

# **Mt. Rainier**

The beauty and the terror of our climb



Its height is 14,410 feet, making it the fourth highest mountain in the continental United States. Every year about ten thousand people attempt to climb the mountain but only a little more than half succeed. Mt. Rainier offers thin air, deceptive glaciers and some of the fastest moving weather you will ever encounter. A summit climb will require every bit of physical and mental stamina you have gotten. As an active volcano, Mt. Rainier stands as a reminder of the beauty and power of nature. On June 2007, George, Mr. Chen and I had the opportunity to climb this mountain. Here is the account of our climb.



*By Chi S. Chan  
June 11, 2007*



When the first time I saw the picture of Mt. Rainier, I felt love for it. It inspires in me a feeling akin to spiritual awe: reverence, adoration, humility and of course, **fear**. Mt. Rainier offers me the first technical climb experience and the mountain by far, is the hardest to scale. To reach its base camp, Mr. Chen, George and I had to carry 40-60 lbs climbing gears, foods, personal items and group equipments, hiking continually on a 35-45 degree slope for 7 ½ hours. The physically exhaustion when we reached

Camp Muir was indescribable. We had no shame for not reaching the summit, considering so little technical training we had in New York. The summit of Mt. Rainier, however, will be on my adventure list. I am determined to stand on its peak someday, I know I will and I can.

### **Bad Weather**

On the morning of Saturday June 9, we arose to uncertain weather. We had been watching the weather very closely and we knew the upcoming weather was going to be our main problem. It had been rainy for the two previous days. That morning, we drove to Mt. Rainier National Park Visitor Center through drizzling rain. After discussing our option to the Park Ranger, we decided to delay our climb until Monday. Further bad news was, another storm system would arrive on Tuesday night. That left us very little time to stay at Camp Muir. We previously agreed that we should spend an extra day to rest and acclimatize before the summit push. That extra day of rest and acclimatization can help us stand strong and healthy on the summit. This ideal option seemed to be out of the door now. After we paid the \$30 registration fee, we agreed to check out the condition of the trail, hike as much as we could, perhaps reach Camp Muir to acclimatize. We went back to our car, put some climbing gears to our backpacks and followed one of the professional guided groups heading towards the mountain.

### **Commercial Guiding**

We left Paradise parking lot at 5,420 feet and climbed up to the snow path through heavy cloud. Temperature was around freezing, with light winds and foggy sky. Soon, we caught up with the guided group and its appearance was the most impressive. About ten of them leading by a strong man, who wore bright color



jacket, carried an ice axe, ropes, and helmet, marching towards the mountain. An hour after our climb, we also saw a group of climbers practice self-arrest, belaying, crevasse rescue, and roping on a snow wall. As I watched them, I asked myself, "Shouldn't we do some of those?"



*Crevasse self rescued*

*"Climbing Mt. Rainier is hazardous and requires skill, proper equipment, and excellent physical condition.... Novices are those lacking glacier travel experience are strongly encouraged to climb with a guide service"*

I remembered reading this warning message from one of the climbing guidebooks. When I first bought up the idea of climbing with one of the guide services; both Mr. Chen and George dismissed my suggestion right away. Retrospect, I wish I pushed the idea a little harder.

### **Early Training**

I am well aware the danger of climbing Mt. Rainier. The technical skill that I am so lacking forced me to train earlier and much harder. Six months before the climb, I began the hard work out in the gym. I filled my backpack with cans, water, and climbing equipments, wore the rigid plastic snow boots and religiously ran on the step master five times a week. In addition, I continually hiked 18-20 miles with George and Mr. Chen over the weekend. By May, physically I was very strong. As a result, this year 26-mile hike was the easiest year for me. Leaving New York on June 8, 2007, mentally and physically, I was ready.



### **First Doubt**

About two hour after leaving Paradise, we reached Pebble Creek at 7,200 feet. It started to sleet and wet snow followed. The visibility was very poor. George and I watched Mr. Chen being swallowed by the dense fog few feet above us. Beyond Pebble Creek, the board, long and steep Muir Snowfield extends all the way to Camp Muir at 10,080 feet. Certain sections were very steep and a few snow walls required us to scramble. Late afternoon, we began to meet climbers coming down from the mountain and they simply glissaded down those vertical snow walls.

The hike progressed quickly and it was evident the clouds were building for a thunderstorm. The wind picked up and the sky darkened. Right now, George and I were soaking wet. It was on the steep slope that we spotted Mr. Chen struggling with the wind. We called out to each other and sheltered ourselves behind some rocky outcropping. Our fingers were numb as a result of the cold temperature and freezing rain. George made a wise decision to turn back. We hurried down the slope and occasionally,

George and I glissaded down the hill to have some fun. Mr. Chen was just too caution and preferred to hike down the steep hill.

The rain continued, and our wet backpacks became even heavier. I felt the pain on my shoulders and the tightness of my chest was nearly unbearable. By the time we reached the bottom of Muir Snowfield, I was in such a poor spirit that I began to have doubt of this climb. This morning, I only filled my backpack with half of my climbing gears. The weight could not be more than 30lbs. Today, we probably just hiked half way to Camp Muir, which was less than four miles. We were all dead tired after returning to our car “How are we going to make it?” I started questioning my and our team’s ability. This uneasy feeling continued lingering in my mind and never really went away.

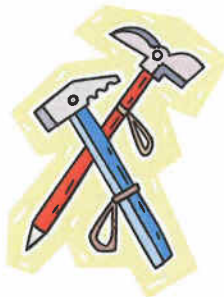
### **Change of Weather**

Saturday June 10, we climbed Mt. Hood and were forced to turn back at about 8,300 feet due to bad weather again. The climb although was steep but required no technical skill. We got a good practice hiking on a glacier slope. Besides, I became accustomed to hike with my heavy plastic snow boots. Both George and I had the first experience falling into a small crevasse. George had such a bad fall and half of his body was buried deep into that crevasse opening.



*Chi's heavy plastic snow boots*

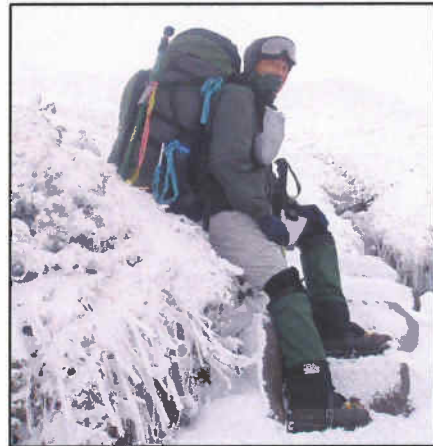
Sunday night, it rained all night. I did not have a good sleep; listening to the rain hitting the roof, worrying sick about the upcoming climb. Rain at the lower elevation could mean a blizzard condition up at Camp Muir. I did not even want to think about the summit. By 5:00am, George and Mr. Chen were already busy packing and making breakfast. I confronted George and told him to go without me. Before the trip, I made a promise to myself; I would not risk my life to get to the summit. Mt. Rainier will always be there for me to climb. George with his usual easy-going manner suggested that we should drive up to the Ranger Station and check out the weather up at Camp Muir.



Reluctantly, I loaded my heavy backpack (now weighted more than 40lbs with all the extra emergency clothing and foods) to the car and nerve-racking sat behind George. Rain stopped when we reached the Visitor Center but the air was moist and cold. Surprising, the Ranger informed us, in spit of all the rain last night, up at Camp Muir, the sky was clear. “Gorgeous” actually was the word he used. Our spirits, especially mine, were lifted by the good news. We went back to our car and prepared ourselves for the climb of our lives.

### High Camp

From Paradise parking lot to Pebble Creek, the sky began to clear up. However, there were still a lot of clouds remaining and obscuring the upper section of the mountain. Up to this point, none of us had seen Mt. Rainier yet. The first two-mile hike was uneventful. Up until Pebble Creek, Mr. Chen was hiking with us. After taking a few photos with him, we separated and did not see him until reaching Camp Muir.



*Mr. Chen resting by Pebble Creek*

My uphill climbing pace usually is faster than that of George. At the rest stop, he encouraged me to move ahead to catch up with Mr. Chen. I told him I was not going to leave him and venture on my own. One of the reasons is because he is our leader and the other reason is I am too chicken to hike alone.

### The Other Side



*Chi with flower from George*

Most of the CMC members who do not really know me usually have the impression of me being a tough, brave, and fearless person. Only my closest friends know well that there is another side of me, which is often hidden from strangers. I embrace the idea of adventure. It will be my ultimate dream if I can still find a place where no one has ever visited before. I love to read and I am eager to learn new things. I definitely not intimidated by strangers. I believe meeting people from the other part of the world and learning their cultures broaden my horizon. I am grateful to have those qualities. However, when facing danger, I often lose confident. I do not have a good sense of direction and I am even afraid to cross a narrow bridge. Most of all, I am still a city girl who enjoys luxury



things such as shower, mirror, and want to maintain an image as an attractive woman. Although this side of

me is not considered bad, it is an obstacle to keep me from growing as a leader. I am simply a follower.

### We Made it

George was having a tough time and I often stopped to wait for him. On a few occasions, I bumped my head against his backpack by following him too closely. Compare to George's backpack, mine was much lighter. I only carried foods for the group. George carried most of the group equipments, such as rope, stove, gas and pots. His backpack was about 60 lbs and was the heaviest one among us. With every 200 feet, we rested.

We were still surrounded by den fog. The whiteout conditions sometimes got so bad that we could only see a few feet ahead. Suddenly, a large group of guided hikers came into view through heavy cloud. A leader with very dark sun tank greeted us with a smile “it is gorgeous up at there, it will clear up after 9,000 feet”

The last 1,000 feet climb to Camp Muir was the toughest. We stopped more often and rested our backpacks against the slope to ease the pain from our shoulders. We ate so many power bars, candies and other snacks to regain energy to carry on. It was during our break around 3'o'clock that suddenly the sky began to clear up. I caught a first glimpse of the mountain behind George. The mountain seemed huge above us. By the foot of the mountain, a tiny man made structure nested on a rock ledge.



*George with Mt. Rainier behind him*

“We made it, George!” I could not hide my excitement. For the first time since we arrived at the Park, I believed we might have a chance to summit Mt. Rainier. The mountain disappeared quickly once again behind the cloud. It took us nearly two hours to ascend the last 1,000 feet. After 7 ½ hours, we gained 4,500 feet and covered 6.5 miles. Our pace, compared to most hikers, is below average! ☺

### Camp Muir

Camp Muir lies at 10,080 feet and consists of ranger hut, guide/cook shack, client hut,



three pit toilets and a 75-year old public shelter. The shelter was remodeled in 2004 with additional cooking and storage space. The shelter is open on a first come first serve basis. It is very primitive. Inside, a long bunk wooden platform occupies 2/3 of the space. During the peak season, this tiny box will accommodate 20 hikers. Luckily, we came in June and it was also weekday, most of the climbers already left the mountain. We shared the hut with six other

climbers. Mr. Chen arrived early and he already spread out his sleeping mat on the platform.

I spotted a corner and placed my ground sheet next to the wall. I shared the resting area with George. George wasted no time; he took out his sleeping bag and collapsed right



*Chi, slept with all the smelly men!*

next to me. Before I had a chance to unpack my sleeping bag, George, with his loud snoring, fell asleep within seconds. The shelter was cold and I shivered with my damp clothes. I put on my dry socks and down jacket, lying closely next to George. His body heat quickly warmed me up. Normally, I would not be able to sleep with such a distracting noise, but I guessed I was too tired. Within minutes, I also fell asleep. Mr. Chen, however, had a hard time getting any sleep right next to George and other strangers.

### **The View**

I woke up two hours later with a light headache. A friendly young man offered me two Advils. Knowing the side effect of those pills, I only took one and saved another one for the summit. Taking the Advil turned out to be a BIG mistake later. (My body does not agree with Advil, the medicine usually takes away my energy and leaves me with sleepy feeling)

It was about 8:00pm and surprisingly it was still bright outside. I headed to the toilet and was astonished by the view. Off to my right, Mt. Rainier's summit dome loomed menacingly over Camp Muir. Glittering like a big diamond, the mountain was covered with the untainted whiteness. The sun was setting and the entire western sky was saturated with its radiant orange color. At the horizon, Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood and Mt. St. Helens



*Mt. Adams floating above the clouds*

lined up to the south. With their snow-covered tops, each giant protruded above a sea of clouds, floating like an island in the sky. This single moment made every hardship worthwhile. I knew only a handful of people from CMCNY would ever witness what I saw tonight. I could not help but feeling proud.

While I was enjoying the view, George was busy melting snow for our drinking water and cooking. Watching George doing all the cooking, I felt very guilty. Unlike Sandy, I am not much a cook. Both George and Sandy are very capable to organize things when it

