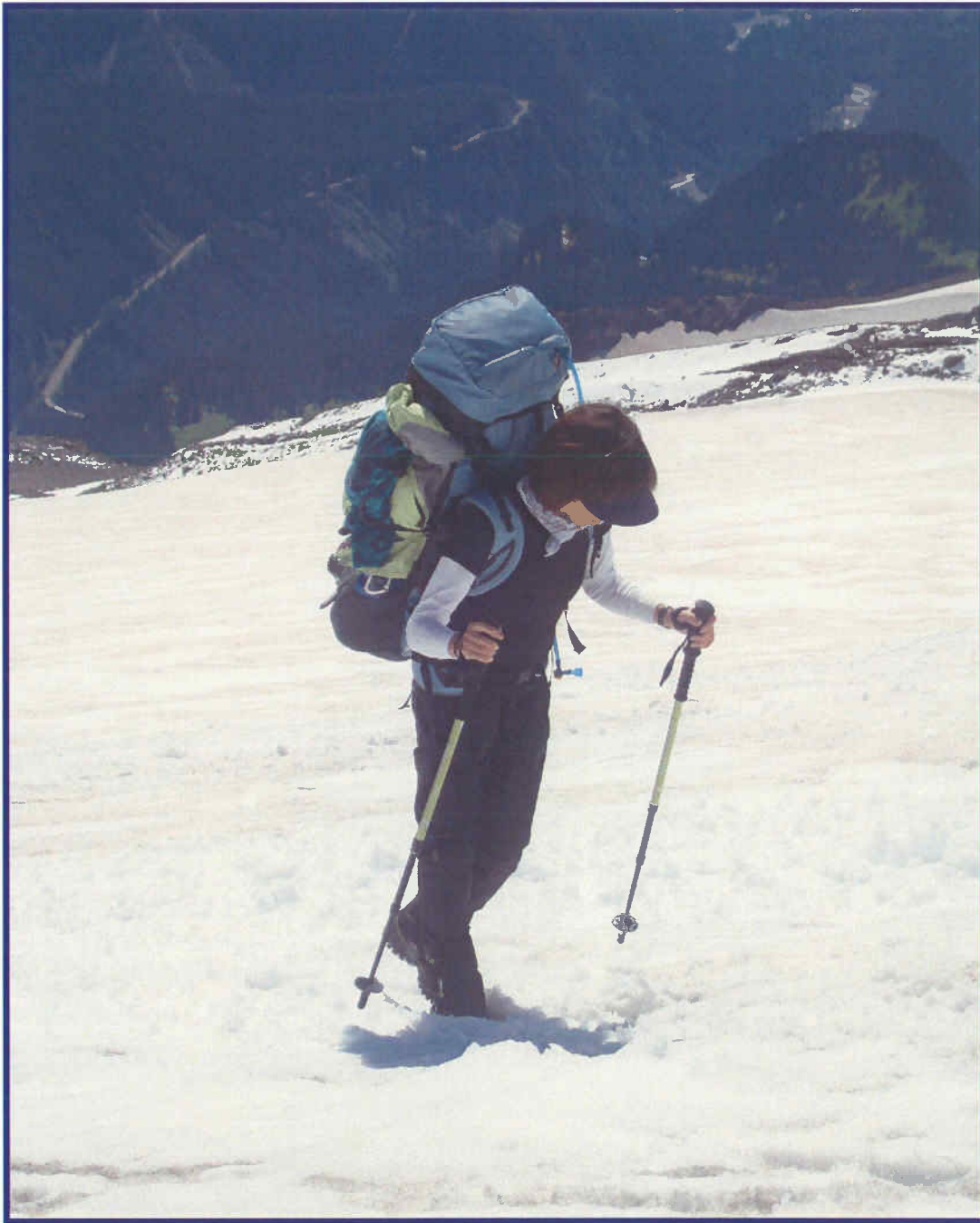


Mount Rainier 2

The closing chapter



Although my mind was not so clear, I knew I had made it. After 7 1/2 hours grueling climb, I finally stood on top of Mt. Rainier. It was 7:45am and the bright orange sun was on the edge of the horizon, but I did not exert myself to enjoy the sunrise. The climb was too hard, so hard that I had to contemplate every single step. The air was too thin, so thin that my brain began to fall asleep. But I finally made it. I have fulfilled the promise that I made to Mt. Rainier and myself fourteen months ago.

*By Chi S. Chan
Augusts 4, 2008*

Failure of last year climbs

It was fourteen months ago that I bid my farewell to the mountain. That morning on my way back to the Paradise parking lot, I took a last look at the snowcapped summit of Rainier and made a promise to myself that someday, I would return. Today, I stand on the Muir snowfield and face the mountain again. This time, I feel much more confident that I will make it.



My new hiking partners: Koti & QT

Looking back a year ago, I realize it was really a foolish and irresponsible attempt to climb Rainier on my part. Not only did I lack of the necessary mountaineering skill, but also I had the audacity of climbing Rainer without going to the training school. It was lucky that I did not summit that night, if I did, I would have end up seriously injured if not death. Today, with my two new climbing partners: Koti and Quang, I feel more at ease. They both are very young and inexperienced, but because of that, they will be more willing to learn, to listen and to accept any help we can get. I look at these two and cannot help but envying them. They have found their passion in such young age and they will have a whole life ahead of them to explore for more adventures.

Rainier Mountaineering Inc (RMI)



Ed Viesturs, a world class climber

About ten months ago, three of us decided to sign up with RMI; a reputable commercial guiding company in the Tacoma area. Most of the guides from RMI are experienced climbers; Ed Viesturs, Eric Simonson and Peter Whittaker are just a few whose names appeared in many issues of the "Outside" and "Adventure" magazines. It is, however, not the reason why I chose RMI as our outfitter; it is RMI guiding philosophy that impresses me. I read story about how a team of clients was turned around right before the summit just because one of the clients was a danger to the team. "Safety" is their only concern. I am impressed by that.

August in Paradise

We arrive at Rainier National Park on the 19th of August. All the snow below Pebble Creek is completely melted. August in Paradise area is just beautiful. Wild flowers cover the entire Muir snow field with such an explosive colors; red, yellow, white, green, purple and blue. The scenery is so much different from that of last year. I am glad to come back. Even if I cannot reach the summit again, seeing this is already well worth it.



We spotted many wild lives along the

Our Guide

Next day, we drive up to RMI head quarter, meet our guide Paul Edgren and other teammates. Our teammates consist of old and young, some are in good shape, some are not. Paul “screens” at his clients closely, asks questions about our background and climbing experience. He later checks on our equipments and suggests additional rental to



Paul is a good looking “dude”

ensure the safety of our climb. Koti and QT lack most of the climbing gears and they both end up spending a few hundred dollars on the rental. Even I have most of the climbing gears; I still have to rent a hamlet and an avalanche receiver. The avalanche receiver alone weight nearly 3 lbs. It adds additional weight to our already very heavy backpack. Paul goes on about “eating”. He is very serious about how we should eat,

“You need to eat, eat every time we have a break. You will be burning 20,000 calories up at the mountain, so I want you to keep eating. The higher the calories, the better”

The most discouraging news from Paul is: no pictures taken unless we are given the permission to do so.

“This week you are a climber, not a photographer. Up at the slope of Mt. Rainer, I do not want to see you hold a camera in one hand and an ice axe in the other... by doing so, you are not only jeopardizing your own safety but also the safety of your teammates.”

I knew about this policy by reading stories from the internet. The policy does not bother me so much as it only shows the professionalism of RMI.

Training School

The following day, Paul and Eric, his assistance take us to a snow fields above the Paradise area for training. Mt. Rainier in August does not guarantee warmer and drier weather. The snow begins to fall when we reach the lower section of the glacier. Paul and Eric waste no time to show us all the techniques about self arrest.



Training school and snow in August

First, we practice sliding down the hill many different ways: head first on stomach, head first on your back, feet first on stomach, and feet first on your back, and at the same time yelling “falling”, turning over so you are facing the snow, digging the ice axe into the snow, and finally kicking your feet in. The purpose of this is if your teammate on your rope team falls into a crevasse, you can stop him/her. It is fun time; the guides are very friendly and helpful. With all the lessons given, I seem to have problem remembering the “rest step” and “pressure breathing”. Using the rest step is using the least amount of energy and muscle strain to achieve a single, elevated step. Maybe I am trying too hard, I just could not do it right. I hope with more practice, the technique will come naturally as I climb.

The weather turns to worse, sleet and wet snow is coming down ceaselessly. By noon, we are all soaking wet and chill to the bones. Paul decides to cut the whole day training section to half. He sends us home early so we can dry out all our equipments. We are scheduled to meet early next morning and start our 1st day climb to Muir base camp.

Back to our cabin, Koti, QT and I are still very excited about all the lessons we learned today. We dry our equipments by the fire place, pack sandwiches, breakfasts and dinners for the three days upcoming climb. This is the first adventure for Koti and QT, neither one of them is fully aware of hardship and danger of this forthcoming climb. They are joking and cooking in the kitchen with no sign of worry. They cook me a big pasta dinner which turns out to be delicious, nutritious and filling. We go to bed with a full stomach.



Our teammates, old and young

Climb to Camp Muir

We rise very early next morning; cram every climbing gears on the RMI checklist to our packs, which includes 3 pairs of gloves, 2 headlamps with extra batteries, food for three days, two quarts of water, sleeping bag, down and Gore-Tex shell jackets and pants, plastic boots and ice axe, avalanche receiver, helmet, crampon, snow goggles, harness and camera,

all together weights definitely more from 40 pounds.

From Paradise (5,500 ft) to Camp Muir (10,100 ft), average 4-6 hours climb depends on how fit you are. Last year, George and I took nearly 7 hours to reach the camp, not a very good timing. The shuttle bus drops us off by Paradise Inn. The sun just breaks through the clouds. The weather is perfect, blue sky, no wind; temperature is at a lower 60s. I look up to the mountain and pray the weather will hold for another two more days.

Paul gives us a short briefing about the Day 1 hiking plan. There will be three rest stops along the way. Each break will last no more than 15 minutes. "If you can not catch up, step aside and let your teammate pass you." Paul's command sounds so insensitive, which remains me a famous quote from Peter Whittaker, another world class climber:

"On the upper mountain, if you are not an asset to your rope team, if you become a liability, we will have to leave you."



Koti and I taking a break at Pebble Creek

Following the Skyline Trail to Pan Point, continue to Pebble Creek at 7,200 ft, we take our first break. Paul urges us to eat, and drink. With Mt Rainier looms behind me, the nightmare of last year climbs returns. I immediately block my mind and concentrate on the view below us. The weather today can not be more ideal. The sky is clear with no trace of clouds. The slope right above Paradise parking lot covers with bright green summer color, a big contrast with the dazzling white of the glacier just a few hundred feet above. Koti, QT and I both feel great. Shortly after the break, the eldest member of the team decides to call a quit. Eric, the assistant guide, takes him down to the parking lot.



QT is slowing down

The team moves on the long slog up asphalt path and onto the Muir snowfield. About ten minutes before reaching Anvil Rock, QT begins to show sign of trouble. He is over-heated, drops of sweat falling down from his forehead. With a trembling voice, QT asks Paul to stop. Paul either did not hear him or just ignored him, he keeps the group moving. QT is falling behind alone. I look back at him and then look up to the team, have no choice but leaving him behind. Five minutes later, I have a cramp on my right foot. I feel the calf muscle is tightened and it begins to hurt. I stop; rest and hope the pain will go away. The team is moving away further and further, and I decide to wait for QT. Minutes later, QT with Eric next to him is approaching me. Amazing, Eric already catches us with us; he is such a strong climber.

QT is totally dehydrated. He is a little disoriented and keeps asking me for water. He almost finishes his bottle. Eric goes off the snowfield and refills QT's water bottle with some snow, hoping it will melt enough to last until we reach Camp Muir. I explain Eric about my pain, and he urges me to eat some salty snacks. I quickly eat some peanuts and the pain gradually goes away. We finally join up with Koti and the team on top of the Anvil rock.

Our Sleeping Quarter

After another short break, we head back out to the snow field. This final snow slope which leads to Camp Muir at 10,040 feet is steep and long with a few small walls. Suffering under the heavy burden of our packs, 5 ½ hours later, we arrive at Camp Muir.



Sitting on the edge of Cowlitz Glacier is out tent

Camp Muir looks the same. The public shelter where George, Mr. Chen and I slept in still looks as small and cold as I remember. What appears to be different from last year is the crowd. A small encampment of tents, nearly 20 of them, are set up in the gully just below the public shelter, looking like the base camp for expedition. Up at the ridge, a little hill leads to three tents. They look so small sitting on the slope of Cowlitz Glacier. Paul points to the last one and inform three of us that it will be our home for the next three day.

We are quite please with the sleeping arrangement. RMI has its own private bunkhouse at the base camp, which is no more than just a small wooden box. With 35 people cramming inside, moving around, talking, farting, snoring, groaning, laughing, well you get the idea, no one will have any good rest or sleep. Although our tent looks so cold and isolated up at that hill, it does provide us with privacy and quiet time. Three of us carry our loads and head to the tent. We find inside the tent is actually quite roomy. We have no problem moving around and can sleep side by side comfortably. However, we do have to leave our backpacks outside the tent.



If you look carefully, you can see Koti inside the picture as well

Koti's migraine headache troubles her a bit but after a doze of medication, she is back to be the cheerful and capable girl again. Eric brings us some hot water and

we cook a simple noodle dinner and rest for the night. Koti and QT are still very excited about the upcoming climb. They talk endlessly and with their voice gradually fading away, I fall into a deep sleep. I wake up midnight by the noise outside the RMI

bunkhouse. Climbers are busy getting ready for the summit climb. It is a perfect night for the climb. Somehow, I wish we could do the summit push that night. An hour later, the night becomes very quiet again and I fall back to sleep until dawn.

More Training – Climbing School

We still have another training section this morning. After gathering outside the guide house, we head off to a snow field just right below Camp Muir. Paul introduces us to another climbing guide, Gablier. Gablier is not too tall but lean and strong. He comes from Argentina; summated Mt. Aconcagua, the highest mountain in North America (22,841 feet) 17 times. Gablier is a very capable mountaineer. He looks at Koti, QT and I; gives us a nod and a warm smile. I like him already.



Gablier, another world class climber, is our personal guide

With his Argentinean assent, Gablier shows us step by step how to walk up and down on an icy slope. We spend the morning practicing more self-arrest, belaying and walking



as a rope team, dealing with switchbacks. We also learn how to coil the ropes when climbing on the rocky slope, to position the ice axe properly when climbing direction alters and most important, how to react when avalanche occurs. Gablier are watching Koti, QT and I very closely. I know the guides from RMI usually use the training section to observe and assess their clients. By the end of the training, they already have some ideas which client will not make

it to the top.

Change of Weather

After lunch, the team is occupied by making preparation to the summit. Eric melts more snow for us. Paul advises us to have an early dinner and lie down for bed around 5:00pm. He will wake us up around midnight. As three of us resting inside our tent, the wind begins to pick up. The sun is now covered by cirrus clouds. The weather takes a 180 degree turn. With the flyer of our tent flapping noisily, I have a sick feeling in my stomach. I still have a chill when remembering how the wind blew me off the track last year at the Cathedral Gap.

I actually manage to catch a few hours sleep. By 11:00pm, we are awake. The wind sounds nasty outside our tent. Three of us shuffle around, numbly in the cold and dark of the night. Eric delivers another pot of hot water for our “breakfast”. We gulp down our coffee, oatmeal and granola bars, visit the toilet, dress and put on our plastic boots, crampons, helmets, and harnesses. Finally we tie the nearly 3 lbs avalanche beacons to our chests. Midnight, Paul comes to our group tents; go over some final points about safety, give us words of encouragement, and also inform us that another teammate decide to quit. Once Paul makes the final announcement of “Rock and Roll”, seven of us gather

