



# team bivy

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## Rainier - depravation, sunburn, and exhilaration

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This was some of the scariest climbing I've ever done. The imperative was to move fast, but absolutely not to make any mistakes.

In May 2005, Sid Wiesner, Don W. Ryan H and I went to Mt. Rainier intending to climb the Kautz glacier route. This was the first "real mountain" for all of us. We intended it to be a major learning experience, we nearly got more than we intended. Bad snow conditions forced us to abandon our route of choice and we instead went up Gibraltar Ledges. This trip saw the formation of Team Bivy with our first unplanned bivy. I was later told that Bivy is a french word for "mistake". This trip report began as an email I typed to myself in a public library.



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I'm back from Rainier, and in one piece, below is a trip report that I typed in a public library outside Portland about a day after we got down.

Rainier was insane... I'm typing this from the Public Library in Portland, OR. I'm still an emotional jumble of highs and lows from my experience on the mountain, and I'm trying to hold onto some of that. We were the first party to summit in two weeks, but also had an unplanned night out and spent close to 26 hours on the move, the last 15 or so with no food or water. I'd been getting nervous for awhile leading up to this. This was the first mountain for all of us, not counting the little pimples we've climbed on the east coast. Sid has taken the mountaineering school twice, making him the most experienced member of our party in this theater. I'm the strongest rock climber, but was fresh out of the school and overly ambitious. Don and Ryan are both strong reliable guys, but have a cavalier attitude that scares the hell out of me. I didn't know how any of us would handle it if things took a turn for the worse.

The first day we hiked up to Camp Muir from Paradise, around a 5K elevation gain over five or six miles. We got caught in a complete white out, which is a hugely surreal experience. No border between snow and sky or up and down, just white in every direction. We "map and compassed" it up toward camp and the weather broke by the time we got there. When it cleared I had my first real "wow" moment about the place. At around eight thousand, just before we crossed the cloud line, I remember thin wispy clouds whipping by only twenty feet or so overhead with their shadows racing along the ground beside us.



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We left camp Muir (around 10K) at 12:45am Tuesday and headed up the ridge to the first glacier. It was a balmy 6 degrees and the sky was clear and cloudless above us. My fingers stung with the sharp pain that comes before numbness but I was so overwhelmed I barely noticed. The moon was full and so bright that we didn't need headlamps. Scrambling up the first ridge and roping up for the glacier was amazing: crisp dry mountain air in my lungs and billowing broken clouds below us at around eight thousand. The lights of Puget Sound in the distance were the only artificial light we could see, and they were on the very edge of the horizon, dwarfed by the pinnacle of Mt. Adams. I think each of us tried to express how amazing this was somehow, and failed. Don managed to say something like "Guys, this is amazing" and we understood, both what he was trying to say and how inadequate the words were.

We roped up for the glacier and started pushing up the ledges that give our climb (Gibraltar Ledges) its name. Great climbing, 40 degree hard snow, Camp Muir receding behind us, and feeling like I could keep moving all day. I found my stride and the movement felt amazing, warmth coming to my toes as the first fingers of predawn started to creep up in the east. We obtained Gibraltar Rock and started the ledge traverse, giving us an amazing view of the icefall down on the Nisqually glacier. It was questionable to rope this part up. There was no chance to self arrest, and if one of the four of us went, we'd all go... it would be a long ride down to the glacier, with plenty of time to yell at the guy who had pulled us off and ponder our stupidity.

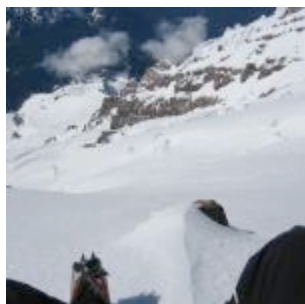


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Sid lead through the 50 degree avalanche chute at the top of the rocks, then I took the lead and started breaking trail at 13 thousand.. I was still nervous about the snow conditions, so I kept a pace that the

rest of the group had trouble following, even with my already stomped steps. We reached the summit around 9:30am. We were all feeling pretty beat by then. The final push at altitude had taken a lot out of me and my stomach was registering its unhappiness with the situation. The wind was blowing in 50 mile per hour gusts, and with no obstructions it was brutal - the kind of wind that just ripped the heat out of you. I was cold in my gore-tex and down jacket, even when I was moving. We did a loop around the crater (mistake) looking for footprints or wands down the DC route and found nothing. We had an idea of the route down from the map, but the slope looked top loaded so we decided to downclimb our ascent route. We drank the last of our water, shed the down, and headed back the way we'd come. Since we'd planned on descending via DC we hadn't placed wands coming up our route, which lead to problems.

The chute looked way more exposed and scary climbing down, with a full view of the thousand foot drop that was waiting for you if you came off. We traversed off to the side too soon. It took us a few hours to realize our mistake, retrace our steps and down climb back onto route. This was some of the scariest climbing I've ever done. I was the first down the chute, climbing down in 50 degree slush. I was hugging the edge of the rocks hoping that if the chute did cut lose I wouldn't be in its path. There was no crisp bite when I sunk my axe, and most places the snow was too shallow to plunge the shaft very far. The ranger had warned us that this few hundred foot section of the route did slide and even a small loose snow avalanche here would be fatal. It would sweep us over the ledges and all the way down to the Nisqually.



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The imperative was to move fast, but absolutely not to make any mistakes. I would kick each boot in three or four times, until I'd packed down enough slush to hold and my feet stopped sliding, then step down with my heart in my throat. As I was climbing little chunks of ice and rock were coming down the chute and hitting me. It was almost a relief when Don started down above me, since the debris he was knocking down didn't make me question the condition of the snowpack. Both hamstrings clenched up at the same time, demanding that I straighten my legs to relieve them, which I couldn't do without falling. I just stood there, paralyzed and leaned over my axe for what felt like an eternity while my muscles clenched. I'd breathe deeply from my diaphragm and really focus on relaxing the steel knots in the back of each leg. They would start to relax slightly, I'd shift to take a step and the knot of pain would return immediately.

I'm still amazed how numb I felt through all of this. Ever since we were lost I had wondered if we'd make it down, and played over all the things that could go wrong. I was scared certainly, but not the way I thought I would be... there was a quiet kind of dread in the back on my mind, and I knew that things could go very very badly.. but I was too preoccupied with the task at hand to get really sketched out.



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We reached the end of Gibraltar Rocks around 4:30pm, exhausted and parched. It burned in my throat every time I swallowed and I felt weak and shaky. Camp was in sight, only a thousand feet below us. We could be there in an hour or so if we moved fast. We stopped to rest up before moving back out onto the glacier and I thought about the conditions. This final slope was about 40 degrees, and had been warmed by the sun all day, though it was now in shade. Perfect avalanche conditions. I spoke up, and suggested what everyone was thinking - dig in and wait until nightfall to allow the snow pack to harden.

This had to be one of the hardest decisions of the trip, with camp in plain sight we were choosing to go another six hours without water and possibly end up hypothermic as well. I later learned that this spot is called Camp Misery. We dug a wind wall and secured our packs with pickets, took our crampons off, and huddled together in our mylar bags, sharing the one sleeping pad we had brought. We saw two climbers we later learned were rangers, start up the ridge following our footprints then turn back rather than cross the glacier. We learned the next day that they had seen us summit through a telescope, and were concerned that we hadn't returned. They were unwilling to cross the warm snow field, and said we had made the right decision.

It went much better than we expected, the wind was mild and we stayed fairly warm. We started the bivy fully expecting to be hypothermic at the end, and perhaps to get some frostbite... in the end all we got were sore necks. We even managed to sleep a little. We walked back into camp around 11:45pm, about 23 hours after we'd left, and more than 24 hours after we'd gotten up. I spent a few hours boiling snow for water. Hot chocolate and reheated food have never tasted so good. I expected to feel elation, to feel joy at being alive, at having summited and having pulled through when I had to. Instead I felt only relief. I felt indifferent to the summit, indifferent to what we'd just been through. I expected to pass out as soon as I was in my bag... but sleep was a long time coming. When it did come it wasn't the complete relaxation that total exhaustion brings, but fitful sleep, tossing in my bag, like I didn't believe we'd made it.

The exhilaration came the next day, when we hiked down to the parking lot and stripped off our shirts and socks. We laid on the warm pavement laughing and soaked up the sun, despite our sunburned faces. Passing hikers gave confused looks at the four men in their underwear lying on the asphalt surrounded by piles of gear.

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