

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.

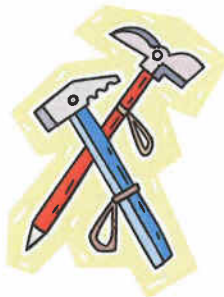
Change of Weather

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

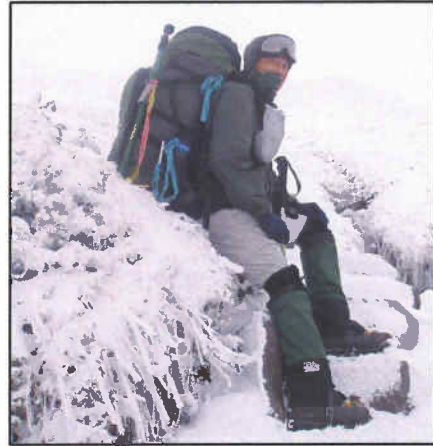
Sunday night, it rained all night. I did not have a good sleep; listening to the rain hitting the roof, worrying sick about the upcoming climb. Rain at the lower elevation could mean a blizzard condition up at Camp Muir. I did not even want to think about the summit. By 5:00am, George and Mr. Chen were 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

comes to camping and backpacking. Usually, Mr. Chen and I just take care of our own stuffs and depend on them to mind all the other camping business. Tonight, I felt I was a burden to George.



George with my scarf

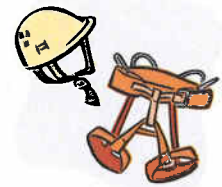
I remembered George mentioning he did not bring enough clothing for the summit climb. I took out my “Kilimanjaro” lucky scarf that Winona gave me and put on George’s neck. At least that was the only thing I could do for him. He looked funny with that woman’s scarf, but it would keep him warm. ☺

Summit Preparation

My headache went away after dinner. The Park Ranger came to the shelter and checked on us. He wanted to know our summit plan. We did not really have a solid one. Originally, we wanted to stay for an extra day. With the bad weather approaching, we wanted to summit that night. I knew through my reading that most of climbers summit at midnight. It is important to hit the slope during the coldest part of the night when everything is frozen in place. This allows us to secure our footing with crampons. It reduces our risk of being hit by ice and rock as well. The early departure also provides us with ample time to turn around before the afternoon clouds move in.

George and Mr. Chen went to bed after dinner and I set the alarm at 12:00am. When it was time to get up, neither George nor Mr. Chen wanted to move. George was mumbling about getting up at 5:00am. I was not happy hearing that. “We are not going to make it if you do not get up!” I kept kicking George to get him going. Finally, he did and Mr. Chen followed. We began to prepare for the summit climb.

First, I put on many layers of clothing, wore three pairs of gloves and two pairs of pants, put the goggles and headlamp over my wool hat. I stuffed my daypack with down jacket, a bottle of water, another pair of glove, power bars, candies, suntan lotion and a pair of sunglasses. I checked and rechecked my cell phone and made sure it was inside the pocket of my Goretex Jacket. Next step would be putting on all the technical gears. I had practiced many times to put on my crampons and harness, so it was not too hard to put them on tonight. However, when it came to use ice axe and rope up with teammates, it was my first time.



Technical difficulty

Outside the shelter, the night was calm and the sky filled with many many stars. There was a feeble moon and I could see the lights from Paradise Inn very clearly. I stood next to George and he threw me a rope. I had no idea how to rope myself up with George and Mr. Chen. The plan was George in the front, I with least-experienced in the middle, and

Mr. Chen in the back. George told me to put “something” over “something” and I understood nothing. I began to get agitated. “George, you never showed me how to use this stuff!, we should have practiced this in New York?” I began to get very nervous.



“Novices are those lacking glacier travel experience are strongly encouraged to climb with a guide service”

I should have known better. Somehow, I knew it was going to be a disaster up on the mountain if we insisted on going. I told George, maybe I should stay behind. George ignored my comments and helped me to put on so many different ropes. They all tangled around my waist. Fear overcame me; I did not want to go.

Alone in Darkness

I was hoping one of the guided groups would start before us. It would be much safer knowing someone with more experience hiking in front of us. When we left Camp Muir, there were no other climbers. We were the only team leaving for the summit at 1:00am. Across the empty Cowlitz Glacier, only our three dim lights progressed in a total darkness.



Climbers crossing the Cowlitz Glacier and heading towards Cathedral Gap

With my headlamp, I could not really see much except a few feet ahead of me. There were infrequent dollops of light thrown my way by Mr. Chen (behind me), but other than that, just an ethereal light showing the rope move with George’s steps. In the dark, I was happy that I could not see the other side of our tiny path. Suddenly, the rope tugged. “Just a minute” Mr. Chen was having trouble. I pulled the rope and let George know. Secretly, I was happy to have the chance to rest and think.

Climbing early in the morning gave me lot of time to think. My world now only revolved around a 12-inch diameter circle of light reflecting in the snow. As I watched the rope move, the hardship of climbing began to get to me. I asked myself, “Why do I want climb Mt. Rainier and put my life at risk?” Before I could answer myself, Mr. Chen was ready to go.

Cathedral Rock

Few minutes later, another tug came from behind me. I heard Mr. Chen saying he forgot something. With 100 feet apart from each other, George had problem understanding Mr. Chen. The shouting kept back and forth and I was getting a little bit annoyed. "I am cold, let us keep moving". We had been going for about an hour and finally we reached the bottom of Cathedral Rock at 10,640 feet.

Cathedral Rock was very steep; certain sections of the rock face were as steep as 50 degree. Climbing up through the loose rocks and gravel with our crampons became increasingly difficult. Crampons just do not bite into rock the same way they do into snow. I tripped numerous times and nearly lost my balance. Our ropes frequently were tangled and caught between rocks. We had to stop often to sort them out. The bundle of ropes that George helped me to put around my waist was so heavy that it kept dragging my



Looking down from Cathedral Rock

harness down to my hips. I gave the rope a tug and signed George to stop. I pulled my harness back up and two minutes later, it went back down again. I let George know my frustration. He came down and examined my harness. "The harness is too big on you," George said. "But it is an extra small size already!" He helped me to tighten the strap and asked me to carry the rope with one hand. This temporary solution worked only briefly and soon my hand got very tired.

Final Struggle

We set off again; switch backing up to the loose rock. Right in front of a huge boulder, our trail disappeared. George looked around and realized that we were on a wrong path. He maneuvered his way off the path, and his footing caused a rock fall; sending two huge rocks rolling down the hill. The rumbling sound echoed in the darkness and made our surrounding become more eerie. I looked down to the lower slope and saw two beam lights heading towards our direction. Moments later, two climbers passed us and asked how we were doing. Now, they realized they were off the main path by following us, but without hesitation, they continued and crossed the narrow section of the rock ridge with ease. I was glad to see other climbers and felt safe to have them leading the way.

Following the two-climber team, George crossed the danger ledge first. He looked back and warned me about the loose section. Gingerly, I crossed over and once again sent a few rocks tumbling down the hill. When it was Mr. Chen's turn, clearly, he was struggling. I could feel his fear. One of his crampons caught between rocks, and badly need some help to release it. Watching him struggling, neither George nor I could offer any assistance. The cross section was just too narrow to accommodate another person. It took Mr. Chen a long time eventually to free himself. By the time he reached us, I knew either one of us had the desire to continue. Nevertheless, none of us wanted to admit. We struggled on.



George, moment before making his critical decision

Turn Back

Looking down the hill, we saw several rows of climbers with headlamps weaving their way up the hill. Instead of heading towards us, they turned right. I could see the mistake we made. A trail diverging from the rock face to the right met a snowfield, skirting around the loose rock wall and gradually joining the beginning section of the Ingraham Glacier. Without an experience guide and in the dark, the path can easily be missed.

Our pace was torturously slow. Ten minutes passed; the rope behind me tugged again. Mr. Chen said something and we could not hear him clearly. We waited and waited, and finally both George and I hiked down to check on him. It turned out that one of Mr. Chen's crampons got loose during his struggle and he was having a hard time to put them back on. With so many layers of clothing and gloves, it was extremely difficult to do anything without first taking off some layers. Mr. Chen could not reach his crampon. He was frustrated and so did I. My disappointment about the whole situation reached the peak. "I should have signed up with the guide service!" I kept saying it to myself repeatedly. Nevertheless, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. Without saying a word, I knelt down and began fixing Mr. Chen's crampon.

The wind started to pick up as we moved again. My harness once again fell to my hips. I pulled them up and a few seconds later it fell below my angle. I gave the rope a tug and informed George my situation. George walked over. With a bitter smile, we exchanged

a look and understood each other. It was over. The decision was unanimous. Dawn cleared and we could see the sunlight gradually appearing on the horizon. It must be around 4:00am.

Descent

Below Ingraham Flat, we had to regain the lower slopes of Cathedral Rock. This stretch had clearly been pelted by rock falls and I was anxious to reach its bottom as fast as possible. Looking down, I could not believe how steep we climbed. We did not want to make the same mistake as we climbed up, so instead of going straight down, we turned to the path on our left. We reached a relatively flat surface and here the trail ended. Once



With wind gusting 60 mile per hour, George desperately searching for the right path to descent

again, we were lost. With the wind blowing nearly 60 miles per hour, we could not stand still. We stayed closed to the ground and turned our backs against the wind. George took out his GPS, fixed his rope and told us to wait for him. He buried his head into his coat collars and threaded his way against the howling wind. I prayed and hoped he would return safely.

It seemed like eternal when we heard George's voice again. Mr. Chan and I followed the rope and found George standing on a beaten path. A visible trail zigzagged down on a nearly 50-degree angle rock face extending to the bottom of the hill where Cowlitz Glacier began. The sky started to get even brighter when we reached the bottom. From a distance, we could see Camp Muir bathing under the morning sun. We chose a flat area and ate our power bars. Fatigue overcame him, Mr. Chen collapsed on the snow floor. I switched off my headlight and enjoyed the magnificent sunrise. The familiar



mountain, Mt. Adams came out of the clouds and towered gloriously overhead. That single moment suspended in time... as I looked upon the face of something more eternal than temporal, more than merely a mountain.

Heading out

We returned to Camp Muir by 6:00am. After packing up all our stuff for the last time, we left Camp Muir by 8:00am and began our long way down. The morning sun was already very strong, every beam of light absorbed by the snow and reflected back on our faces. Within hours, my face and nose were badly burned.



Chi, with a badly burned nose

Hiking down hill with a heavy backpack was equally difficult. Besides, we had been climbing since 10:00am Monday morning and did not get a good sleep for nearly 24 hours. We were exhausted, but the thought of having a hot shower and clean cloth kept me going.

George took a lead and ran down the mountain. On top of a rock, I paused for one last look at Mt. Rainier. “See you soon”, I whispered to the mountain. Then, I chased after George ignoring the unbearable sun.

Why Risk it

Back at the cabin, we took our most needed shower, washed clothes, and hung them everywhere to dry. Afterward, Mr. Chen and George retired to catch some sleep. I was tired but my mind was too excited to rest. What three of us had done these past few days was still very fresh in my mind. The journey we took to reach the mountain, the beauty we saw at Camp Muir, and the terror we felt up at Cathedral Rock seemed to pass too quickly. In spite of the disappointment not reaching the summit, I felt relieve knowing that three of us were safe.



I enjoy climbing as much as I enjoy eating banana.

Returning to New York and telling friends about our latest adventure, my long-time friend Cam accused me being a mountain maniac; taking too much risk. The unanswered question, “Why climb Mt. Rainier and put my life at risk?” came back to me. I remember this quote by Jim Whittaker, first American to summit Mt. Everest.

“If you aren’t living on the edge, you’re taking up too much space. It has nothing to do with thrill seeking. It is about making the most of every moment, about stretching your own boundaries, about being willing to learn constantly and putting yourself in situations where learning is possible – sometimes even critical to your survival. Being out on the edge, with everything at risk, is where you learn – and grow – the most”

It pretty much sums up how I feel about climbing Mt. Rainier, about Kilimanjaro, 26-mile hike, Nepal trek and other “crazy” things I did.

THE END