Resilience

1445 words

Alaska wasn't entirely foreign for David or Tim. They both hiked and climbed many 14ers around Colorado; David had just started rock climbing when he moved to Alaska in 1951. Willow, Alaska, was a small town but a significant gold mining operation. David worked in the mines to fund all his climbs and expeditions to the Alaskan range. Denali was at the forefront of David's mind. David had been scouting and planning a trip to Denali. David and Tim had been together almost all their lives and worked concurrently in the mountains; they were staunch. In 1964, David and Tim had both submitted Denali Successfully and in the summer of 1969, David and Tim climbed together, preparing for another attempt on Denali. They believed that the mountain was below them, that it was something that didn't require the preparedness and training that a mountain they'd never been on needed.

On May 10th, 1970, they Drove to Talkeetna from Willow. The brush plane sat waiting for them, silver and chrome gleaming in the light. They loaded their gear and food and took off. They reached Denali base camp with perfect weather and clear skies. May 11th was a surprise; clouds rolled in from the northwest, depositing snow followed by wind. On May 12th, they took to the mountain, which was in perfect condition. They approach the Cassin Ridge route via the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. May 13th: They moved quickly up the Lower Kahiltna to Camp 1, used on the standard West Buttress route. They arrived in the basin around 12,000 feet. David and Tim were at the foot of the Cassin Ridge. It was a spectacle to behold; you had to almost fall over trying to look to the top of Denali. The mountain erupted from the ground, towering above. On May 14th, they took to the Ridge; throughout their traveling to the Cassin Ridge, the weather had been perfect, no more than wispy clouds in the sky. But on the night of May 13th, A strong wind pushed in clouds from the north that were concerning, but David had seen similar clouds around Denali before, so they decided to move on. On May 14th, they began the ascent by climbing the Japanese Couloir, one of the most demanding parts of the route. Twelve full pitches of 60 to 65-degree hard ice with occasional mixed rock. This is where disaster struck. The clouds that David and Tim had seen the morning of May 14th had turned nasty. Once above the Couloir, standing on a hanging glacier, the wind blew without mercy. The group was dreadfully exposed to the elements. With snow and ice blowing in the wind, they were turned around. David decided to try to wait out the storm by huddling with Tim. All of this is known from other climbers at base camp seeing the group when breaks in the clouds and snow happened. This huddle was the last known place for both of them. After the final view of the two men huddled, the wind and snow somehow grew even more violent. They were suspected to have tried to downclimb the Couloir, but nothing is for sure.

I was five when my mother and I received the news. I had chosen denial as my form of grief then. But as I grew older, that denial turned into anger. Anger at my father and the mountain. I saw it almost every day; it reminded me that my father and Tim were somewhere up there. Before then, I had known only of the mountain's beauty and allure, but on that day, the mountain had shown its pestilent side. I developed an idiotic obsession with the mountain because I was convinced that if I were to find closure in my father's death, I had to go where he went, succeed where he failed. This abrupt change in my hard-headedness to avoid the mountain happened when I was 15 in the summer of 1985. I was engrossed with the mountain. I didn't fear the mountain; I had an indissoluble link to it. For some reason, I still cannot explain, for the mountain brought me purpose and serenity, which was the opposite of what I had felt when I received the news that my father was lost. In 1987, when I was seventeen, I started my training. I believed that my climbing and mountaineering skills were almost adequate for the climb, but I trained hard. Then, on May 20th, 1990, I was ready for it. I felt prepared; I was not going to underestimate the mountain. In a wry way, fate had chosen the same pilot that flew my father and Tim to base camp, to fly me to base camp. I would have to do this alone to finally find closure. So thus, I did. On May 22nd, I gathered my gear and food in a ninety-liter pack. I brought radios, flares, and an emergency shelter. I brought a surplus of food and hardware. We landed at base camp in the early afternoon. The weather was perfect, a climber's dream. Though this weather was kind, I did not want to have a false sense of security and become complacent. So I immediately hot-footed it along the Lower Kahiltna to the normal Camp 1 used on the standard West Buttress route. I was going to do the route exactly as my father did. Then, on May 23rd, I spent the day hiking to the foot of the Cassin Ridge. After a few days of acclimatization, on May 26th, I packed up camp and began the ascent, first, on the Japanese Couloir. It was intense. The ground below fell away, almost straight down. I tried to count the number of times I heard the repeated "swish" and low "thunk" as my axe laid siege to the ice, but I lost count. I spotted an older-looking piece of equipment stuck in the ice next to me, and after I examined it, the initials D.W Stuart were shown on the piece. I had just found an ice anchor that had been there for 20 years, from when my father had gone up. I left it there as a somewhat of a memorial. Then, after 8 hours of almost nonstop climbing, I was at the top of the Couloir. I stared at It; if you look at the mountain long enough, it seemed to expand above me more than vertically to where it overhung-vertigo. The peak was poking the sky with it's sharp point. I stood where my father was seen last. It was surreal; I could see why my father was drawn to the mountain so strongly. Above where I stood, several pitches of mixed climbing reached the base of a 1,500-foot ice rib, sometimes called "Cowboy Arete," which I see in nine pitches of steep traverses that rise on ice and snow. After the cowboy arete, I stood below the first rock band, where I made camp for the night. The first rock band has both mixed and pure rock. This part of the mountain provides excellent climbing that's enjoyable. Above the first rock band, the terrain's gradient lessens to easy snow hiking. A short, plain spot leads to the third rock band**,** a 50-degree couloir, and the end of the most difficult part of the route at 17,000 feet. The exposure on this corridor is concerning. On the left side, the ground drops away abruptly to the cliffs of the Southwest and South Face; the drop is a certain death. As I finish the last rock band, I breathe a nonchalant sigh. Between me and a final ice face that would take me to the summit lies easy to moderate snow climbing until I inevitably reach my final challenge. a 400-foot, 65-degree ice face. It's daunting, but I can see the summit above, gleaming. The sun is out, and it's a perfect day. When I turn around and look out, it's as if I'm seeing the entire earth. Even to this day, looking back on pictures, I can not comprehend the expansiveness and sheer amount of open air around me. I reach the clearly defined summit ridge, which is an almost straight shot to the summit. In fifteen minutes. Here, I, am. I'm standing above all in North America. I stand, but I can feel the lump in my throat. I stand, and as I stand there, I fall and sob, I scream, I let all those built-up emotions release. Release into the open air to be whisked away by the wind, to never envelope me again, I find peace within myself.