



# Climbing Aconcagua

By Larry Johansen



## Aconcagua

It's been called "The Mountain of Death." It is the highest point in the Western Hemisphere. Aconcagua was a test of my resolve. A climb to satisfy my inner need to prove to myself that I had such qualities that the mountain would require of me. It soon became an obsession. I started planning the trip years years.

It became a goal to climb the mountain that formulated on an earlier trip to Nepal while on a four week trip off road into the Himalayans. I trekked the Annapurna region where I spent many an hour in conversation with fellow trekkers from all over the world. ^

It was all a revelation to me- a kid that grew up on an island in Alaska reading about strange places in National Geographic. I grew up on the edge of wilderness and was taught to respect the power of wilderness by my father and grandfather. I climbed all the mountains surrounding my home and followed the mountaineering feats of the times. Reinhold Messner was making climbing history HB and served as a role model.

One day I saw a recruit poster of a campus surrounded by mountains and decided to go there. The University of Colorado at Boulder was 2000 miles away and the school was twice as large as my hometown. It was a lot for me to absorb. I came back to Alaska to finish school. I got my feet under me and again I felt the urge again to venture out. I stuffed my backpack with lonely planet guides and went to Europe for the winter. The next year I went to Southeast Asia and Nepal. Eventually it would be about 40 countries in all.

After coming back in the spring I would return to Alaska to work. First I would be given busy work in the shipyard of Ballard working on maintaining our vessels. I met Randy Bozelle there and we became great friends. He was a guide for Rainer Mountain Guides and had summited Mt Rainer more than a dozen times. It wasn't long before we both wanted to climb Aconcagua, and made plans to go.

Aconcagua was the highest mountain in the Western Hemisphere. At 22,300 feet it was over 2000 feet higher than Denali, the hometown



mountain and the highest point in North America.

After the summer season in Alaska, Randy and I made a plan to meet in Mendoza in February to climb the mountain. I knew that it was one of the seven summits and the highest point in the Western Hemisphere. I also knew that despite being classified as a walk-up by professional climbers, that more than 100, or about 3 per year, people die attempting to climb it. A "walk-up" is describing a mountain that could be climbed without ropes. Mt Everest was technically a walk-up so but it is treated with respect. So was Denali back home in Alaska and Aconcagua was taller.

Most of the deaths on Aconcagua can be attributed to underestimating the conditions and poor decisions. The atmosphere at the summit is 40% of what is at sea level. Bottled Oxygen is standard for any climbing above 6000 meter - Aconcagua is 5900 meters high so it technically does not require oxygen but that fact lures climbers to make fatal mis-



takes. The temperature in a lack of atmosphere easily drops. The temperature at our highest camp was -20 when we started up on summit day. It was summer in the southern latitude's but it was brutally cold at altitude.

I did some research and found in the Seattle public library an account of the first successful climb of Aconcagua by E. A. Fitzgerald. It was written in 1898, the year after Matthias Zurbriggen of Switzerland became the first to climb the mountain in January of 1897. In 6 attempts Fitzgerald failed to summit and never did make it to the top, but it was his expedition that propelled Zurbriggen to the apex of Aconcagua. Here is how Fitzgerald described the going at high altitude base camp.

*'On Christmas morning, we crawled out after the sun was up. The day, in spite of this happy omen, and recollection of home, was not a promising one. Great clouds were banked up to the north west and the wind was blowing heavily. One of my men greeted me with a "Merry Christmas", I said in reply, that it was not. This ended the matter, for nobody was prepared to disputed the point.*

*In the afternoon, as we were beginning to feel slightly better, Zurbriggen and I started out to reconnoiter, and if possible find suitable camping ground on the shoulder of the ridge*

*above of us. The weather had greatly improved since morning, the clouds dispersing as the wind subsided. We were feeling distinctly weak about the knees, and we were obliged to pause every dozen step so catch our breath, and frequently sat down for about 10 minutes to recover."*

#### OUR PLAN

Randy Bozelle was a navy guy and a ladies man. He embraced life head on. He was working at Pacific Fisherman when I returned from traveling from South East Asia before the Alaska season would start. I was a hot shot manager for a hot shot Cruiseline that was buying up ships yearly and sending them to Alaska. There was yard work that needed to be done every winter as the new ships arrived. Randy and I were relegated to doing carpentry work and needle-gunning on the older vessels. We would work together and shared music and conversation. Soon tales of adventure were flying and we began planning to Argentina in January after the summer season was over.

My plan was to go to South America and travel to meet Randy in Argentina , where we would gear



up and climb the Mountain. I started In Ecuador and worked my way south to Argentina via Chile. Along the way I would train by climbing peaks that would ready me for the challenge of Aconcagua. I would climb Imbabura, Tungaragua, and the 4 day hike up along the Inca Trail. Then Randy would meet me and we would climb.

Then life happened. Randy had an excursion that became popular in the Northwest. He had an idea to offer sled dog tours to people visiting Leavenworth, Washington. He wanted to see if it could be done. He found that after a local news story ran on Seattle TV stations that his business was suddenly in high demand. He was a victim of his own success and could not breakaway from this chance he was given to make it profitable.

So I had already arrived in Mendoza, Argentina and was eager to climb. At this point i realized that could not go alone. I had some experience but I knew my limits and thought I might try to catch on to a team that was looking or had a spot that would open up





last minute. The closest town and the location of the Aconcagua permit office was Mendoza.

Mendoza was a city of about 100,000 so it was a pretty vibrant community. I went to the permit office and found a climbers bulletin board where climbers were leaving messages for climbers. I posted my desire to team up with a party going up and checked it daily while lodged at a quiet pension near the futbol stadium. The stadium was larger than Folsom Field, the football stadium at the University of Colorado in Boulder, but it was empty most of the time and was open to the public. I started to train night and day running the steps of the stadium up and down until I had circled the field. A stadium was one time around. I did stadiums twice a day for three weeks at an altitude of over 5000 feet. If given the chance I was going to be ready.

My chance came when I get a message from

Diego. He is a hulk of a Argentinian who is also looking for a partner to climb. We discuss a plan to meet at basecamp to give it a shot. I am excited and make plans.

The road from Mendoza goes back toward Chile backtracking for me as it is the only road going over the pass through the Andes. I came this way from Chile. At the height of the pass is about at the 10,000 foot level about an hour from Mendoza. The bus stops at Punta de Inca at 2900m. There is a lodge there and a telephone. It is the last time you can call anyone before setting out. I drop a few letters I've been writing before packing up and head out.

The base camp is on a saddle of land coming off the base of Aconcagua and xxxxx . It is called Plaza de Mulas (Place of the Mules). It is at 4300m altitude and located about 20 miles from the road and Punta de Inca down the Herconas Valley. The mules come from the expeditions that used mules to transport their gear to basecamp from the road. I have all my gear on my back as part of my train-

ing strategy. There is a simple restaurant at a newly established "hotel" just opening up at basecamp. Most of the climbers assemble at plateau just above the hotel foregoing the luxury. I am one of them.

It is a three day hike along the Hercones River to reach the Plaza and I plan to meet Diego there in three days time. according to our plan he left yesterday along the same path I am on now. At the end of the first day I run into a challenge. I must ford the River carrying my gear. I get half way across and realize that it may be too deep for me make it. I can use a makeshift bridge across but to use it safely I will have to throw my backpack across the river. If I don't throw it safely across it could float down the river. It's about ten foot throw so not a for sure thing. I try few logs to practice and determine what kind of force I need. I wait until it becomes obvious no one else is going to come along and help me and go for broke. I wind up like a shot putter and let it fly. It lands barely on the far bank with no room to spare. The quest moves on!

I start up the right side of the river and look for a possible camp ground. It has gotten much colder since





leaving the hot city of Mendoza. I pitch my rented tent and snuggle into my sack for warmth. I sleep well and wake up to snow on the ground and I think to myself I still have 10,000 feet higher to climb.

I trudge up the Horcones Valley without seeing the mountain. I know where it is but it's obscured by the foot hills that form the valley. I saw it once from the parking lot of the trail up from Punta de Inca but since that one intimidating shot it has been out of view. At the end of my second day I have a harder time heating my pasta and head to my warm sack quickly.

Again the next morning I wake up to snow and curse the cold again. I get under way asap and I'm making good time when I spot three guys coming



down the trail. As the get closer I realize it's Diego in the middle. He doesn't look so good when I stop to talk with him. His two companions explain he has been suffering massive headaches from the effects of cerebral edema and during the night he began slurring his words so they decided to bring him down.

There are too types of "mountain sickness" that humans have that become evident at certain unknown altitudes. You to be watching for it at any altitude higher than 5000 feet. The first is pulmonary edema that affects your heart, and also cerebral edema that messes with your head. Two places you don't want to be messing with. The only treatment to relieve the symptoms is to get to a lower altitude- fast.

So it was with Diego- an outstanding athlete built like a bull but his eyes gave his pain away. I offered to help but the two men who accompanied him (park rangers I guessed later ) seemed to think it



was under control. I figured the only hope of safely going further was to wait and see if he could recover and try a few days later. I told him I would wait for him a couple of days before heading down. So I continued on to the Plaza de Mulas (base camp) without much hope of going on but I wanted to see it and the climbers taking their shot at the mountain.

When I rounded the last curve and saw the tent city I realized how much I wanted to go on but my respect and thorough background reading of the mountain kept my



goal in check. It was simply stupidity to on alone. I knew I had promised to stay at least two nights here but really did not expect to see Diego again. So I resigned my self to having gotten this far and so my story got passed around.

I was told the campsite was unusually crowded with climbers waiting for the weather to improve. No one had summited in over a week and that had created a small backlog. I met some interesting people all with different stories from all over the world. From Ireland I meet Steve, Jay, and Mark. A Spanish contingent who I could speak with in Spanish and a group from home. A guide from Chilkat Guides out of Haines was leading a group up. I also met Arts Rauthe who was leading two ex executives that were attempting to climb the 7 summits. There had been published a book about an executive who had given up his job for the first person to have climbed each of the continents tallest mountains. Art was a guide from the same group of RMI guides Randy had been part of.

I spent the days I waited for the final word from Diego doing day hikes from base camp. It was good to acclimate to the height by climbing high and sleeping

low. So I went up to the glacier coming down the saddle opposite Aconcagua to explore the area. I also climbed up to the first camp called Canada at 4900m but with out a backpack so it was slightly easier. I returned to base camp in the day to sleep low. I was prepared to begin packing to go when Art came over to let me know that his clients had bailed on him and was catching a helicopter out. He wanted to stay to climb the mountain. The weather had broke and recent accents had been made and the teams were heading up. Art asked me if I wanted to team up with him and the climb was on. I was a lucky bastard and I knew it. One minute I was resigning myself to disappointment, the next moment I was partners with professional guide.

We made a quick plan and headed up to Canada, the next camp up the mountain. We jettison even most of my rented gear and went with Arts tent and equipment. We split the load of food and water which consisted of mostly pasta, granola, bread, crackers, powdered milk and muesli mix. We were able to buy fresh bread from the lodge that was a treat. All in all there was little appetite due to the altitude I imagine.





What there was that came out in conversation among heterosexual males was that there was a feeling of being sexually aware. Okay I'll just say it- we are all at time feeling horny. There were few women on the mountain but getting anywhere with that urge was in reality not practical. We were struggling with keeping warm and the thought of disrobing was far from anyone's mind. Besides were all smelly and greasy haired. I was told it was part of the tricks of the mind at altitude. I had heard stories about the altitude playing tricks with the mind especially mirages. Seeing people and structures that could not be real. People thinking they were too hot and started to take off their layers of clothing that they really needed. Some climbers report being present with another climber who would speak to them and offer advice that often wasn't sound. Only at altitude would these hallucinations appear. It was talk around the camp at the happen between climbers at end of the day.

We spent an extra day at Canada because Art was feeling the affects of altitude. We both ran up supplies to the next camp and returned to Canada to sleep. The next morning we headed up the next camp - the "Nido de Condors" or "Nest of Condors" at the 5500m level. There will be one more camp at Berlin and then it will be summit day.

When we get to Berlin and set up camp. It's time to make an evaluation of the viability of summiting. I have no signs of

endema of any kind. I attribute that to my careful and gradual progression through the plan I set out. The 2 a day Stadiums and the fully loaded 20 mile backpack trip up the Horcones Valley has me feeling in pretty good shape. A few minor headaches and that's about it.

Art is about to outline a plan for the next day when a climber comes back down from a summit attempt and burst into camp asking for help. There is a climber who is down with cerebral endema symptoms and is incapacitated. The camp empties as we respond. A short way up the mountain there is a group already assisting. The guys is being carried down the mountain on a makeshift gurney and he is completely out of it. The only hope is to get him lower. I can't help and just try to stay out of the way. Just as soon as it started it was over. Going down is much faster than going up and the gurney bearers keep on heading down. The hope is to get him down to basecamp where a helicopter can reach. That is the altitude level limit that the helicopter company will fly. I never knew if he made it out or not or one of the average three that don't ever come back every year on this mountain.

The final push to the summit would take us the final distance to the top air 6950 meters or 22,250 feet. The last day would be the hardest and longest of the climb. The weather report was good as far as wind and clouds were considered. Art and I put on everything we owned and starting heading up at 4am. The reason for the early start was take advantage of the cold temperatures to freeze the scree that we were trudging through.

*'Not a single stone or rock that we trod on afforded any support. Every thing, however firm in appearance, gave way beneath us.*

We were high now at about 2100 feet and I could see the Pacific Ocean beyond Chile. The other peaks seemed to fall away as the sun rose. I didn't want to stop because of the cold but I needed to hydrate. I took the opportunity to snap a quick picture.

We could see the route to the top clearly now. Breathing had become more difficult even though my pack was empty. Before starting out Art suggested wearing it just as another layer of warmth. It held my camera and water and not much else. I began to slow down. Art was getting concerned about making it to the top as I was laboring. It was decided that

Art would hurry on and try to summit and then if I was still struggling he would assist me down. It wasn't endema that was an issue but simple fatigue.

We were now considerably over 21,000 feet above sea and in such a condition that the slightest rebuff damped our spirit's, and forced us to stop and rest. Rebuffs were frequent. We were continually thrown sprawling on the rotten surface. Our patience and endurance were tried to the utmost: We seemed to stop every ten yards for rest, and, in fact spent far more time in resting than advancing.

The going was tough. I could not get my legs to move and found myself stalled at the bottom of a steep ravine filled with scree. This was the last section before reaching the crest and onto the last short section to the top. It was were a lot of turn arounds happened. Staring up from the bottom of the ominous steep section they called Gargantula del Diablo "Devils Throat" I could see why. I had passed by climbers who had charged out at camp to find themselves stopped and were turning around and heading down.

We were one of the earliest teams to head out. The Germans were a head of us and the Spaniards, led by Daniel, were behind us. Some of the teams had split



apart on the final climb with every man for themselves.

I stopped and contemplated whether to turn around and head down. I swore to myself I would make good decisions. My stomach did not have much in it but I started to dry heave. So little came up but it forced me to halt where I was. I decided to turn back down. With the decision made I waited a while longer then without thinking started to go up. I didn't think I just moved. I entered a kinda trance and continued to climb. I lost track of time and the next thing I knew I had reached the top of Gargantua del Diablo. I met Art coming back down, he was moving a lot quicker going back down. I told him i had decided to turn back but feet wouldn't listen and I some how ended up here. He laughed it off and told me that it was unusual to continue on after emptying out my stomach. I was close now and simply needed to make a vertical sortie along the arete that created the north face of the mountain.

I climbed up to the edge and peared over the side. I could not see the bottom of when I would land

if I were to take another step. The mountain sheered off and dropped at least a thousand feet into the clouds that had been slowly coming in from below. I carefully followed the ridge to where I could see the summit to the left of the ridge. There was a cross at the top that I assumed was the summit as there was no place higher to climb. I realized then that I had made it.

I remember reminding myself that I hadn't made it until I got back down. That most of the fatalities happen then. But despite it being cold there was no wind, which had been prevalent earlier in the week. The top of the mountain was ice free but it had begun to snow- a dry powder that covered everything and stayed where it was because of the lack of wind.

I was standing on top of the western hemisphere by myself with the snow clouds swirling and creating a Misty mirage. I realized that. More than a billion people lived in the Western Hemisphere and that they were all below me right now. My Nepoleanic illusions were startled when I no-

ticed another climber making his way to the summit. Phil is from the disbanded German party and I greet him upon his arrival. After some congratulating we take each others picture while standing at the top. Phil doesn't stay long before he heads back down. I leave shortly afterward.

The going down is harder than I anticipated. The trail is not so clear in places and is now covered in a light dusting of snow that changes how every thing looks. I pass the Spanish team on the way up. The group Daniel was leading was smaller than it was before but they were making steady progress. I see stacks of rocks that mark the decent and carefully follow them down but at times I wander off the trail and often need to back track to be sure I'm still on the right heading. It slows me down but I'm wary of making a wrong move.

At one point I can't see any of the trail markers and this forces me to stop and think things through. I know I am close by but if I wander now I could become disoriented in the snow and I am still pretty high up on the mountain. I mark my spot and start to search for the trail from that reference point. My first sortie is un productive and I return to my spot and rest awhile. Then I hear somebody

coming down the mountain straight toward me. It is Daniel making good time. He has summited and is the last man down the mountain. He heads on down the trail with the surety of having climbed the mountain many times. No fool am I and start to follow him down the mountain. In no time I am into familiar territory and by the time I'm back at camp I'm feeling pretty good knowing that I made it to the top and back again. Art greets me and we share experiences.

That was quite the climb and I'm proud of myself. I am looking forward to dinner even though it is pasta again. The next day we pack up and head back to basecamp at the Plaza de Buros.

Art heads off the next day via helicopter from basecamp but I'd rather save the money. However I need a couple of days of rest before the twenty mile hike down the mountain. I decide to check into the "hotel" and find myself a bit of celebrity for being from Alaska and making it up. I answer questions about the experience for those who are headed up. For the trip back down the Horcones Valley, I could hire some mules to carry my pack but almost all my food is gone and



the load is lighter and not a problem for me. Besides I am in the best shape of my life. A month of intense exercise has toned me and after a day of eating “hotel food” I feel pretty lite on my feet.

The trip back down the valley is a reflective time for me. I look ahead toward Patagonia and my adventures there. I have a couple of more months to go before I need to be back to Alaska. When I get back to the road I stay at the hotel at Punta de Inca. It is there that I see myself in the mirror for the first time since leaving. I don’t recognize my own face. I have a dark beard from not shaving for a month and my skin is a leathery brown from all the sun. I look like the Marlboro Cowboy in all the cigarette advertising. I feel like a bad ass too.

I book my passage for the bus back to Mendoza for the next day and that’s where I met Eugenia. She is writer from Italy and does not leave me alone. I’m not used to this attention but Eugenia is persistent. And sits next to me on the bus and our conversation never seems to end. When we arrive at the terminal I am “shocked” to learn that of all the places to stay in a city of more than 100,000 people, Eugenia happens to be staying at the same pension that I am. She wrote to me one time when I got back to the states that spring. I wonder if she ever wrote about

the trip. Now I have and it was good.











