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Never Too Late

How not to climb a glaciated peak

Nicholas Reynolds



RETIRED BUT STILL FULL OF ENERGY, MY WIFE ENROLLED IN Acupuncture school above a food co-op 75 miles north of Seattle when she was 59. I was 61 and had never stopped dreaming about climbing a glaciated peak in the Pacific Northwest. The brochures had been sitting on the coffee table since 1987! Becky's initiative moved me one step closer to doing something about those blue-tinted pictures of the jagged peaks in North Cascades National Park. I'm a hiker, not a mountaineer, but I thrilled to the exotic activities I was reading about: glacier travel, crevasse rescue, expeditionary climbing.

The first hurdle was distance. We live just outside the other Washington—D.C.—where we had both worked for the federal government. Becky chose Middle Way Acupuncture Institute and planned to commute from one Washington to the other once a month for a few days for three years. I saw my chance and traveled west with her one November weekend. I visited the acupuncture school, ate an organic meal at the busy co-op alongside the bearded and tattooed regulars, then went in search of an outfitter that I will call Cascadian Climbing and Guiding. There I found friendly, hyper-fit young men in their 20s and 30s. They were hardly effusive—I suspected that they lived to climb, not talk. But they were willing to help the aging Easterner: “Yes, we offer courses for beginners as well as seasoned climbers. What would you like to know?” My problem was that I didn't know what to ask beyond, “When is the best time to climb in the Cascades? What do I need to prepare?”

During that winter and spring, I had an on-again, off-again, long-distance relationship with the guide service. I decided to sign up for a short course, a three-day climb of Mount Baker, the glaciated peak that stands some 10,000 feet above Skagit Valley. The process went something like this: email to ask about spaces, fill out forms, send in check, get check back (course full), get lucky (course added), write another check. In the two months or so between registering and climbing, I did what I could to get fit, assembled the gear I thought I needed, and bought a ticket to go West with Becky for a few days at the end of July and the beginning of August—said to be the best time of the year for climbing Baker.

On one of the clear, white-wine summer mornings that year after year call us back to the Pacific Northwest, Becky dropped me off around 7 A.M. at Cascadian's unpretentious but functional headquarters. Soon I met

The author at 6,000 feet, having survived a trek that many consider a pleasant day hike.

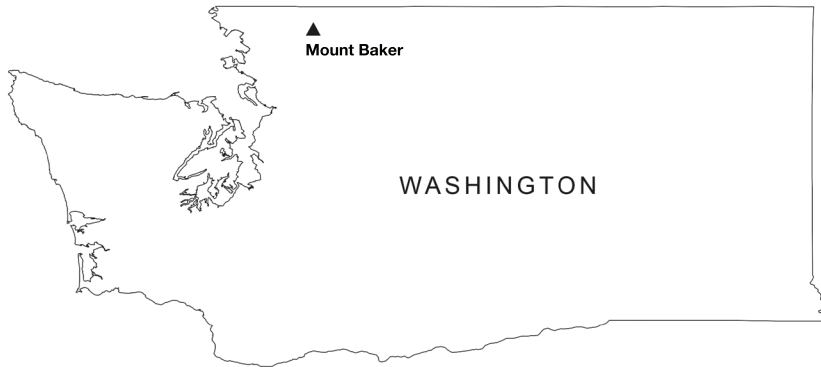
COURTESY OF NICHOLAS REYNOLDS

the guides I'll call Bob and Bentley. Bob was the 30-something lead who watched and listened as his students from both coasts assembled. Bentley was the 20-something climber who would assist him. Bob looked a little like Casey Affleck approaching middle age. Bentley looked like the young Sean Penn. Bob was measured in his speech and movements—he paused before answering questions—while Bentley came across as energetic, even impulsive, with shoulders drawn back and choppy arm gestures. For a climber, Bentley talked a lot, not surprisingly about climbing and fitness, which I guessed were more important to him than teaching or guiding, not an unusual mindset. He told us that he wanted to be a “dirtbag.”*

I will never forget some of the other clients: the banker from North Carolina who came West every year to climb one of the many peaks in the Cascades—arriving the day before, flying out the day after unless there was a convenient red-eye the same day; the Russian-born anesthesiologist and his wife from the East Coast, both tall and thin like ultramarathoners, crackling with energy, wit, and intelligence; a father-son team, the father about 40, his body starting to relax into middle age while his son was striding energetically into his early teens. Bob told us to pair up and parceled out such shared gear as tents, stoves, and ropes—to spread common burdens. I was paired with a young man from Washington State. Maybe 20 years old, he looked friendly but said little. The young man was happy to share, but some of his gear seemed to me like state-of-the-art for 1962, not 2012. I guessed his two-man tent weighed at least ten pounds, impossibly heavy by current standards. I strapped it to my pack and hefted it into the back of a van.

The two dented and dirty vans might once have been white, but the best they could now manage was off-white with streaks of mud. They moved east and north, from the Seattle suburbs and coastal plain toward the park. With the exceptions of the husband-wife and father-son teams, none of us had ever met before that morning, and no one said much during the two- to three-hour trip. We drove in silence alongside a clear, cold-looking river, past broad swatches of partly deforested hillsides, the bald acres interspersed with acres of forest. After the four-lane interstate tapered to a two-lane state highway, we found ourselves on a winding dirt road. Now we gained altitude fast,

*This made no sense to me until I found out that the word refers to those who care about climbing and little else—including cleanliness. The most famous dirtbag was the late Fred Beckey, who shunned creature comforts and lived to climb, pioneering many routes in the Pacific Northwest.



Mount Baker rises in North Cascades National Park in northwest Washington.

LARRY GARLAND/ APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

eventually parking the vans at around 3,000 feet, and got ready to climb 3,000 more feet to base camp.

It was deceptively cool in the shade of the tall trees around the trailhead. When I strapped on my pack, I knew immediately that I was carrying more, far more—at least 15 to 20 pounds more—than I had ever carried during my haphazard two months of training on the small hills near our house in Virginia (elevation about 25 feet above sea level) and in the stairwells of a local five-story parking garage (often enough to attract the attention of building security). With food and water, the load weighed 40 to 45 pounds. That started the internal monologue: I could tolerate this for a few hours, and once we got to 6,000 feet, I would not have to carry the load any higher. It did not matter that, at 62, I was 15 to 40 years older than the other climbers, or that I weighed in at over 180, putting me in a weight class by myself on that day. I was not fat, exactly, but neither was I lean and muscular. Like many men my age, I had been slow to acknowledge that my waist had gone from 32 to 36 over the past couple of decades. Still, I had always powered through physical challenges, usually without suffering anything worse than a sprained ankle. I was never an athlete, never fast and competitive and triumphant, but I was no couch potato either.

The first hour was tolerable. Bob, our senior guide, led us onto a broad trail, worn smooth from years of use. The trail angled gently upward in the dense, leafy forest. Where the terrain was a little steeper, the switchbacks were

lazy at first. The two stream crossings were at stunning places, over water rushing down the mountain, but we scrambled easily along a fallen tree or hopped from one rock to the next. By the second hour I was sweating heavily, starting to pull at my straps to get the weight off, first one shoulder for a few seconds and then the other. By now the vegetation was thinner, the tall deciduous trees giving way to progressively smaller evergreens and inviting sunlight onto the trail.

By the third hour, I had slipped to the back of the pack, where the junior guide Bentley was acting as sweep, charged with making sure no one fell behind him. I kept moving, but ever more slowly, and soon Bentley (one of the younger members of the group) and I (the oldest by far) became our own subgroup. Even today, years later, I vividly remember my thoughts. I imagined that Bentley could barely conceal his frustration at my pace. We were falling behind the rest of the pack. His body language seemed to shout, “Stop holding me back!” When he spoke he didn’t ask, “How are you doing?” or say, “It’s only another mile,” or “Let me take some of the group gear from you.” Instead he offered from behind a piece of advice I did not want to hear: “All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other.” Though I was paying for his company, I said nothing.

Of course, Bentley had only met me a few hours earlier and could not read my thoughts. He could not know that, when I needed to speak up or actively decide something, I all too often said or did nothing. Here I might have told him to leave me the hell alone, no one needed to tell me how to walk. Or, more positively, I might have asked for his help, or rest periods, or something like energy gel, which I had neglected to bring. (Instead I carried a heavy pouch of homemade salmon chowder from the co-op.)

As we emerged from the trees onto Heliotrope Ridge, the trail ran to scree, not unlike a bed of uneven ball bearings two inches deep in some places. The small stones gave way when I stepped on them. I had to take an extra step or two to gain purchase and continue upward. The added effort sapped more of my energy as we moved into the third hour of climbing. I had almost nothing left over for the glorious scenery. Alpine flowers grew close to the ground on either side of the trail. They bloomed red, lavender, yellow, and white, tiny petals stretching for acres in the bright sunshine. Uphill, the gently rounded, snow-covered peak glistened in the distance. Downhill, the stands of evergreens made their own dignified statement.

After about four hours, I saw my reward for all this effort: a rocky plateau named Hogsback Ridge. We continued to walk upward until we were almost

at the Coleman-Deming Glacier, which just looked like a big snow-covered hill that extended at a gradient of about 30 degrees as far as I could see, up to a ridge a little over a half-mile away, where it seemed to end. None of this looked very forbidding until Bentley pointed out a chute, a kind of runoff, where a glissading climber had been unable to stop and literally sailed off the side of the mountain to her death. Someone had since put up a few feet of orange plastic safety netting to warn others where the runoff ended.

We would camp on Hogsback Ridge. It looked as if generations of climbers had been there before us. The opening covered maybe half an acre, on a small finger, or spit of land, pointing toward the valley. Five or six circular stone walls, as much as 18 inches high, stood here and there. They defined individual campsites and would protect tents from the elements, especially wind. We could not drive the pegs into the ground, which had a crust of volcanic cinder, but we could tie guy lines to the walls. Outside each circle, I could see blackened rocks where there had been campfires. We had running water—melting snow gave off trickles that merged into small streams. Someone pointed to the empty space where the “outhouse” had stood. To save money, the National Park Service had removed the self-composting toilet, a large rectangular box with a couple of holes cut in the top. I had to wonder how much money they were saving, but I had come out West partly to escape the bureaucratic mysteries that are the lifeblood of the other Washington where I lived.

We spent the first part of the afternoon setting up our makeshift homes. I extracted the group gear from my pack. My tentmate and I laid it out flat on the ground before putting it up. On this calm, sunny afternoon, we did not have to fight the wind, and, after twenty or so minutes, we had a good-enough shelter from the elements, a place to roll out our sleeping pads and bags.

Bob called us over to talk about the schedule. This gave me a better chance to form an impression. He was thin without being wiry, more compact than tall. He had strength where he needed it; we could see the well-articulated muscles in his forearms. His short hair was neatly trimmed; he had no beard, mustache, or ponytail. He wore a wedding band. I later saw his biography online. He had spent most of his adult life guiding and teaching, some of it at the college level. On this day, he got right to work. I do not remember that we spent time on introductions, like filling out name tags or talking about our outdoor experience or what we wanted to get out of the climb. Instead he launched right into the techniques of glacier travel—what kind of steps

to take on the ice, where to hold the ice ax, how to tie knots that might save a life.

We broke into two small groups—five or six in each—and practiced. I found it surprisingly difficult to put on crampons. I was just getting used to the heavy plastic mountain boots that I had rented for the climb. One of the merits of the plastic boot was that it did not bend as you walked—thus creating a stable platform—but they did not give at all when I tried to secure the crampons. Bob was quick to notice anyone—like me—who wasn't catching on right away. He came right over to straighten or tighten, doing first, then talking, but not too much. Pull, fasten, tug. "That work? Got it? OK, good."

Soon it was early evening, when the bright sunlight gave way to a long twilight. Class dismissed, we went back to our campsites. Except for the father-son and husband-wife duos, each climber had brought and prepared his own food. I wanted to learn a little more about the others and talk about my impressions so far. I did not get far with my tentmate.

"So, what did you do to prepare?"

"Rode centuries."

I had no idea what he meant.

He explained that centuries were 100-mile bike rides, in his case through the coastal plain and foothills of Washington State.

I then asked the banker from North Carolina how he had trained. He sat in front of his one-man tent, surrounded by his light, practical gear. I was learning that light gear was late-model and expensive-looking.

"Prepare?" he mused, looking up from the even-burning flame of his sleek camp stove. It wasn't easy where he lived in the flatlands of North Carolina. He had driven to Mount Mitchell, a local 6,000-footer, for a practice climb. I confessed that the hike up had been hard for me. Should I continue? He was not unsympathetic, but it was up to me.

The Russian anesthesiologist and his wife, who turned out to have been born in England, joined us. His name was Dmitri, and she affectionately called him "Dim." But he was anything but dim. Their story poured out in a few minutes. The day before they had caught a flight after work, arrived at their hotel outside Seattle at 2 A.M., and slept for no more than four hours so that they could make it to the storefront at 7. "Baker is our practice climb," they said. "We're doing Rainier next."

The banker asked which guide company they had chosen for Rainer. Even I knew there were many choices. They said none: “We’re going on our own.” They would keep their rental, drive it to the trailhead, and start up the hill.

The banker looked concerned, I thought. He might have raised an eyebrow and cocked his head slightly. Rainier is a big mountain, 4,000 feet higher than Baker, with vast snowfields, crevasses, and sudden snowstorms. It was, the banker said, not hard to get lost there.

The doctor said, “Oh, we’ll figure it out.”

That night I fell asleep quickly, but around 1 A.M. I awoke with leg cramps, the muscles in my thighs seizing up like never before. On the chart that the doctors use to assess pain, my pain level was at least halfway between the smiley face on the left and the deep frown on the right. In an instant I was on the move; I knew I had to stand up, to put weight on my legs to lessen the pain. I must have fought my way out of my bag and the tent, not bothering with my boots or zipping the flap back up. The cramps subsided after a few minutes of walking around in the cold, still air.

I had always known to love *and* respect mountains; they could be as dangerous as they were beautiful. My Hungarian mother had loved the mountains, always preferring them to the seashore. They demanded—and repaid—effort in a way that the beach did not. Mom told us kids that there was something uplifting, even holy, about them. But she also used to tell us a story about a young friend who had died during her honeymoon at a lodge high up on the Jungfrauoch, literally the virgin’s yoke, one of the stunningly beautiful peaks in the Swiss Alps. Mom even remembered a gruesome detail: The groom had taken his bride’s body down the mountain on a sled.

The only slightly less stately Mount Rainier reigns over Seattle at 14,411 feet and is stunning to look at. The lodge at its base is called Paradise. But even the easy routes to the summit feature narrow aluminum ladders across yawning crevasses, not to mention the random danger of rockfall or avalanche, to say nothing of the altitude, enough to make some people very sick. One night, two years after the events of this story, for example, four climbers led by two experienced guides would simply disappear while they slept, probably swept off the mountainside by an avalanche.

The routes on the smaller but still glaciated mountain I was on now, Baker, were shorter and, with one or two exceptions, not overly steep or rocky or technical. People do get hurt and even die on Baker, but it is rare.

Sometimes it is bad luck—the wrong place at the wrong time, perhaps in front of a serac (an unstable column of snow and ice) that chooses just that moment to collapse. That was pretty much what happened to three teenagers in 1986. Well prepared and led by a professional guide, they left home one Friday afternoon for a weekend on Baker. From one moment to the next, a serac the size of a school bus collapsed and drove two of their bodies deep into a crevasse. It took 30 years for the glacier to yield part of its secret, a backpack that slipped downhill, inch by inch, until it was visible. But more often, accidents on Baker seemed preventable. Bad judgment, poor training, or ignorance, like the death that Bentley mentioned the first day, had caused them.

The next morning, my internal debate felt almost unbearable. Bad judgment, poor training, ignorance: Was that me? Should I climb or not? Was I listening to my 62-year-old body, or being a quitter? If I quit, was I letting the team down? What team? Was this my team? What would I say to friends and family later? Should I talk things over with Bob? Or just tell him that I was quitting now, that I would not even try to summit? In life I had not



Mount Baker: The actual summit is out of sight, top right. NICHOLAS REYNOLDS

always made good decisions, but no one had ever called me a quitter. I was far more likely to keep going long after it made sense to turn around.

Even though I wasn't sure what I was going to do, I trained with the group on the second day. We learned how to climb out of a crevasse and practiced roping into teams of four or five climbers by tying onto loops on 30-meter nylon ropes. This felt like acting out the old television ads for 20 Mule Team Borax. Two teams of mules tied to each other all had to move together to get the wagon through Death Valley. Here, far from Death Valley, we were being taught to move—and especially turn—so we could get up and down the glacier safely without slipping or falling into a crevasse. For most of the time on the ice, no one would be able to unrope. We learned that this did not change, even for a call of nature. The other team members might turn their backs, or just look away, but a climber did what he had to do while attached. I didn't see it happen, but I heard it described, graphically. And if someone could not continue, the whole team would have to turn back with one of the guides.

The voices in my head went back and forth. I looked for a chance to tell Bob what I was thinking. When I finally got him alone later in the morning, we squatted around the campsite by ourselves and talked quietly. I told him about the cramps. Could he suggest a remedy? Yes, that was the easy part—an energy drink with potassium, maybe some ibuprofen. As for the climb to the summit, I wanted to know if that would be easier or harder than what we had been through the day before. Bob listened with concern and empathy. He said getting to the summit would be at least as hard or harder than the climb up to Hogsback Ridge, even considering that the load would be much lighter (no tent or sleeping bag). In that case, I didn't think I could make it. I would let him know for sure later in the day.

I attended a couple more training sessions, going through the motions without a lot of enthusiasm or commitment, especially when Bentley was teaching. In early afternoon, Bob announced the schedule: train for a couple more hours, break for dinner and rest, get up around 2 A.M., and start for the summit when the snow and ice would be at their firmest. The round-trip would be ten to twelve hours. After returning to base camp, we would pack up and walk back down the trail to the vans, arriving around 4 P.M. That meant fourteen to sixteen hours of walking. Now I was sure I couldn't make it. I had finally made up my mind.

I found a few seconds to tell Bob. He told the group during a final briefing. It was matter of fact, no drama: "Nick will not be summiting. He will stay at the camp." The other members of the group were silent, neither

friendly nor unfriendly. Because I was doing what they secretly wanted to do? Undermining their resolve by quitting? Or showing my true character—not what the mountain demanded? I didn't know. Then Bob went over the schedule one last time and urged everyone to rest. Even if no one slept, everyone must lie down and rest. He closed by urging us all “to enjoy the mountain” at dusk. It was a surprising twist, seemingly out of character. Maybe we were catching a glimpse of what lay beneath the surface.

The others went back to their campsites, to make dinner and last-minute adjustments. There was always one more adjustment. That seemed to be an immutable law of the outdoors, especially in mountaineering. I had nothing to adjust and was free to look around. Once again the air was still, but it was not yet cold; the sun dropped slowly. The lights of Bellingham were coming on across the valley to the west. In the sky to the east, stars were leaping out of the growing darkness, one by one.

Feeling a little lonely, I ate my dinner by myself. I was near certain that I had made the right decision, but I wasn't really part of the group anymore. After dinner, I stretched out on my mat. Around 2 A.M., I could hear the others getting ready to climb in near-total darkness. I got up to wish them well. Everyone had something to do, and no one said much, to me or each other. Soon they were lashed up in rope teams and starting up the mountain, moving fast. I watched their headlamps, small points of light in two rows, like undersize headlights throwing their beams on a few square feet of snow, receding with every passing minute. The lights disappeared after they reached the ridge about 3,000 feet above the camp.

Now the vast expanse of snow and ice was empty, dark, and utterly still. The stars were the only light I could see on the mountain. They did not illuminate much. I couldn't see anything around me without my headlamp. But seeming much closer than at sea level, each star sparkled in its own realm, and the realms were countless, covering every inch of the sky. I found my way back into my sleeping bag. I imagined that I was secure with two industrial-strength zippers between me and the great outdoors but missed the comfort of having company nearby.

When I woke up several hours later, I felt like a character out of a Jack London story (or maybe his cousin from the city who says he loves the wild and buys a lot of gear that he never gets around to using). The other tents were still up, but it was a ghost town. If I wanted solitude or even isolation, well, here it was. I guessed that today maybe 25 to 50 people were moving up on our side of Baker. In the Northeast, or in the Alps, hundreds of climbers



The neighboring campsite with a crumbling glacier in the background.

NICHOLAS REYNOLDS

would be plodding toward the summit on a pretty day in the summer. The only company I had was a marmot or two sitting up on hind legs, looking around and sniffing.

WITHOUT HUMAN COMPANY I DID NOT FEEL PARTICULARLY ADVENTUROUS. I thought of trying to climb to the ridge behind the camp, just to get a little higher up the mountain. Then I imagined falling into a crevasse with no one to rescue me. From where I stood, I could see a few crevasses. They looked like slits cut into the snow, measuring between a foot or two to five or ten feet across. The ones I could see I could avoid without too much trouble, but what about the ones I could not see? I stayed put.

I THOUGHT BOB HAD SAID HE WOULD GET THE GROUP BACK AROUND NOON. Noon came and went. I worried a little. What would I do if no one came back? It seemed unlikely on this beautiful, sunny day. And, sure enough, around 2 in the afternoon the first rope team reappeared, a dark line against the snow coming over the ridge. About halfway between the ridge and the camp, the climbers stopped, unroped, and swarmed down the last snow-covered hill, glissading on their own.

Everyone had summited but no one was carrying on about it. One climber reported that Bob had kept the group on top for 30 to 45 minutes to savor the experience. Now they were not savoring anything but tearing down tents and packing up. Within about 30 minutes we were on the way to the trailhead, retracing our steps down the mountain. Bob and I made a bit of friendly small talk on the way down—about an avalanche in a streambed that had taken out a footbridge and other things—but that was about it until we reached the vans. There I saw a very fit older man who was loading up his car, and I wanted to know his story. When I approached, he turned out to be friendly and talkative. I learned that he was 62, exactly my age. He had been to the top and back.

As soon as we reached civilization—a country store with phone service about halfway to the interstate—I called my wife to tell her that we were off the mountain and would be back where we had started within a couple of hours. I told her that I had failed to summit. I had trouble getting the words out. I felt I had to say it twice. But it didn't seem to matter to her. She was coming for me whether or not I had summited.

Epilogue

I finally made it to the summit of Baker along the same route in 2014, at age 64. First I had to get myself ready, mentally and physically. I did a number of things differently. Perhaps most important, a longtime friend and I formed our own team. Together we researched training plans, guides, and routes. I figured out just how much I needed to train—the short answer was a lot. When I was 30 and going on a winter Outward Bound snow and ice expedition, I did exactly no training, I simply headed out the door, went up to Maine, and did just fine. Now I needed every day of the excellent plan I'd found online. It spanned six months before a climb. It assumed “a couch start” and included as many as twelve sessions a week to build capacity, strength, and flexibility. My friend and I went on practice climbs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire in our mountaineering boots, water sloshing in gallon jugs on our backs to simulate the weight we would carry out West. The first year back in the Cascades, I got to the top of Quien Sabe Glacier but did not summit a peak called Sahale. The second year, there was no stopping either of us. By luck and hard work, we found patient, persistent guides not unlike Bob who matched our temperaments. Along the way I learned how much I could and could not stand, especially when it came to exposure and discomfort. I found I could not tolerate a narrow rocky ridge with a 1,000-foot drop-off but that I could climb a 35- to 45-degree wall of snow and ice. That was good to know, because when my legs started to cramp at the top of the Roman Wall on our way down Baker after summiting, our guide told me there was no safe place to stop for a mile, and I would just have to keep moving. So, I did.

NICHOLAS REYNOLDS researches and writes modern history, and he gets out into the mountains when he can. His most recent book is *Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: The Secret Adventures of Ernest Hemingway, 1935–1961* (William Morrow, 2017).