even in a tense situation (on stage or high on a mountain!) More oxygen to the brain would help in so many ways - giving us more energy, preventing headaches (and if we had a headache, a few pressure breaths worked faster than any Advil pills!), preventing HACE / HAPE (even though Rainier wasn't high enough to cause these symptoms in most people), and keeping our mind more focused. Of course at just 6000 feet, practicing pressure breaths seemed a bit silly, but it was all about developing muscle memory for summit day. Descending sounded easy as well, but again, there were efficient ways to move in a controlled fashion (glissading was generally NOT recommended!). As the snow softened, we would have to always be on the alert to prevent the crampons from balling up (for people who didn't have the anti-balling plates) and to keep our feet from slipping out from under us (especially since we would be pretty tired on the way down). A much higher percentage of accidents happen on the way down a big mountain than on the way up - we had to stay focused the whole way! And when we took breaks, even a 15-minute span could pass very quickly! We would need to immediately put on an extra jacket (the body would get cold very quickly during these breaks in our exertion), drink 1/3 a liter of gatorade and eat around 200 calories (a bar or trail mix). Again, we would often not be thinking of these things all the time during an extended climb, so we drilled

them a bit. When we didn't feel hungry or thirsty, eating and drinking were still as important as ever.

We got back fairly early from the day school - around 4:00 or so. A few of us considered going for a short hike on the mountain (Carter falls was only about 1 mi in, and Comet falls was a couple miles), but none of us realized we were a full 45 min from Paradise in Ashford. Nobody was up for driving 1.5 hrs back and forth to the mountain just to do a short hike. I was fine walking down the street, visiting the country store to make sure I had fresh batteries, fresh gatorade for the hike and a nice ice cream sandwich.

I think many of the folks on our climb either had their own plans, or weren't thinking about being too social for dinner, with the intense anticipation of the next 2 days. I wandered through the cafe, figuring I could just get something on my own - might as well take advantage of the free dinner token again. I spotted a couple who looked like they had just finished the summit - they were a bit bedraggled and looked like they had been out for a while, though they had smiles on their faces. I told them about my ambitions about Rainier the next couple days, and they shared about their last 11 days on the Wonderland trail - a 93 mi loop around the mountain, stretching to the lowland forests at around 2000 ft to some high passes and lakes near 7000 ft. They wished me good luck on the mountain as we enjoyed a nice dinner that night - salmon burgers and a final beer. A quick peek at some of the bulletin boards in the guide service room indicated successful climbs over the last 4 days - I hoped that we could keep the streak going.

A last look outside before going to bed showed some high clouds coming in from the south - probably the outer bands of the "weak disturbance". I was hoping it was just going to be some high clouds, but with one last look at the forecast, it had changed to a 30% of scattered thunderstorms the next day. Oh great - what had been looking like fine weather was starting to turn a bit. I still hoped for the best, hoping we'd get up to camp before the rain and lightning would unleash the next day. I had seen some amazing photos of a lightning storm on Rainier just a couple weeks earlier. I was impressed at the weather service's attempt of predicting the weather - instead of just saying what the weather was going to be in one place, they provided a detailed synopsis of what was happening in multiple layers of the atmosphere and how that would be manifest both low on the mountain at Longmire and Paradise, but also at Camp Muir and the summit. Since a climb of the mountain passes through many different climate zones, this detailed forecast was key. Of course, having a high mountain nearby allows one to see what is happening in different layers of the

atmosphere. An upper-level low could be passing overhead almost imperceptibly if there is a lack of terrain to shape the winds, wring out the moisture and generate clouds.

The night before our climb I was eagerly anticipating another event that was totally unrelated to Rainier, but happening at the same time. The Mars Curiosity rover was scheduled to land on the Red Planet around 10:30 pm Sunday night, after an 8-month journey. Although I probably wouldn't be able to stay up until 10:30 (we had a fairly early start the next morning to start our climb to Camp Muir), I would be thinking about it a lot. I was really hoping to go 2/2 this weekend (that the rover would survive the "7 minutes of terror" on its landing at 13,000 mph, and that we would make the summit of Rainier).

After what seemed to be an eternity I managed to finally close my eyes and get a little bit of shut-eye in fits and starts. The anticipation was intense. I just reminded myself it would all be over in about 36 hours and I'd be on my way back down. My pack was ready, my rental gear was all checked, I felt good during the mountaineering day school, the slight twinge in my left calf was gone, and my stomach was feeling fine. I knew anything could happen at this point - I just needed to trust God, and He would show His faithfulness, whatever the outcome.

August 6 - Camp Muir

I awoke long before my 6:00 alarm the next morning - still tossing and turning. I watched the light from the window grow slowly but steadily, anticipating the first rays of the sun anytime. The strumming guitars of my alarm finally went off before I saw any rays, however - I opened the blinds to see dark grey skies above. Bummer - it looked like rain was on its way. It drizzled a little outside - the previous day had been quite hot and sunny, and this day looked to be quite different. I had to build the courage to pick up my phone and hit reload on nasa.gov, fearing the worst that maybe the rover had crashed - a bad omen to our climb (even though they weren't at all related!). But my fears were soon dissipated when I saw the news that the parachute had opened, the retro-rockets fired, the sky-crane deployed, the wheels touched the ground gently, the camera had turned on and the rover even sent its first picture back! I couldn't believe it - it felt like a miracle! I looked outside again and the clouds seemed to be thinning and the sky was getting a little brighter.

We met our third guide Nick as we headed toward the mountain. A first-year guide with RMI, he already had a lot of experience in the mountains, climbing

in the Olympics and on Rainier. He had recently quit a computer job and jumped to a complete career shift. Once he got "the calling", he picked up everything from his past career, put it behind him, and jumped head-long into his new career of guiding people up mountains. And he's been loving every minute of it too.

We reached Paradise about 45 minutes on the bus, heading through beautiful old-growth hemlock and douglas fir forests low on the mountain. I watched the wipers go back and forth occasionally, hoping the rain would clear off soon and we'd have decent weather for the climb. By the time we got to the parking lot, the rain was coming down lightly but steadily. We got our packs out, made a final bathroom break and made sure all our gear was ready. We went through a quick drill - how fast could we put on our gore-tex pants? In inclement weather on the mountain, it would be important to be able to get them on in less than a minute to prevent cold and dampness from chilling our bones. I ended up having to rent a pair of these special pants, which included zippers that went the entire length of the pant legs - this was to prevent the need to have to remove gaiters, crampons, and boots every time we wanted to change pants. I succeeded in my drill in under 30 seconds - the pants were very efficiently made. However, as soon as we put on the gore-tex pants and our hard-shell jackets, the rain let up and we started getting hot, so we immediately took off the layers!



Starting on the trail

John Muir wrote in 1889 "... the most luxuriant and the most extravagantly beautiful of all the alpine gardens I ever beheld in all my mountain-top wanderings." - his quote was inscribed on the steps right at the beginning of the

trail in Paradise. He definitely had it right - the lupines and Indian paintbrush and avalanche lilies and countless other flowers were all in bloom, creating an array of colors all across the spectrum. The flowers came to life with the bit of rain we just had - I appreciated the vegetation on this part of the mountain since I knew for quite some time we'd be in a barren icy landscape.

The cloud cover was a blessing as we started up the paved path of the Skyline trail - it had felt like 90 degrees the previous day as we headed up to the mountaineering day school, but today it was probably 20 degrees cooler. I had gotten a bit sunburned during the day school the previous day, even when I thought I had been careful with applying generous sunscreen. Even with the cloudy skies, the guides kept emphasizing the sunscreen - especially as we got higher on the mountain - we'd really need it! Luckily the rain didn't return, and the clouds started to thin and patches of blue sky were forming behind us. The clouds parted like a scroll - ending with a distinct line marking the edge of the frontal boundary. By the time the sun came out, we were higher on the mountain and we were out of most of the heat. We watched the last of the flowers and trees go by. A couple marmots were hanging out lazily on one of the rocks by the trail asking us to take a picture.

We passed the snowfield we had used for the day school the previous day - our tracks were still visible. I knew we wouldn't be using any of the skills on our climb to Muir, but I was glad to know the boots were comfortable and I was prepared with the right clothing should the weather decide to turn again. I looked up at the mountain when I heard a loud roaring sound, expecting an avalanche or icefall, but instead I was surprised to be greeted by a pair of A-10 Warthogs flying back from Seattle. There had been a huge air show called SeaFair (similar to the SF Fleet Week) that was just finishing (clogging I-90 and many other freeways), and we got a final parting glimpse.

Higher on the mountain the flowers and trees gave way to grass and low shrubs and eventually to just ice and rock. Our final bit of greenery was at the Pebble Creek where we entered the Muir Snowfield. The snowfield isn't technical - just long and tedious and boring. For around 3000 feet, it continues up at a moderate angle, leading up to Camp Muir. The view to our south became increasingly more expansive, covering majestic Mt Adams on the left, Mt St Helens on the right (no longer spewing steam), a glimpse of Mt Hood in the center behind the Tatoosh range, and you could just barely glimpse further Mt Jefferson behind and to the right of Mt Hood. Having been on Mt Hood just a month ago, it was interesting to see some of the same mountains from a different perspective.

We paused for a break (thankfully) about 1/2 way up the snowfield - it didn't look like we made much progress in the last hour, but the guides reassured us we were making pretty good time. I heard another rumble from on the mountain, half expecting some more jets to come streaking by, but this time, it was genuinely an icefall from somewhere high on the Nisqually glacier. As the clouds parted and sun was coming out, the warming rays were starting to melt the ice, and one of the unstable sections decided to let go. We were going to be wearing avalanche transceivers on the hike above Camp Muir - I first doubted their usefulness, but seeing an avalanche made the threat seem a bit more real.



Weather starting to clear

As the weather cleared and blue skies emerged, the chattiness of the group started to increase. We had started the hike fairly quiet and hunkered down, just hoping to survive our way up to Camp Muir, but the clearing weather seemed to cheer our spirits. It was interesting to hear stories about Casey and his 3 summits of Everest as well as many other mountains along the way. He had been lucky - with good groups and good weather each time. Each trip had its own adventures though - one of his summits had almost been jeopardized by a slice of lemon merengue pie in Nepal which tasted really good but somehow didn't agree with his stomach for a couple days...

Unfortunately on our break, one of our older members in the group decided he had enough (he was in his 70's), and he knew that higher on the mountain he would probably only slow the group down. Rather than overextend himself and create a liability for the group, he felt it prudent to scrub his summit attempt and start heading down. Nick, the newest guide on our team took him back down to Paradise to make sure he descended safely. From that point on, I

recognized a bit more of the seriousness of the climb and made sure I continued to monitor my own "gas tank" to make sure I had enough energy to keep pressing forward. Getting down safely should always be a priority than just reaching the summit.

One of the guides tried to break the tension by telling jokes - "how can you tell God from a mountain guide?" or "a climber and a guide and a sherpa walk into a bar..." But somehow the frivolity of such joking seemed a distraction and out of place, as if some part of the sport of mountaineering had degenerated into mindless comedy. Such funniness was far from my mind at this point - the climb was going to be getting much more serious. I could see for some people, this was a sort of coping mechanism to deal with the stress of the journey ahead. But for me, knowing and trusting God each step on the way was sufficient.

Camp Muir was looking closer than ever, even though it was still an hour away. The old stone huts built in the 1920's started to emerge on the horizon in front of the majestic Gibraltar Rock. With RMI, we would be staying in one of the newer plywood ones - not as fancy as the old stone one, but it still served its purpose. My legs were getting more fatigued as we climbed the last couple hundred feet to Muir and I was quite relieved to be climbing the final couple switchbacks as we transitioned from the last part of the snowfield to the rocky plateau on which Camp Muir was built.



Camp Muir

We passed one of the groups who had just come from the summit. Some were happy, a couple seemed a little disappointed. They had made the summit, but it

was pretty cold and breezy, soaked in with clouds and even snowing while they were there, blanketing all views in a white misty shroud. They were already at the summit when I woke up in my room and it had been drizzling outside. I saw the summit cap cloud at this point steadily dissipating and just a few clouds blowing to the east of us and Mt Adams. The disturbance was passing (good for us but a bummer for them) - the moister air was hitting the dry air of the deserts to the east, billowing large cumulous clouds which threatened to turn into thunderstorms (hence the 30% chance), but thankfully for us even those clouds were forming and dissipating harmlessly on the NE side of the mountain (guess we hit the 70% of no thunderstorms, being on the south side.) The weather at the summit is really hit or miss - very slight changes in the atmospheric conditions can manifest to large differences in conditions at the summit - that's why we were careful to pack our layers and be ready to change on a moment's notice. We had a great view to the SW, where the prevailing weather was coming from, and it was clear as a bell to the horizon - a reassuring sight.

At camp, our first priority was getting the packs off and our gear inside. We left our "sharps" outside - our ice axes, crampons and poles (which wouldn't be needed inside anyway and could only be a hazard). The rest of the clothing, food, and gear we brought inside. Even though the hut smelled like a sweaty gym, it was like a 4 star resort along the desolate rocky ridge bordering the Cowlitz glacier. I found it hard to complain about anything here - I felt the whole experience to be a treasure that would last for a long time, suppressing any form of negativity or slander that would otherwise enter my mind.

We had about a 45 minute break before the guides would assemble our group and discuss the summit attempt the next morning. It was tempting to explore around camp a bit, and we could as long as we stayed on the rocky part (the Cowlitz glacier was just behind our camp and it had many crevasses, so the guides were strict about not allowing anybody to venture out there on their own!) I saw a few people wandering up to the rocky peak along the spine of Camp Muir - the peak probably went up about 75 feet above camp and it looked to give a fine view. I was already quite tired from the 4,600 ft climb to Muir, but I figured another 75 feet wouldn't be too bad.

A fairly well worn use trail went up the class 2 peaklet, providing a wonderful panoramic view over Camp Muir, stretching across the Cowlitz glacier to the Cadaver and Cathedral gaps (we'd be going up Cathedral gap the next morning), over the many crevasses of the Cowlitz, including some beautiful blue ice caves (they looked fun to explore, but I'm sure they would be quite dangerous), and back over the Muir snowfield we had spent the last couple

hours climbing. A yellow tent sat near the summit - I just hoped it was decently wind-sheltered! A memorial plaque at the top of the peak seemed a bit foreboding -

*Here's to Banana Slugs and High Places
We Gratefully Celebrate
The life and spirit of Jenie
The song of our soul
Her family
The Diepenbrocks
Janie and Willi died
March 4th
1979*

They had died at Cadaver gap when they were overcome by an avalanche. Of course that would have been a winter climb - I wonder how many people attempt winter climbs on Rainier. I could see it as a great training for more serious mountains like Denali or Everest - I'm not sure if I have that level of ambition yet or if I ever will.



Memorial plaque

Back in the RMI hut, it was nice to get my boots off, my smelly socks changed and water bottles filled. Nick had already arrived back at Camp Muir - he apparently ran back up the Muir snowfield in less than half the time it took for us to slog our way up it. I thought he wouldn't show up until after dinner - it looks like he has the energy to be a fine guide in the years ahead.



Panoramic view at Camp Muir

Our route for the next day hadn't changed - we'd be heading across the Cowlitz to Cathedral gap (which we could see now), up to Ingraham flats, up the DC to the upper Emmons, up to the crater rim and up to Columbia crest. We had to budget our "gas tanks" - make sure we still had about 90% at Ingraham flats, about 75% above the DC and 50% at the crater rim (they say 80% of the accidents on the mountain occur on the way down, and we needed to make sure we had plenty of gas to make it down safely). Each rest stop was about an hour apart and would be about 15 minutes - enough time to quickly put on our down parka (we didn't want to get cold at any point), get a good drink of water, re-apply sunscreen, and eat plenty of calories, and use the bathroom if necessary. I hoped to not have to "blue-bag" on the mountain (if you needed to go #2), as they explained the process. On a rafting trip of the Grand Canyon, we had the "day tripper" - a similar concept of packing out waste - I had to use it once and it wasn't particularly fun.

By the time the speech was done and we understood what we needed, the hot water was ready. The guides were wonderful to dig out a bunch of snow and melt it and make hot water for soup, tea, Mountain House freeze-dried meals and ramen. The noodles tasted as good as they did during my college days, and I was surprised to be able to finish my whole lasagna packet (at 10,000 feet I tended to not have much appetite on previous trips) - I knew I would really need the calories, so I was pleased.

At this point on the trip, the fun and games were over and it was more of a matter of survival - thinking about what our bodies needed. It was a cleansing experience actually, to get away from the frivolity of so many things back

home. Keeping up with my Facebook friends, watching the latest YouTubes and exploring the random threads of gossip on twitter and reddit seemed so unnecessary. Even the Olympics were far in the background. I would later experience a bit of "reverse culture-shock" when I got back down and thrown back into civilization again - I lamented a bit how we have lost the simplicity of life years ago.

Bedding down at 6 pm was difficult - the sun still blazed outside even though the bunks were now quiet. Fortunately, the 5-day folks were pretty quiet, even though there was no pressure for them to go to bed early, since they weren't waking up at oh-dark-thirty like the rest of us. Draping a sock over my eyes and stuffing in my earplugs, I tossed and turned for a couple hours and probably managed to nap for fits and starts, though I don't remember being asleep for any extended period. What seemed like many hours later, I pulled the sock off my face and still found light coming in - it was only 8:00 and the sun hadn't even set yet. I was reminded of camping in Denali in AK where it never totally got dark - earplugs and socks over my eyes for eyeshades were essential. At least here it would be getting dark soon. The guides said they would wake us up between midnight and 1 am, depending on the temperatures and wind.

When my mind did finally lay down and rest, I seemed to have some strange dreams - I've remembered having strange dreams above 10,000 feet in the past, and I've also remembered strange dreams when I had an early alarm waiting for me in the morning and my mind brewed with anticipation. Here I would have both of those working in tandem - I just remember a dream with strange colors and sensations, almost like I was having a "trip" on LSD. I awoke and glanced at my watch - the glowing hands were both pointing up - midnight.

August 7 - SUMMIT DAY!

It would be a warmer than usual night, with the freezing level at around 13,500 feet, so the guides decided to wake us up on the early end of the window to make sure we got out and back before the snow softened up too much and the icefall / rockfall danger would increase. I was already awake when I saw a headlight beam flick back and forth and one of the guides slowly turned on the solar-powered lightbulb - the chill in the battery pack caused the bulb to warm gently instead of a jarring flash, thankfully.

The first announcement was that the winds had kicked up a bit - to about 25 mph and we would be needing our long johns and soft-shell jackets. I knew the winds were supposed to pick up on the back side of the disturbance that had just passed, but apparently the winds were a little more than expected. I took a

hesitant glance outside and feared the worst - maybe clouds had rolled in and socked us in and there would be 50 mph winds on the summit, so we'd just sleep in and head back down when it got light. But a waning gibbous moon was shining in a cloudless sky above - a glimmer of the Milky way actually shone a bit even when being drowned by the blazing moon. The Cowlitz glacier and crevasses and Gibraltar Rock were clearly visible in the moonlight, and a glimpse toward the summit showed no clouds - whew! It actually wasn't nearly as cold as I expected, either. I still had faith in the favorable forecast for our summit day.

The hot water was ready and we could start having breakfast - oatmeal, coffee, and soup. Unfortunately, I could only manage to finish about 1/4 cup of the coffee and 1/4 of a packet of oatmeal - my body didn't have much of an appetite before 1 am, especially since the oatmeal was the plain, unflavored variety. I knew I would be needing the energy later on, but I knew I still had a lot in my pack from my \$120 meal plan, so I didn't worry too much.



Getting ready for the climb

It was probably about 1:30 when we waved bye to the 5-day folks still soundly sleeping, strapped on our crampons (glad I knew they were going to fit fine this time!), grabbed our axes, roped up, and started heading across the Cowlitz glacier. I was reminded as we were putting on the gear that it was like putting on the armor of God for spiritual warfare – the helmet of salvation, boots for readiness and my ice axe was the sword of the Spirit. I knew the journey ahead was going to be a mental one and spiritual one as much as physical.

I felt like we were moving like zombies across the expansive glacier - just putting one foot in front of the other while being careful not to trip on the rope with our crampons. The moon was out, gleaming brightly off the sparkling glacier all around. Every step was a step of mercy - I felt God had been merciful in so many little ways on this trip so far, and on these long stretches I had plenty of time to reflect.

It looked like we'd be across the glacier in probably 15-20 minutes - it didn't look that wide. But distances were quite deceiving - without any distinct reference points for scale, I realized it was much more expansive than originally thought. Even though it looked like we were just making a level traverse across the ice, we were actually climbing gradually the whole way. We were moving slowly but efficiently - the rhythm of our feet and the rope moving was steady. I had plans to meet some friends in Seattle in the evening after I got off the mountain - it was hard to imagine I'd be seeing them the same day (even though it would not be for another 18 or so hours!). We were going to be meeting at a friend's place for small group back home in the bay area the next day, and he was going to be grilling pork tenderloin - I had lots to look forward to, but I just had to make it through the challenges that lay ahead.

Our pace was pretty even - I feared the guide would move too fast and I'd be barely hanging on and the guide would be pulling me up the mountain! We maintained a consistent bit of slack to keep the rope "smiling" between us - not dragging too much on the ground and not taut either. I was happy to be on Nick's rope - we had some interesting discussions during the previous day and I already had great respect for him.

At the end of the Cowlitz glacier, we reached the rock band that divides the Cowlitz and Ingraham glaciers. We just kept moving until we were safely on the rock band - there was quite a bit of rockfall from above. An advantage of climbing early was to move while the rock and ice were more stable, increasing our safety threshold. I had no desire to linger and was happy to keep going at our steady pace. After several switchbacks on a scree slope, we reached the crest of Cathedral Gap - we were on the spine of the cleaver that split glaciers on both sides. In the moonlight, the glaciers dazzled below.

From Cathedral Gap, we followed the edge of the Ingraham glacier, climbing steadily but slowly up the snow. I started to get a bit tired and started to fear I would no longer be able to keep up the pace, but the guides had warned us the first couple stretches would be the longest. I tried to anticipate where the first

break would be, but the climbing seemed to continue for an eternity before we finally pulled off the trail, laid down our packs ("Packs off" were magic words!) and sat on them (a lot warmer than sitting on the snow!)

Finally we were able to sit and relax for a moment - each of these breaks was to be about 15 minutes. I first didn't think I would need that big pouffy winter jacket, but during these breaks I was quite glad to have it - I got pretty cold even after just sitting for a minute or 2. I first thought 15 minutes would be plenty of time, but at around 2 am, it was barely enough time to get some gatorade (about 1/3 bottle each break), a bar / trail mix, do a quick bathroom break if necessary (still hoping to not have to blue-bag it anywhere), and relax for a couple minutes.

Unfortunately after the first break, another one of the guys in our group decided to turn back. The guy behind me on our rope had been struggling to keep up with Nick and me, even though I felt we were moving slowly and not going any faster than Zeb's or Casey's rope. Luckily another guide was nearby and was able to take him back down to Camp Muir where he got to go back to sleep and relax until we got back in the afternoon after the summit. I tried to not let people dropping out sap any of my energy to keep going, but it enforced the reality of the difficulty of the climb that lay ahead. I wanted to avoid any traces of negativity from affecting my enjoyment of the whole experience.

We were down to 10 now - 7 climbers and the 3 guides. But we were going strong on our next stretch, which involved traversing the Ingraham glacier, crossing over to the Disappointment Cleaver (DC) and climbing the rock and ice until we reached the top of the DC. Again, my movements felt rather zombie-like, just putting one foot in front of the other for what seemed to be several hours. Crossing the glacier, we had the rope to its full length, with each member being 20-25 feet apart, but on the rocky DC, we "short-roped", reducing the rope length to about 5-6 feet, to avoid the rope getting entangled in the rocks.

I was reminded of one of my favorite songs in following the footsteps of our guide - it is "Step by Step" by Rich Mullins, where the verse goes like:

*Oh God, You are my God
And I will ever praise You
I will seek You in the morning
And I will learn to walk in Your ways
And step by step You'll lead me
And I will follow You all of my days*

At one point crossing the Ingraham glacier, I saw in my headlamp what appeared to be a small step up. I didn't think much of it until I reached the edge of it, and when I looked down I realized I was actually stepping over a crevasse - probably less than a foot wide, but I couldn't see the bottom! I was glad to be roped with the guide at that point! A second crevasse came maybe 15 minutes later, also a brief step-across of maybe a foot or so, but that step took on a solemn seriousness that I had not anticipated.

The wind was rather quiet on the glacier - thankfully, since it was rather breezy on the exposed ridge of Camp Muir. We got ready to cross onto the DC, and just before reaching the security of the rocks, we had to navigate several snow-bridged crevasses by zigzagging a small meandering path only about 2 feet wide. I thought this would be a point to use a picket as an anchor like they mentioned in the class the first day, but we continued slowly and surely and were soon on the rocks.

In the earlier season, the guides often place fixed ropes on the DC to aid us on the steep climb, but today we were able to access an easier route, making the fixed ropes unnecessary. The rock and snow looked impossibly steep, probably rising at an angle of over 50 degrees, but thankfully the path was well-trodden and switchbacked, reducing the steepest grade to a much more manageable 20 degrees or so. I felt a bit disorientated as we zigzagged back and forth, but I figured as long as we were together and heading uphill, we were making progress.

After what seemed an eternity, I saw Nick stepping to the side of the trail and saying the magic words "Packs Off" - yay! It felt like an eternity but when I checked my watch, it was about 4 am and we had actually only been climbing about 1.5 hrs since the last break. We were higher than the summit of Mt Adams now at around 12,500 feet. It was still pretty dark outside, but I took a glance to the east and could just make a hint of a deep blue glow breaking through the darkness. Venus and Jupiter were shining brightly in the pre-dawn skies, and Orion was there, laying on its side, rising in the east. A shooting star streaked briefly overhead - perhaps an early outlier of the upcoming Perseids meteor shower.

The moon still shone brightly and a glance at the summit revealed a couple small clouds blowing in the moonlight - hmmm, I was hoping for it to remain clear. The clouds passed quickly and the summit cleared again - I kept my fingers crossed as we got higher. It was a good time to work some of the pressure breathing - taking short but powerful exhales to increase the partial

pressure of oxygen in my lungs to help alleviate altitude sickness. And maybe the powerful breaths would even help to blow the clouds away on the summit...

After another 1/3 of a liter of gatorade and a bunch of trail mix (as much as I could eat - I was pretty slow), and knowing the sun was soon to be rising, I felt rejuvenated and was ready to tackle the higher part of the mountain. I knew my stomach often tightens up and my appetite gets suppressed when going above around 13,000 feet, but I had faith in the techniques of pressure breathing and keeping the steady pace we learned in our class. I was reminded of Vienna Teng's soothing song with the repetitive lyrics "breathe in, breathe out, inhale and exhale" - I had first heard her music on our way to Mt Whitney years ago and the relaxing tones still resonated in me.

Inching our way up the Emmons glacier, I felt we were moving up an endless snow cone. The landscape was devoid of any features except ice and snow at this point - no rocks, trees, birds or anything. The rising sun was gradually warming the otherwise bleak and featureless expanse of white around us. We kept our course, zigzagging back and forth, maintaining the rhythm of our steps, our breaths, swapping our ice axes back and forth (keeping them on the uphill side) and swapping the rope back and forth (keeping it on our downhill side). I occasionally peeked behind and could glimpse the needle of Little Tahoma like an ominous black blade piercing the Ingraham and Emmons glaciers.

We reached a point where a ladder was lying next to a fold in the snow - I had seen many pictures of the Khumbu icefall on Everest and knew they had to use many ladders to cross the treacherous icefall. I hadn't anticipated ladders on this climb and we hadn't practiced it during our school. We did practice passing anchors - I figured we would at least set a couple pickets and anchors, and this is the kind of place where that skill would have been appropriate. But we trotted onward across a snow-bridge over the crevasse. We kept the rope taut and each person on my rope got to peek down into the gaping blue crevasse - the crack in the layered ice was probably 20 feet wide in places and at least 50 feet deep. Gleaming icicles hung like chandeliers from the top. I wanted to pull out my camera for a photo, but refrained, since I was happier to just keep moving and get out of there quickly!



Awaiting the sunrise

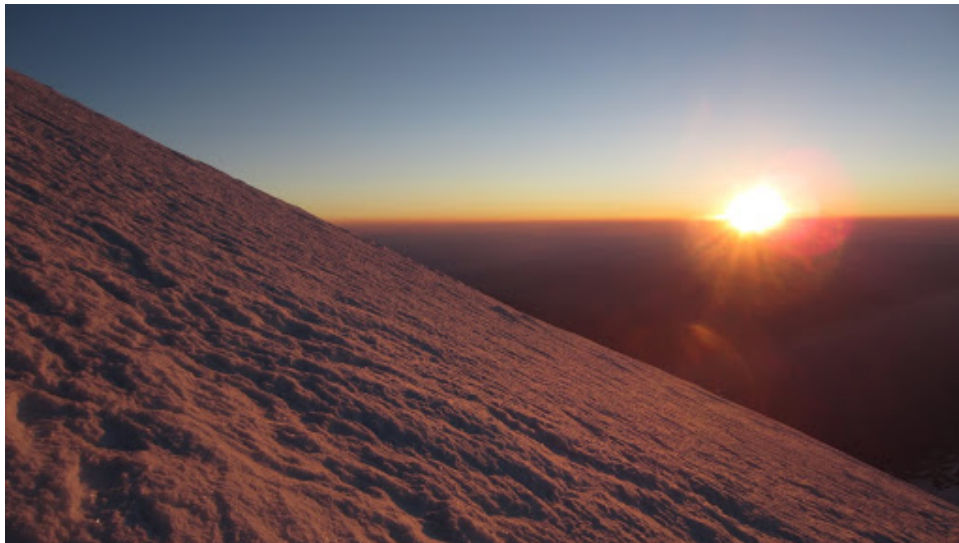
We soon came to our final break ("High Break" they called it) - we were about 13,500 feet now, and it looked like the sun was about to breach the horizon any minute. The twilight had lasted all the way from the top of the DC to here - I was surprised. But upon realizing that we were quite a bit further north and the sun takes a lower angled path, it made sense. But of course with the level of anticipation in my mind, time was moving very slowly! On Mt Shasta years ago, we were climbing on the SW side, away from the sunrise and we could see the deep triangle shadow of the mountain on the thousands of feet of atmosphere below us. But here it was hard to tell how much further the sun had to climb to reach the horizon.

Just as we shouldered our packs one last time, I took one last glimpse toward the east before we got going, and could just barely see the top limb of the deep red sun filtering through many miles of the hazy atmosphere below. I only managed to shout a guttural "SUN!" - it felt like a miracle that it finally came! Seeing the long-anticipated sunrise was a reminder of God's faithfulness - "as the sun which rises everyday, You are so faithful" - this song took a whole new meaning at 13,000 feet.

Although we were in the thin air high on the mountain at this point, I felt my steps getting lighter as the mountain got lighter around us. The snow was cast in a warm pink, then orange and yellow glow as the sun broke through a distinct haze layer at around 13,000 feet. The air had gotten noticeably warmer around this point - it was probably mostly psychological, but I realized there was a distinct inversion layer, trapping the haze below 13,000 feet. The sky

above was a brilliant sapphire blue at this point, and the sun reflecting off the top of the inversion layer appeared to be reflecting off a vast infinite sea.

I noticed the rope was a bit snowy at this point where it had been dragging on the ground. We were above the point where it had snowed the previous day and we were going through about an inch of fresh snow on the trail. In places it had drifted to a few inches, noticeable in our footprints. Coming around another set of switchbacks, I noticed the goal of this whole adventure on the horizon - a set of dark rocks. These were the first rocks we had seen in several hours, and I immediately knew these rocks to be the rim of the summit crater. Although they looked to be only a hundred yards away, they were still probably 15 minutes away - distances and time had gotten severely distorted in such an alien environment. I knew we were going to make it now! From here, it would be an easy stroll to the crater rim and across the summit crater itself to the true summit at Columbia Crest.



Sunrise high on the mountain

At this point, I was happy to have my puffy jacket on - even though the air wasn't particularly cold (maybe around 30 degrees), my body was tired having probably not digested enough food (at altitude much less blood is circulating through the digestive system to process food). Also with less air and less blood flow in my body, it was hard for the circulation to keep my body warm. Instead of letting my body get cold at any point, I was careful to make sure I was always feeling warm.



Inside the crater

Crossing the crater rim, we had officially summited! Some groups decide to call it a day where we were since it already "counts". But I knew we were still not at the highest point yet - we would have to cross the crater itself and climb the far rim to get to Columbia Crest - the true high point. I wasn't quite ready to celebrate yet! The summit part was optional - we could hang out where we were, or tag Columbia Crest and sign the register. We all huddled for about 15 minutes celebrating our victory just inside the crater. The sun was still low, casting long shadows from the rocky rim of the crater onto the snowy bowl we were in.

I was eager to get going and tag the true summit! One by one, we got up and started crossing the crater. Without packs and unroped (there were no crevasses inside the crater), we slowly made our way to the distant rim of the crater. I thought I would be running across - it looked pretty flat and easy and not too far. But it was a good 15 minutes before we started climbing the far rim. One of the guides mentioned about a guy who ran a lap around the entire crater in 8 minutes flat - he must have been a machine, fully acclimated and in amazing shape! One of the guides also mentioned about a lady who ran up the entire mountain from Paradise, reaching the summit in just 3 hrs, then running down in less than 2 hrs! I guess if you've been doing it all summer (and memorized where the crevasses were), and had perfect weather, and you were an ultra-hiker it may be possible. I was just happy to finish it in 2 days!

Upon climbing the sandy slope on the far side of the crater, we stopped about 1/2 way up at "Register Rock" - a full-size school notebook had the names of all the folks that made the summit. I thought the register would have been at the

top, but seeing the true summit to be a windswept snowy plateau, that would not have been very possible - it would have been either buried or blown away! We took our turns signing our names - some people had written poems and drawn pictures, but I only mustered the energy to sign my name and put San Jose, CA.



Crater and steam

We were near the edge of the crater where steam from several vents was flowing - patches of hoar frost crystals looked like icy hair 3-4 inches long in sections. The ground next to one of the vents was even slightly warm - reminding us that Rainier is still an active volcano (I had remembered seeing volcano evacuation route signs on the freeway on the drive to Ashford) - there had been a Nova special about the scenario of Rainier erupting catastrophically like Mt St Helens in 1980 sending muddy lahars racing down the canyons at 60 mph and into downtown Seattle. This has happened many times in the recent geologic past (you could see the muddy layers in the bed where the Nisqually river is currently flowing on the drive to Paradise.) I could peek into several steam vent caves with openings by the rim near Columbia Crest - there are actually several thousand feet of tunnels hundreds of feet below the icy surface of the crater. A deep blue lake lies at the deepest point inside a white icy scalloped chamber the size of an auditorium, and in one place there are reports of an airplane wing that had recently become visible when a tunnel melted through a section where a plane had crashed and gotten buried some 50 years ago.

Exploring the steam caves was on the back burner of my mind - I was happy to just be reaching the summit! I knew we probably wouldn't have the time, and

besides many were quite unsafe and we had to stay together with the group and guide - maybe if I come back on my own with some friends and reach the summit and allot extra time, we could explore some of the caves. Some of the gases are hydrogen sulfide, however, and suffocating in a dark cave buried underneath the ice at 14,000 feet would be a lonely place to die.

The last section of the trail above Register Rock was short and soon we were standing on the highest point of Washington! The views were a bit muted from the haze layer below 13,000 feet, but we could make out the bulk of Mt Adams and Mt St Helens to the south. On a clear day, we would have been able to make out Mt Hood and Jefferson and maybe even Mt Washington further south, and to the north we would have seen Mt Baker. Instead it appeared we were floating on a glassy sea from the sun reflecting off the top of the inversion layer. Low clouds blanketed most of the forests to the west in a dense marine layer to about 3000 feet, so to millions of people in Seattle the mountain was "in" (socked in clouds). For us it was clearly "out" - a matter of perspective.



View from the summit

The sky was a deep crystal clear blue with just a few cirrus clouds blowing around high above - signs of still a slight disturbance in the atmosphere, even though the weather was holding nicely when we were there. The winds were probably 20 mph at the most - about right on the forecast, so it was actually quite pleasant. I was elated - on top of the world! I couldn't believe we had all made it to the lofty summit, after so many months of anticipation and preparation. My body was faring well, my mind was clear and as a bonus, my camera worked flawlessly (it had been notorious on several other summits to die for various reasons at very inopportune places!).



At the summit!

We got to take our turns taking our summit poses, holding our ice axes as trophies to our conquest! I looked forward to being able to pass on photos to my family, Nisha, my sponsored child in Tanzania and folks in the Sierra club who I had climbed with recently. The climb had been a lonely experience in a way - far away from friends and family, but I looked forward to using it as a means to connect more deeply with them when I got back. One of our members proudly wore his moose-antler hat - I've been on climbs in the Sierra with some people who carry mascots like small teddy bears and interesting flags - I was pretty "boring" without anything distinctive - oh well.

I realized accident-wise, we were only about 20% done with the mountain (they say 80% of accidents and injuries happen on the way down) - but still felt we were home-free now that the climb was "over". It would be all down-hill from this point on. I felt free as a bird, practically running down the summit crater back to where we had left our packs, coming down in probably 1/3 of the time it took to go up. I realized in my excitement and carelessness, however that my

left crampon had come loose by the time I sat down by my pack - whoops! I had good fortune with my crampons on the way up (as compared to Mt Gayley a couple weeks ago where they slipped off twice on a much shorter climb). I knew we had a long way to go, and with different forces on my crampons on the way down, I worried a little as I re-ran the straps as tight as they would go to make sure my crampons wouldn't slip off again at a bad time (like right in front of a crevasse!) I was lucky here that it only slipped off right before we were stopping for a break in a flat area.

Re-shouldering our packs, we made it down at a pace about twice as fast on average as on the way up. A few clouds were blowing over the summit now - the sky was mostly clear everywhere else except for this small cap that was just now starting to form over the summit. We were already below the summit rim before the summit itself became obscured, so I was glad we got a little earlier start in the morning and reached the summit when we did!

My crampons performed flawlessly when I needed them as we zigzagged our way down the upper Emmons glacier. In full sunlight, our route was much clearer - we had been zigzagging not only to make the ascent easier and at a lower grade, but we were also avoiding crevasses. Every dozen yards or so, small red flags marked the route. They seemed unnecessary and even a bit silly since the route was quite obvious, but if the clouds did decide to roll back in, we could have easily been lost in white-out conditions with the white clouds merging with the crevassed white snow and ice all around us. Without the huffing and puffing and tension we had on the ascent, I was able to enjoy the scenery in the glorious sun, stop for a few photos (after making sure the guide and other climber on my rope know ahead of time), and appreciate the adventure we were on. It was starting to feel like a hot afternoon, though a quick glance at my watch indicated it wasn't even 8:00 yet.



Little Tahoma peak

The needle of Little Tahoma faced us most of the way down and the heavily crevassed Emmons and Ingraham glaciers lay far below. We quickly passed the point where we had made our "High Break" stop and we chugged on. Soon I saw the ladder we had passed earlier and from above could appreciate the seriousness of the crevasse we had crossed earlier in the early morning light. At the time, I was just putting one foot in front of the other and not thinking too much about my path, but now I saw how treacherous the route truly was. I felt a bit of relief when Nick our guide decided to place a picket and clip the rope into the anchor. With the warming sun out, the snow-bridge would start to soften, increasing the danger of the crevasse below. We took turns passing the anchor, each time shouting ANCHOR! and then CLIMBING! as we clipped the rope from one end of our harnesses to the opposite side. The ladder was not necessary, but I think it was there since later in the season when the crevasse opened more seriously, it would be the only option to cross that section of the mountain.

We steadily chugged our way down to the top of the DC visible far below. We had only been descending for about an hour and a half from the crater rim, even though again it felt like twice that. I wasn't feeling too tired - still energized from the scenery all around and knowledge we had made the summit. I knew at this point I could enjoy the scenery and not stress anymore about "am I going to make it?". Even if I got injured on the way down, I could still brag about making the summit (this is probably not the healthiest perspective, but it was how I was feeling).

At the top of the DC we enjoyed a nice break in the warming sun, snacking on jelly beans, beef jerky and trail mix and finishing a bottle of gatorade. Unfortunately one of our guys was not able to hold his stomach contents and had to let some of it loose - he was sitting with his head down with a splitting headache and looking miserable. Casey mentioned that pressure breathing was a key to helping with a headache especially if it was altitude-related. He insisted on taking an Advil, but before popping a pill, he took a few deep breaths, and the headache started to clear immediately. Keeping himself well hydrated was also key.

We slowly zigzagged our way down the DC, again short-roping our way down. I got to lead for a section - I felt like an experienced guide for a moment! Of course I was actually just keeping pace with the rope in front of me and making sure we placed our feet as flat on the rocks as we could to give better traction with our crampons (it wasn't worth taking the crampons off for the rocky parts and then just putting them back on again when we hit snow, so we kept them on the whole way above Camp Muir). The gaping crevasses of the Ingraham glacier looked like cracks of doom where some sort of dragon was going to emerge and chase us off the mountain. I could clearly see now where our path had gone this morning in the pre-dawn darkness - I hadn't noticed the zigzags, but from above, it was clear we were going around some serious crevasses. It was clear where one path had once gone, only now to be split by a 20-foot opening - then the path was re-routed, and then that path was split by a 10-foot opening. Our path was the 3rd re-routing of the season.



Making our way down to Ingraham flats

A cluster of small yellow tents far away at Ingraham flats started to become clear - they looked tiny and almost imperceptible, but once we got closer, we saw that it was an entire tent city and a base camp for dozens of climbers. The camp was in a very inhospitable place - on an island surrounded by cracked slabs of ice, the dark massif of Little Tahoma and the jumbled Ingraham icefall. We had a few more crevasses to negotiate (I had remembered stepping over some in the dark) – and even though I knew they were coming, they both came as a bit of a frightful surprise, since now in the daytime we could fully gaze into their depths. Thankfully when we got past these last couple of hazards and got near to the refuge of the tent city, we knew most of our main fears and challenges would be past. It was a wonderful area to relax for a nice long break, guzzling the last of our drinks and finishing bars and trail mix, and just reveling in the awesome scenery all around.



On the way back to Camp Muir

It was a humbling experience being in such an alien environment. The giant crevasses revealed layers deep beneath – from many years of snowfall and summer melt periods. Dust and dirt would accumulate during the summers, only to be covered with many feet of snow each winter, causing the cracks to reveal a “tree-ring” pattern – you could tell which winters were heavier than others through looking at the layers.

From here, the rest of the hike down should be “easy-peasy” - nothing too technical. It was a straightforward scramble back down Cathedral gap and traverse across the Cowlitz glacier (though the distances were much longer than they appeared!). Camp Muir looked so close like we could reach out and touch it, though it was probably still almost a mile away. Plodding our way across the

last glacier, we made steady progress, repeating our steps we had taken many hours earlier. Back at Camp Muir, I ran into some of the 5-day folks who had slept in and had been hanging out for the last couple hours. A couple of them hiked up to the local highpoint, and their guides were going to take them out on the Cowlitz to explore some crevasses and mess around a little. When I signed up for the trip, I debated about doing the 4-day or 5-day trip, but at this point, I was so happy to be done with the mountain and heading down, instead of having to wait another full day in anticipation!

We exchanged our ice axes for trekking poles, took off the crampons, changed out of some of the unnecessary warm clothes, and got to go back to shorts and T-shirts! We were back to the familiar smelly bunks of Camp Muir, but it again felt like a lavish hotel! The guides had water ready to fill our bottles one last time for the hike down. It was great to just take the boots off and lay down for a little while and just soak in all the memories of the experience over the last 10 hours or so. I'm sure all of our sweaty boots added a bit to the smell, but we didn't care at this point... After packing the rest of the gear we had strewn on our bunks (it was nice knowing the cabin was safe during our climb), we re-shouldered our now much heavier packs to finish our trek to the base.



Descending the Muir snowfield

Looking back toward the summit - I saw it was shrouded in a lenticular cap cloud which was slowly but steadily growing thicker. The weather for the next day was supposed to be sunnier, but windier high on the mountain. Again I was glad to be heading down. I felt we were quite lucky to summit when we did. Slipping and sliding down the softening snow of the Muir snowfield, we made quick progress heading down. My knees were starting to feel the descent - we

had dropped probably 6000 feet, but still had 3000 to go! The air steadily warmed and the wind died down as we got lower. A couple people tried glissading on their butts, but with the low angle it was hard to gain much speed. I was moving as fast as the folks glissading with "boot-skiing" and staying upright - keeping my butt and legs warm and dry! But near the end I had to try a few short glissades that were steep enough to slide but where I could get up quickly and dry off! After these glissades I went to film the others behind me and noticed the mountain quite socked in heavy clouds now. A mid-level altostratus deck was passing at about 12,000 feet, bunching up into a stack of lenticular platters caused by orographic lift over the mountain, obscuring much of the terrain above Gibraltar Rock.

Just as we were coming up to Pebble creek - the end of the Muir snowfield, I saw a group of folks who looked to be practicing a search and rescue drill with a large sled. We stopped and watched them for a bit, wondering what they were doing, when we found out they were actually hauling a body out. The previous day, somebody found a pant leg sticking out of the snow which turned out to be a climber who had died and gotten buried in many feet of snow. Only later in the summer did enough snow melt out to expose the body. Back in January, 4 climbers went missing on the Mountain when they got caught in a storm - this body is thought to be one of those 4 climbers. It was a humbling experience to be close to several deaths on the mountain - the memorial plaque at Camp Muir of the climbers who had died near Cadaver gap, and now these 4 climbers. I just hope they find the other 3 climbers soon (which they might since the snow will continue melting a bit longer), and the families can have closure that their loved ones were found. Although it has been a tradition on high mountains for bodies to be left where they lay, I felt it made sense to bring the bodies down even though it meant a significant effort for body recovery crews.



Back to the trees and flowers again

Back on the paved trail, I felt we were just back on our walk in the park. We passed Panorama point, where my friend Ed and I had hiked a few years back before the wedding. It had a very different perspective now, that we were coming off the summit and seeing the same point again! Slowly but surely, the vegetation returned - starting with low tufts of grass, some small flowers and then the hardiest windblown shrubs. The smells of life returned as well - the scents of flowers, bushes and finally trees again. It smelled like Christmas - the firs had a wonderful aroma. I felt life returning also in seeing families and kids running and playing and sledding and skiing on the lower part of the mountain - above the Muir snowfield, most people were solemn and serious, but back near the base, many people had a much more care-free attitude since they were just there to enjoy themselves.

We finally got back to the final few steps - still inscribed with John Muir's quote about the lush gardens. It felt like an eternity ago in a way, but in another way it felt strikingly familiar like we were just there a couple hours ago. It was 3:00 in the afternoon, even though it felt much later - we had been awake for over 14 hours and just descended 9000 feet. Even though the entire climb up and down the mountain was not even 15 miles, it felt like 40 - measuring this as a "hike" in "miles" just didn't make much sense! It was a relief when the bus showed up shortly after to pick us up. My shoes were still waiting above my seat on the bus - it was like heaven to get the heavy and smelly boots off and get back to my comfortable shoes! And to top it off, a couple of the ladies in the staff prepared brownies and drinks and fresh cantaloupe for a mini-celebration - good times!



Back at Paradise

Back on the bus, we chugged down the mountain and watched the trees as they changed from the spindly firs near timberline at Paradise to the lush fern-laden forests of pines and cedars and 12-foot diameter old-growth Douglas firs lower down. I felt everything going in reverse at this point - remembering everything as it was on the way up. Back at the Whittaker lodge, we could celebrate our "victory" over the mountain (though I never consider a climb to be "conquering the mountain" - the mountain was merciful and just let us climb that day – even just that hour!). Unloading all the rental gear and throwing everything else in the car (it was still there just as it had been what felt an eternity ago), I was finally able to just let it down for a moment and just relax.

I was looking forward to meeting friends back up in Seattle - now that I had good news to share! We had our final celebration - beers back at the bar and certificates with the guides. They had been great! I looked forward to exchanging pictures and emails and stories in the days to come. They would be able to add another column on the bulletin board saying "high point - SUMMIT"!

Heading back north on 161 I made my way back toward town. The same low clouds we had seen 10,000 feet below us earlier were now above us - these clouds socked in the scenery above about 2500 feet - the Mountain seemed so far away, and the whole thing felt like a dream (just like it did just before the trip started as well!). But the memories (and pictures) were quite real. Reality started to come back as my phone re-gained signal and a symphony of chimes reminded me there was a world of emails and texts and voice mails waiting for me! I got to call Nisha and my parents with the good news - we had summited

and I was back safe. No calls from work - whew! That could wait for the next day when I was back. My legs were quite tired and sore and I would even be limping a bit the next day, but sitting at my computer at work was a great way for the legs to get some rest!

Unfortunately, my friend's plans had changed and they were no longer able to meet me for dinner. I was a bit disappointed but I was actually glad to have the time to just be by myself and unwind for an evening. Having a fast-food dinner and checking into an airport motel at Days Inn, I was able to just flop on the bed, turn on the Olympics for a couple hours, get a nice shower and go to sleep!

August 8 - the trip home

It was a pretty early wake-up since I had an 8:50 flight this morning. Fortunately with free breakfast (with my favorite do-it-yourself waffles) and being right near the airport, getting in and returning the car was pretty uneventful. But seeing a check-in line that went past one set of winding rat-mazing queues to another, it appeared to be at least an hour wait. And I overheard a security officer saying the line was at 110% capacity - oh great, guess all the business travelers were out - looked like I wouldn't be making this flight - bummer. But I didn't care too much - having made the summit and getting back was all that mattered! I didn't care how long it took to get back to the office...

But as soon as I looked up again, the line started moving - they must have opened a bunch of new agents, and the line speeded along quite nicely. I was soon checked in, and the security line speeded right through as well. On the plane, as we broke through the dense marine cloud layer, the summits of all the great mountains shone in their glory. Rainier was like a 25,000 foot castle in the clouds, and behind it was another giant castle - Mt Adams. The group that summited this morning would have had a glorious summit day - I almost wished I had been part of the 5-day group to have a perfect day to summit. But I didn't have anything to be disappointed of.



Rainier above the clouds

I could finally let my emotions flow freely and my thoughts wander as the last several weeks of tension and anticipation could finally release. I've found in past years after trips of this nature that my mind had often entered a sort of melancholy - almost as if once a struggle and risk is over, my mind is no longer satisfied. In a similar way how the Mountain concentrates weather and wrings out the moisture on one side, creating desert on the backside, I feel as if my thoughts go through a similar pattern. In the quietness and return to normalcy after these kind of trips, my mind would be wandering and searching as if lost in a desert. But I've also found those periods to be a time to grow in a new perspective on God's faithfulness and mercy.

The climb would affect my thoughts and behavior for months after the trip - I began to see analogies from the climb in my other experiences. For example, having climbed the Disappointment Cleaver, I had a great view of how these rock bands split 2 different glaciers. In the Sierras in the Palisades region, for example, I couldn't help notice similar types of rock bands that would have cleaved adjacent glaciers - of course the big glaciers are long melted thousands of years ago, but seeing the different cleavers on Rainier gave a new perspective of what the area would have looked like. On a more abstract level, I envisioned some events in my life being as a sort of "cleaver" dividing different phases of my life. I also couldn't help but notice how the climb connected with my spiritual journey and walking step by step with the Lord.

The marine cloud deck persisted all the way until about the 3 Sisters in central Oregon, shrouding the lower slopes of many of the Cascade summits. Mt Hood, Jefferson, Washington, Three-Fingered Jack and the 3 Sisters stood in

prominent fashion above the clouds. Crater Lake gleamed below - I had fond memories of a couple years ago with Nisha, when we spent a 3-day weekend up there. Mt Shasta and Mt Lassen finished the Cascade chain. A dense plume of smoke shrouded the NE side of Lassen - I checked their web site when I got home and found there had been a major fire sparked by lightning, which had actually closed much of the park. We flew right over SF and the famous Golden Gate bridge before making our turn into SJC. It was good to be home, and I knew these memories would last for a long time. I look forward to Ecuador in the beginning of the next year - I felt a bit more confident about the high peaks there after having experience on Rainier. As I had seen someone with a Nike shirt saying "there is no finish line" on my last trip to Rainier, I feel like there is no finish line for me either - I want to always be exploring and enjoying life to the fullest.