

Outer Space

by Curt Mobley

Great things seem to happen on days when I have eggs benedict for breakfast.

My friend Rick and I were in good climbing form after a summer of weekend rock climbs and mountaineering in the Cascades. We were both mediocre climbers by most standards, but that did not diminish the quality of our adventures. Earlier that summer we had attempted the North Ridge of Mt. Stuart on the Fourth of July weekend. That route is one of the classics of alpine climbing in Washington State and we had long dreamed of doing it. On the first day we drove to the road end miles to south of the mountain, hiked around its west side and crossed the small glacier on the lower part of the north face before spending the night near the base of the north ridge. The next day we would climb the long north ridge and descend via the easier south face.

We climbed for hours on pitch after pitch of beautiful granite. A pitch is one rope length, usually about 150 feet. As the leader, or first climber, works upward, he or she periodically “places protection” by inserting mechanical devices of various designs into cracks and clipping the rope into them using snap links called carabiners. If the leader falls from a point ten feet above the last protection, the length of the fall will be twenty feet plus stretch and slack in the rope. A twenty or thirty foot fall may result in a few broken bones, but that is the inherent risk that comes with climbing. I have taken many leader falls on vertical rock, all without ill effect. Rick once fell only a few feet but broke his ankle when it hit a small ledge just below him. It took three painful days to descend from the climb and reach a hospital, but that is a story for him to tell. At the end of a pitch, the leader places more protection, ties off the upper end of the rope, and pulls up the rope as the second climber then climbs the pitch and removes the protection. The second then leads the next pitch, reusing the mechanical protection devices. The two climbers thus leapfrog up the climb, each one belaying, or holding, the rope while the other climbs. Rappeling is a technique for descending in which you slide down an anchored rope and then pull the rope down behind you.

Near the top of the North Ridge, it is necessary to rappel off of the ridge itself into a 55° gully and then climb the last few hundred feet over terrain that is steep but technically easy. But we were too early in the year; the upper part of the mountain was still snow covered. The easy upper slopes were a death trap of bottomless soft snow turned into avalanching slush by the afternoon heat. We had no sane choice but to head down. Each hard-won pitch was now surrendered without recompense as we completed rappel after rappel. Nightfall eventually caught us on a sloping ledge about two feet wide. This was as good a bedroom as we were likely to find, so we tied ourselves to the cliff wall and settled in for the night. We had no stove. Dinner was leftovers from lunch and some dirty snow sucked out of a dank recess in the cliff. We tried to sleep sitting up, feet hanging over the edge of the ledge, but the moment we dozed we began to slide into the black abyss, which jerked us awake. A cold rain began to fall. It was a very long night.

The next morning a few more rappels finally brought us to the base of the North Ridge. We hiked back to the car with our tails between our legs. We had a good story to tell, but no bragging rights about having climbed the North Ridge of Stuart. We still needed a climb that would set this summer apart from all previous ones.

Soon it was September and winter surely would arrive any day. We decided that our best chance to distinguish that summer's climbing was a route called Outer Space on Snow Creek Wall. Most climbers consider Outer Space to be the premier rock climb in Washington State, and we were hungry to sample its famous final 300 feet where a narrow crack splits an otherwise blank and vertical wall of perfect granite. We started driving....

We found a restaurant open at 6 AM and, much to my delight, they served eggs benedict. This luxury was precisely what I needed to put me into the positive mental state necessary for attempting my hardest rock climb yet. We loaded up with enough calories and cholesterol to give a cardiologist a nightmare and began hiking up the steep trail to the base of Snow Creek Wall.

The first pitch was easy. We then scrambled to the left end of a wide ledge, where the hard climbing begins. From the ledge I led up vertical cracks using what is known as a "lie-back" technique, pulling in one direction with my fingers and pushing in the opposite direction with my toes. The moves were hard but within my ability, and the very act of climbing felt great. These initial cracks took me to easier climbing on a steep ramp which, after 50 feet or so, ended in an overhanging, blank wall. From here I peeked around the right edge of the ramp to discover a slightly overhanging face. This face was blank except for a crack that rose upward and to the right, crossing the face.

The next section clearly required me to pull myself along the right-trending crack to what looked like easier climbing ten feet away. These moves would be akin to doing chinups while moving along a horizontal bar, except that the bottom edge of the crack was rounded and my hands kept slipping out as soon as I pulled down on them to move along the crack. There was nothing for my feet except a thin flake of rock a foot or two farther away than my right leg could reach. I spent a considerable amount of time trying to work out a sequence of moves to get me from the ramp to the flake. Nothing solved the problem with the elegance and grace valued by rock climbers. I finally crammed my hands into the crack in a contorted and painful fashion sure to induce arthritis in my old age, extended my legs in a gymnastic split from my left toe at the edge of the ramp to my right toe just touching the flake, and with a surge of eggs-benedict-powered brute force managed to move along the crack until I was standing atop the flake and could rest.

Another 20 feet or so of easier moves along the rising crack led me to a point where I needed to climb straight up again, over a bulging section of rock with only marble-sized nubbins for finger and toe holds, to a spot where I could anchor myself to the rock and belay. This would not have been difficult except that the rope extending behind me now followed a 120-foot-long zig-zag path up the initial cracks, up the ramp, around the corner, and along the hand crack to my present stance. The friction of the rope passing over the rock and through the carabiners generated so much drag that I could barely pull it up by hand, let alone climb any further with it pulling me downward. I could not go up, and I certainly could not climb back down. This unpleasant situation is sooner or later

encountered by all rock climbers.

I held on with one hand while I pulled up the rope a few inches at a time with the other hand. Finally I had 20 feet of loose rope hanging below my feet. That would be enough to let me climb over the bulge to the belay spot, but it also meant a 40 foot fall if I popped off. Looking between my legs I could see that the face below me was still slightly overhanging, so if I fell I would hit nothing but air. I planned my sequence of moves from nubbin to nubbin, psyched myself up, and began climbing. It is amazing how such a situation concentrates the mind. I can still see these few feet of rock in my mind, and I can recall how each simple act of moving a finger or toe from one pebble to the next required overcoming a strong temptation to reach too high. Slow and easy and always in balance is the fastest way up. I finally reached the belay spot, relaxed, and congratulated myself on one of the hardest and most nerve-wracking leads I had ever done.

Rick then lead an easier and enjoyable pitch up the right side of a pillar that leans against the upper part of Snow Creek Wall. He belayed me up. We were now sitting on top of a miniature Leaning Tower of Pisa. Facing outward, we looked down into Snow Creek valley. Its deep green forest was sprinkled with the autumn gold of alders and red of maples. Above us was a blank wall 350 feet high and as vertical as a wall in your house. Now the fun would really begin!

I climbed down the left side of the pillar for perhaps 15 feet. A ledge a few inches wide then led left across the face. Just as the ledge ended, an amazing crack began and headed straight up as far as I could see. The crack varied from one inch to three inches wide. The face just to either side of the crack had weathered away slightly to leave walnut- to grapefruit-sized knobs of harder rock protruding. Climbers call such knobs chickenheads. Everywhere I needed a hand hold, there was a place in the crack perfect for my hand or fist. Everywhere I needed a toehold, there was a chickenhead. Whenever I felt the need to place protection, there was a spot in the crack just the right size to accept one of my protection pieces. This was rock climbing at its finest!

My 165 foot rope barely allowed me to reach another narrow ledge, where I could sit and belay. The sky had grown overcast during the day, and a few drops of rain now began to fall as Rick climbed up and prepared to lead the next pitch. This was not good. The last thing we needed was for rain to slicken the rock and turn hard climbing into desperate climbing. We were now committed, as climbers say, meaning that retreat would not be easy from so high on the wall. We were still 200 feet from the top.

Rick led off, but the crack disappeared for a few feet and another bulge had to be passed before the crack reappeared 8 or 10 feet above the belay ledge. Rick tried various moves to get past the bulge, but nothing worked. He tried to the left; he tried to the right; he tried everywhere, but the holds were too small. Minutes began to feel like hours as he probed for a weakness. It was now late afternoon and watching the clouds lower around the surrounding peaks was not improving my mental image of where we might be spending the night. I am a slightly better climber than Rick, so we decided I should give it try. We switched the belay and I began sniffing the rock. It was hard all right—harder than the bulge I had led three pitches below.

Fear does wonderful things to the endocrine system. I was now afraid of getting caught high on Snow Creek Wall in the rain and dark. The ledge we were on had barely enough room for one person to sit and one to stand. A night here would make the ledge on Mt. Stuart seem like a night in a posh hotel. If the first winter storm were indeed imminent, morning might find us hypothermic in the middle of an ice-covered rock face. We definitely had to get to the top!

I got in one piece of marginal protection in a small pocket in the rock above my head. I doubted that it would hold a fall, but there was no time for further speculation. My only thought now was getting to the crack above the bulge, where I could again hope to find useable hand and foot holds, even on wet rock. My reserve supply of adrenaline began to flow. I summoned up the last few calories of energy left from the eggs benedict. I found a nubbin or two and perhaps a small hole for half of a finger joint—I do not really remember—and I just went for broke with all the strength I could direct to my fingers. After a few desperate moves, I reached the safety of the crack and sank in bombproof protection. I now had the luxury of breathing again.

A few minutes later my body had regained some semblance of normalcy and I began to climb again. The crack was now a bit easier than on the last pitch and I made good time. The wall eventually began to lean back a bit, and I could see that the top was near when I reached the end of the rope and set up another belay. Rick came up without problems. It was now raining and the rock was wet, but only half a pitch of easy climbing separated us from the trees at the top. Rick moved past me and headed upward.

No sooner had Rick started climbing than a mountain goat peered over the edge of the cliff above us. These regal animals with their long white hair and beards have all the appearance of wise men privy to the secrets of the universe. The goat simply looked at us with an expression that clearly said, “Why do you humans keep coming up that way? Don’t you know there is an easy trail on the back side of the cliff?”

We were soon unroping in the trees and trying to persuade the goat to carry our gear down. He showed no sympathy for our fatigue, probably because we had brought it upon ourselves. We were soon heading down a climbers’ path that would take us around the end of Snow Creek Wall and through several smaller cliff bands. I distinctly remember my relief after finally reaching the bottom just at dark, but I have no memory of the hike back to the car. Once we reached safety at the base of the cliff, my brain’s only duty was to tell one foot to keep stepping in front of the other until I reached the car. I was so exhausted that I cannot even remember if we drove home that night or slept in the car. It had been a perfect day and a fitting end to the summer.