

Mt Baker, Coleman Headwall

Oct 20-21, 2010

W/ Shannon Pahl and Cray Flannery

Warm sun. 30deg at 8k. windy. Summit high wind and whiteout

Met Cary and Shannon at the P&R at 6am in the dark with commuters buzzing in and out heading to their work day. Our next two days would be very different from theirs. An easy drive to Glacier to register for the climb. Two others had registered for a hike to the Coleman Glacier. Mid day we'd see on of then in the distance. Up the road to the Heliotrope TH at the first view of the mountain and the route we stopped to check out our route and a brief chat with some forest rangers checking out the goat population. I think it was two groups of 15 in the Baker area.

The sun had come out and it was warmer than expected. It was looking to be a great spring style day. We divied up the group gear, and on the trail at 9:40 (th c3700'). I'd been having the feeling of on the verge of getting sick –maybe allergies/hayfever??? Made for no desire to rush, more hoping I could pass the feeling and enjoy the trip. Felt odd walking in heavy stiff winter boots on the easy trail. Over the new bridge close to the TH and several streams that were very low. In an hour (10:47, c4744') we took a break at the opening of the old cabin site. Shortly after that (11:00, c5010') a right turn up the climbers path, switchbacks rising, lifting us out of the trees, trail steepening, out of the trees and soon on the peaked ridge of an old lateral moraine. After the moraine a flatter spot (11:30a, c5680') and up a bump to the next. We used a mix of trail and long clean rock slabs. At the last flat before the glacier (11:50, c5920') we took another break for food and pumped water. Heading direct up (toward Black Buttes) we took advantage of rock as high as we could. Along the way stashing the water filter and trek poles. Would we find them on our way back? We figured it would be dark, so picked an "obvious large stray boulder and built an obnoxious temporary cairn. Shannon had a gps so also made a waypoint.

Dedicated to the glacier travel we donned our crampons and headed up and diagonal the pitch to a flatter area at c6550'. From here we traversed east and south toward the headwall on no crevassed hard snow with occasional ice patches. At several opportunities we took photos for reference of our tomorrows route (nice to have the images to look at later to figure where you are. Wove south then east again past mine fields of seracs and some dodging of small and large crevasses that looked well over 50' deep. The weaving always makes for interesting travel making sure to speed up or slow down depending on the angles of the rope from the zig-zagging. Felt more like we were heading to the North Ridge for a bit. Felt pretty much due north (TN) of the Headwall we turned south to head up and look for a camp. The Headwall is visible as a steep gradual right to left rising line on the north side of Baker. The bottom has a right straight up flow and on the left a flow that angles left to right meeting the right side above a pyramid shape of rock. From here the flow angles left to a massive ice fall. A ridge on the right of this slope offers some exits to the NW running ridge that leads to the broad summit.

My guts were getting to me and it was a relief around 7800' to see a formation of seracs that proved to provide a sheltered campsite. Some ice chipping and digging with the axes and we had a flat protected area large enough for the three of us. We'd gone light since this was a carry over. I'd brought a bag cover, bag and thin pad. The others only bags and pads. Hope for them was dry weather... In the NW... lol.

The day had been full of stunning views and more from our vista. Earlier a large military helicopter had flown low hugging the glacier and dropping into it, circling east and returning. Shannon and I took a

hike up about 600' vert to get a recon of our route for the morning. Our plan was ascending another 1000' in the dark. The daylight hours are short and we already knew we'd be descending some in the dark. Our goal (besides the climb up) was to negotiate the glacier crevasse areas in the light. Back at camp a stunning high altitude sunset after dinner. Lights NW of Abbotsford and the final glow of the sun across the ice of the glacier. Sunset was at 6:16 giving us a long eve to rest. At 9pm I awoke to a spot light in my face, A little startled I shock it off and realized the nearly full moon lit up our entire camp area like day. Whew! Glad it wasn't some other option... lol. I got up to check out the scene. Careful not to venture off our flat area –the slope was slick and steep enough... one slip... After some photos it was back to the sack burying the head from the spotlight moon.

The moon was still partially out and the stars too when we got up at 5, breakfast, break camp and roped up (6:45a). By headlamp we passed a few giant arrows Shannon and I had scratched on the surface to provide direction in the dark. 20 minutes it started getting light with sunrise at 7:30am. An hour from camp (7:45a) we started our first pitch up the left flow (left of it's center). Fifteen minutes a 10' vertical ice patch (8:00, c8900'). We kept simul-climbing and at c9000' (8:15) set the first belay. We pitched out on the 50m rope (about 44m per pitch with how we were tied in). The next two pitches on hard ice WI3. The ice was very brittle and hard. I was glad I brought sharp crampons with vertical teeth. It was a chore not breaking off chunks of ice to send down on those below. Even with diagonal ascents the ice would bombard the lower people. A chunk hit dead on my chest ripping my jacket, but oddly didn't feel much. Between the multi layers and hitting my money/credit card wad... I had a good laugh, yes, money can save you, lol. What a way to start, calves letting me know they were getting more work than they were used to. On pitch four reaching to put an ice screw on my belt I dislodged my water bottle bag to watch it tumble past the base of the climb. Big bummer, second day for it and there goes my water for the day. Good thing I had divided my water amongst another bottle.

Suddenly, a chunk of ice broke off the ice wall above and left of us. Tumbling and a giant cloud coming at us. The illusion had it coming direct, but it was directed by the gulley/slope to our left (east) the we ducked anyway. When the snow dust plume settled we continued. The ice softened and mellowed a little the next couple pitches. Was around noon as we traversed west, found a good spot for a break to eat and drink. The blue skies were beginning to grow clouds, the change was on the way. Off we went again, Shannon finding a route through several crevasses and seracs and could see the top of the rock pyramid on our right a pitch or so up. Again more noise of ice fall, being closer it looked like we were under it, but again an illusion. The debris went east of us and some dusting reminded why we did not take the far left death route.

The dust settled we moved on. Good firm snow/soft ice pitch up to the rock top then another traverse right onto the long easier firn pitch above the meeting of the right and left flows. Again simul-climbing (third time) we worked up and right to a snow gap between two rock ribs (3:00p, c10000'). Looked like a good place for an exit to the summit ridge. We set a belay under a ledge around the corner from the pitch. The pitch started with a fun vertical ice with good sticks. Shannon lead off to disappear around the corner and soon we simul-climbed behind. The pitch kept easing about every rope length, but never finished. And going was slow with the altitude, short breaks more frequent. Taking that opportunity of pulling a pickets or screw as a chance to let the heart rate settle. At 4:00 we were on the upper summit ridge. Wind howling (well above 40knots) and the sun gone, now a whiteout. Another break to eat, drink and check the map, compass and gps.

We followed the ridge toward Grant peak then right keeping near the west. Several hundred feet south we let a bite of the rope flow before us to get an idea of the slope. If the rope dropped out of site it

would be time to stop. Heading west and slightly down we spotted a rock formation on our left and barely a larger on the right. We felt we were at the top of the Roman wall and proceeded down the 30degree snow slope. Snow falling and wind blowing we dropped several hundred feet down the cloud lightened enough to give us a visual. I yelled at Shannon and we both looked out to see Colfax directly ahead of us. We couldn't have been more spot on the route if we'd tried. As we descended we got below the cloud layer, wind still persistent and now dark ominous skies to the west. We needed to get a move on to get off the Roman Wall and descend the glacier past the puzzle of crevasses before dark. We had a little over an hour... I took some photos for later reference, ate and down we went. Some narrow crevasse hopping, a wide one for a running leap and a belay over a suspect partially fallen bridge (of a wide c15-20' crevasse).

Heading north of the Black Buttes light gave way to dark. A finger of snow lead north into a mine field of crevasses. From the images taken on the Roman Wall we could see a potential route weaving up this arm. Luck proved right and with some negotiating we made it back to the flatter glacier area we'd traversed the day before (c6550'). More breaks, cold rain falling and a seemingly forever traverse west past a rock buttress then down a final snow finger to the rock. We'd landed within a hundred feet or so of our stash, that was nearly invisible in the dark.

None of us had been drinking what we should. We filtered water and replenished, more food and started the dirt/rock downward search for the moraine trail (~9pm). We found some campsites littered with garbage of the personal nature. Heading west we found the moraine trail and easily followed to the main trail. I say easily in not having to do anything but hike. We all were wearing still boots and feet /heels were feeling punished –sore and on fire.

The trail back was easy and hearing the final creek put a lightness to our steps for the last bit to the car. We got out around 10:30. Oddest thing was a car came out from up the road. I'd thought we were the late ones ;-). A stop at the Ranger station to check out, and another in B'ham for food. Tomorrow being a work day would be coming too soon.

A great climb, stunning views, a great route (~15 pitches ?), and couldn't ask for better climb partners for this trip. With the upcoming stormy weather we hit the window perfect. Thanks Shannon and Cary!

Happy trails!
-fwb2

Equipment: Ice tool, technical ax, steel (sharp) crampons, helmet, 3 pickets, 9 screws, 2 zippers, 50m rope