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The mountain rose up before us, taunting us, challenging us, making faces at us, daring us to scale its treacherous slopes.

We faced a grueling 4,500-foot elevation gain in less than 5 miles. Straight up into thin air. Each one among us knew the risks; each had weighed his chances. Man pitting himself against mountain. Epic stuff. We were up to the challenge. We laughed in the face of danger.

There were six on our climbing team: Nordquist, Hilary, Mallory, Whitaker, Shackleton and myself. (Note: Names have been changed to avoid messy lawsuits.)

Nordquist is the leader of the expedition. The success and safety of the climb is going to rest on his cool head and clear thinking. The very epitome of the mountaineer, he inspires confidence in the rest of us. Dressed in his mountain boots and gaiters, his Kelty pack bedecked with ice ax, ropes, pitons, carabiners, oxygen canisters and a dome tent that can comfortably accommodate 20, he carries enough food to have kept the Donner party alive. I feel slightly unprepared with only my sneakers and a space blanket.

Hilary is still laughing in the face of danger. We realize the altitude is already getting to him. Since we haven't left the parking lot yet, this is not a good sign. We may have discovered our weak link.

It is a clear and cloudless morning as we set out, yet each of us knows how fickle the weather can be. (Certainly not as fickle as last night's date, but still...) It would be a race against time. We would have only a narrow 12-hour window to reach the summit and get back down off the peak before happy hour at Scandals.

Nordquist orders us to rope up. We appreciate his concern for safety. Still, we feel a little foolish being the only ones roped together as we leave the parking lot.

The climb soon becomes grueling. We break out of the trees into the vast and barren lava fields. We are on our own now, cut off from the outside world—except for our three cell phones, one laptop computer and Mallory's high-tech palm-size television-radio with satellite relay.

We are soon scrambling over boulders and traversing the scree slopes. Hilary is having a particularly difficult time. (Note for future expeditions: High heels should be strongly discouraged.)

It is a warm day on these hazardous and unforgiving slopes, and Nordquist orders a halt for the expedition to rest and rehydrate. (Real mountaineers don't drink water, we rehydrate.)

Mallory keeps us informed of the altitude with his new razzle-dazzle high-tech watch with built-in barometer, altimeter and can opener. At 7,000 feet we come upon a sensitive geophysical seismic sensor. It is great fun jumping up and down around it, wondering if there will be anything in tomorrow's papers.

Finally, shortly before noon, we reach the summit—8,363 feet. We've done it! Triumph of the human spirit! Proudly, we plant our rainbow flag atop the peak and watch it unfurl to snap and wave in the wind, right next to the happy face banner of the team from the Goldendale Senior Center.

We stand on the thin, knife-edge narrow rim of the crater, gazing out into the vast grandeur and majesty of the northern Cascades. There are few thrills that can match standing atop a mountain peak—I can think of only five or six, and most of those are illegal.

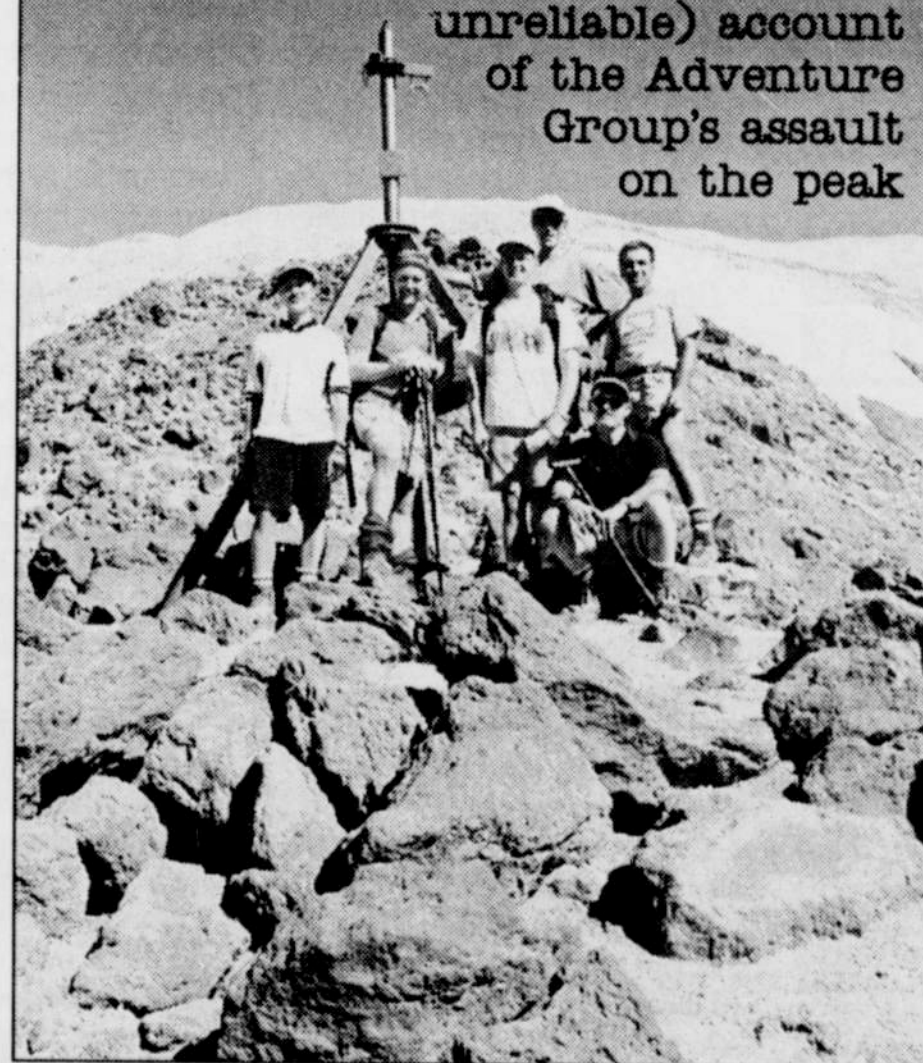
Nordquist points out the surrounding peaks: Mount Hood, Mount Rainier, Mount Adams, Mount McKinley. (Too late we realize Nordquist's poor sense of geography.)

Looking thousands and thousands of feet down into that immense crater, beholding the rising lava dome with its fissures and steaming vents, I am overwhelmed by one powerful realization: "We're standing on a live volcano!"

We break out our provisions. I share my orange with Hilary, who had been under the mistaken impression that there would be vending machines at the summit. Nordquist offers a piece of beef jerky that was dried and seasoned last century. Mallory shares his high-tech high-carbo-protein bar, which contains enough energy to fuel a small city. Shackleton, mean-

Conquest of Mount St. Helens

A stirring (though highly unreliable) account of the Adventure Group's assault on the peak



while, is dining on gazpacho soup with a crisp Caesar salad and barbecued lamb in a tahini marinade as he lets his bottle of merlot breathe. (Shackleton's also a member of the Cooking Club.)

An hour later we begin our descent, each of us quietly proud of our achievement. We had risen to the challenge and triumphed. Forevermore we would be counted among the courageous few (13,000 each year) who had reached the treacherous summit of Mount St. Helens and returned to tell of it.

■ ALAN ROSE is a member of Portland Gay Men Writing and contributes regularly to the OutWord column.