A group of four hikers, two men and two women, are wading through a shallow, fast-moving river. They are all wearing large, dark-colored backpacks. The man in the foreground on the right is wearing a grey t-shirt, a white cap, and is using a trekking pole. The woman next to him is wearing a green shirt. The woman behind her is wearing a yellow shirt. The man on the far left is wearing an orange shirt. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains covered in snow under a clear blue sky.

TEAMS ON THE EDGE

STORIES & LESSONS FROM WILDERNESS EXPEDITIONS

SHAWN STRATTON

FORMER NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL INSTRUCTOR

"Shawn writes from a place of passion, dedication, and a burning desire to always do better. His stories are both gripping and inspirational. They make you want to sling your backpack over your shoulder and head off for adventure."

— Ray Zahab

Adventurer, Ultramarathon Runner

Author, Founder of impossible2Possible

"*TEAMS ON THE EDGE* is a testament to how teams can be shaped, molded, and taught how to achieve incredible results. Through his gripping storytelling Shawn makes you feel like you're living the adventures alongside him and in the end the result is a transformed reader with a more thorough understanding of how to make teams better."

— Sami Jo Small

Canadian Olympic Hockey Goalie, 3-time Medallist

Author, Professional Speaker

"*TEAMS ON THE EDGE* is a great read and contains many valuable lessons for both wilderness and urban leaders. Each story drives home the importance of caring, competent leadership and the importance of building a strong team."

— TA Loeffler, PhD

Professor of Outdoor Recreation

at Memorial University of Newfoundland,

Author, Mountaineer

"Great read. Stratton paints a great picture of the NOLS instructor lifestyle: the good, bad, and ugly. Anyone who wants to be a NOLS instructor should read this book."

— Darran Wells

Associate Professor of Outdoor Education & Leadership

at Central Wyoming College, Senior NOLS Instructor,

Author of *NOLS Wilderness Navigation*

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All the stories are true; all names and distinguishing characteristics have been changed.

Dedication

To **Stacie Farmer** (left) and **Cary Girod** (right), two of my NOLS students who were tragically killed in separate accidents by vehicles while riding their bikes just a few years after taking their course.



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TEACHING IN A CLASSROOM WITHOUT WALLS

It wouldn't be an adventure if you already knew the ending.

BEING AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR is more of a life-style than a job. I was paid to travel the world for almost 15 years, leading glacier mountaineering, backpacking, sea kayaking, and white-water canoeing courses in far-flung locations around the globe. I was, as some might say, *living the dream*. I loved the job so much that, even though my yearly tax return said I was scraping by just above the poverty line, I felt rich. To make this life possible, I lived out of my little red Mazda truck. Everything I owned fit in the back, and there was room left for me to sleep. In nine years I didn't live in one place for more than three months. Three times I drove to Alaska, twice from Mexico. Now that's a commute!

When I look back over my years of leading wilderness expeditions, two particularly vivid memories jump to mind. The first is the sight of a rescue helicopter lifting off in a white wall of blowing snow from the side of a remote, storm-logged mountain. It's carrying one of my students with an injury so severe it could have meant loss of limb or fatal infection had the cloud cover not shifted for a few precious minutes, allowing it to land. The second image is of returning to camp after a short hike with a group on a three-month course canoeing a remote Alaskan Arctic river to find our tents and gear—our essential, life-sustaining supplies—shredded as if by a horde of malevolent beasts. Never before has my stomach plummeted so rapidly to my feet.

You'll notice both instances occurred in extremely remote locales. I find that every aspect of life and death is heightened in the wilderness. Friendships build faster when a team is pushed to the edge of its comfort zone; sunrises are more stunning; vistas are more awe-inspiring; camp food tastes richer. And danger looms larger. A twisted ankle is not so simple when the mobility of the team is compromised; rescue becomes death-defying in itself. Teams under pressure is a consistent theme throughout this collection of adventure stories. It's amazing how magnified the highs and lows of life become when they unfold in the middle of the wilderness.

Another theme, and the most significant for me, is the importance of a team. More than anything, these flashbacks underscore the power of teams. As a leader, I look back proudly on those

two challenges. Each event could have ended disastrously, but the cooperation, commitment, and high level of communication among the members of the group not only surmounted calamity but also allowed both teams to strengthen and both expeditions to excel.

I decided to write this book about some of my real-life stories because I feel there are many lessons to be shared from these experiences. I'm extremely proud of the teams I've led. We began each adventure as a group of assembled individuals; we walked out of the wilderness as a team. The details behind the entertaining and sometimes scary stories of overcoming misadventure, life-threatening accidents, challenging decision-making, and disgruntled team members are the elements that gelled each group into a fine team. Dealing with these experiences has left a lasting impression on me and taught me lessons worth sharing.

Why NOLS?

All of the stories recorded here were either National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) expeditions or were made possible through NOLS funding.

NOLS teaches wilderness skills and leadership for the purposes of both educating people and serving the environment. Most of the participants are American college students looking to earn extra credits in a more unusual and interesting way than tradi-

tional classroom lectures. Most are also hoping for an unforgettable, life-changing experience. Some students even hope to become instructors one day.

I was a young man when I first learned about NOLS in an Adventure-Based Experiential Education class in college in 1995. I nodded my head as I sat at the desk, thinking *I'll work there some day*. After several years pondering careers, that night the light bulb had been turned on in my head. I called NOLS headquarters the next morning, requested a catalogue, and devoured every page when it arrived. From that day on I became enthralled with everything NOLS.

Growing up in Newfoundland, Canada, an island in the North Atlantic Ocean and North America's most easterly point, I'd never been exposed to the world of outdoor education and my family was not interested in camping. Yet, as a youngster, I always loved adventure and, fortunately, thanks to the Scouts, I was able to develop my passion for the wilderness. I was 20 years old in the fall of 1995 when I learned about NOLS. I spent the next four years building my resume so that I could eventually apply for an Instructor Course. I took the Instructor Course in the spring of 1999. At 24, I was the second youngest person in the course; the average age was 28.

Becoming an instructor with NOLS is no small test of will. From the beginning, an applicant has to go through a highly competitive selection process toward being accepted into a 35-day course (also referred to as the 35-day interview). You must be

prepared to relinquish a month of your life, as well as pay for the opportunity, which promises in-depth instruction on NOLS protocol and the NOLS curriculum. However, being accepted and taking part doesn't guarantee you a job. Most businesses would doubtless love to have a testing period for their potential new hires, but most people would never agree to endure it, let alone pay for it. The fact that potential employees are willing to pay and take the Instructor Course is a testimony to the unflinching desire people have to work for NOLS.

I'll never forget the day I got the call. I was backpacking on my own around New Zealand, when I called home to check in with my family. My mother relayed the good news that I'd been selected from the wait list to take part in the Instructor Course starting in just two weeks in Tucson, Arizona. Despite the fact that this was my dream, I had a tough time deciding whether I should accept. I had planned to stay in New Zealand for another month and hadn't yet made it to the part of the country I most wanted to visit: the Southern Alps. When I got the news, I was in the remote mountain highway village of Arthur's Pass, and I had no idea how I'd get to Tucson within two weeks, much less generate the money to pay for the course. I'd saved to buy an open ticket to return to Canada and had roughly \$500 to my name. I couldn't easily buy a ticket to Tucson, let alone pay for the course; I was working my way around New Zealand, just making enough money to keep traveling on a tight budget.

NOLS also told me that, if I passed, they would immediately offer me two summer contracts, which is rare, but they were short-staffed that year. I needed to be available to work for them if I were to take the course. Problem was, I'd already committed to work for another company, doing a multi-adventure teen expedition in Alaska. I hated having to let this company down, as I'd worked for them before and they'd given me an amazing reference. I had just two hours to make the decision or someone else would be offered my spot.

With no idea how I was going to make it happen, I said, "Yes!"

Of course. It was my dream job.

I just hoped everything would work out. Through the jigs and the reels (a Newfoundland expression!), it did. I found solutions to all the obstacles and made it to Tucson on time. Having gone through considerable upheaval to get to the Instructor Course, I placed tremendous pressure on myself to do well and pass. Unfortunately, it turned out to be the worst outdoor education experience of my life, and it nearly turned me off ever working in the industry again, let alone working for NOLS.

From the beginning of the course I just wasn't myself. Having never taken a regular NOLS student course before and not knowing anyone else who had, I was fairly green, unlike many other applicants. From the first day, when I accidentally burned the hash browns, I grew more and more nervous. I'd find myself having internal pep talks, *Relax, you know this stuff and deserve to*

be here. After the first few days we shared our personal goals with the group and all I could blurt out was, “I just don’t want to fuck up!” Nearly all the other instructor candidates had either taken a NOLS student course or worked for NOLS in a support role. They were much more familiar with the NOLS style of camping and what an Instructor Course was *really* like.

From then on the “interview” kicked into high gear, and it was almost a competition among the candidates to see who could impress the instructors the most. It turned out that this was not “staff training” and they actually wanted us to behave as students. This wasn’t a stretch for most people on the course because many had been NOLS students previously, but I’d been leading expeditions for four years and hadn’t been a student in a long time.

Upon completion of the course, students are evaluated and ranked in order of most-ready-to-work. Even if they are cleared to work, it can take a year or two for new instructors to be assigned their first expedition. Some participants are deemed not ready to work and are asked to attain further training or are discouraged from working for the school altogether. I was devastated when I was told that I was one of the few who needed more training. When I was given the news, it was—and still is—one of the most gut-wrenching moments of my life. I was told I didn’t have enough off-trail navigational skills to work as a NOLS instructor. It was upsetting news to me because even though (granted) my group *did* veer off course on one of the last days during the hiking section, I was confident in my off-trail navigation. Making it even

more tough to take, it seemed I'd only just missed out on being accepted, because the rest of my evaluation was strong: I had a talent for working in outdoor education and was close to being an instructor. Despite the rough experience and the devastation of rejection, I felt a certainty that I had the talent, passion, and drive to be a worthy NOLS instructor some day soon.

So I persevered.

After discussing the next course of action open to me with NOLS staff, I took a shorter instructors' seminar later that summer. It was a backpacking course offered to NOLS paddling instructors and I was determined to prove that my navigation skills were up to snuff. As it happened, the senior instructor leading the trip had no issue with my abilities and said he was surprised I hadn't passed my Instructor Course. He spoke with the NOLS staffing office and gave me approval to work field courses as an instructor.

My first course job (as a co-instructor, which is how everyone starts) came around the following summer. It was a Wind River mountain range backpacking course in Wyoming. When the course was finished, I knew that this was the job and company I wanted to work for. I loved the length (average, 27 days) and structure of NOLS expeditions; they gave you time to get to know the students and see them grow. I loved pushing students to the edge of their comfort zones daily and seeing them rewarded for their efforts.

Living the Dream

I discovered that I strongly related to teaching in a classroom without walls. In the NOLS environment, most of the learning is applied immediately, be it during glacier travel, through effective feedback, or in an outdoor cooking class. I'd tell most people who asked what I did for a living that I was a *mountain or sea kayak guide* because they rarely understood the term *outdoor educator*. NOLS instructors are educators, first and foremost. They teach students important leadership, natural history, risk management, and outdoor living skills, which they can use in college, at the office, at home, or on their own wilderness expeditions. It's about helping people become comfortable with themselves, which in turn helps them become more positive, contributive members of society.

I thrived when I was challenged by harsh weather, difficult terrain, long days, and the occasional crisis. You'll read about several of those tough situations in the pages ahead. Although they make for good stories, I'm thankful that all my courses weren't quite so dramatic or before long I'd have been struck down with burnout or suffered a nervous breakdown! My goal in going to NOLS was to work as much as I could, in as many different course types and locations as possible. That's precisely what I did for nine years. As much as it was something like *living the dream*—and it was certainly living *my* dream—adventure travel is really only glamorous in retrospect. It involves very little pay and few benefits, constant

low-budget travel, caring for and teaching people in remote and often harsh environments, weeks and months away from loved ones, and constant physical strain.

To put up with all these challenges, what did I get?

The privilege to play an integral part in a life-changing experience for my students. Many alumni call their NOLS adventure one of the greatest experiences of their lives. Not many people can say they were a part of something like that when they go to work each day.

An opportunity to be employed alongside incredibly gifted, dedicated, and inspiring people who work for the company because they believe in its mission.

A chance to get paid to see many of the most isolated and beautiful places in the world that even locals rarely get to see: remote waterfalls in the Kimberley outback of Australia, unclimbed peaks in the Indian Himalayas, pristine beaches in Mexico, and calving glaciers in Alaska.

Incredible road trips throughout North America. As mentioned earlier, I drove to Alaska three times, twice from Mexico and once from San Francisco.

The chance to live a life of adventure, not knowing how each day would play out, yet feeling reassured that I had the skills and experience I needed, as well as an outstanding team of professionals for support.

The opportunity to make decisions of consequence. When you're leading a course in the field, it's up to you and your co-instructors to make all the decisions. And one of those decisions could mean the difference between life and death.

And a great collection of stories to tell.

OVER THE EDGE



Photo: Dave Nathanson

CHAPTER 1

IT'S 3:30 P.M., DEEP IN THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAIN RANGE *just west of India's second highest peak, Nanda Devi, and I'm standing with my co-instructor listening to a strange, moaning sound. It seems to be coming from the drainage area sloping 300 feet upward away from our campsite. At first I think students have hiked up to where the area narrows into a canyon and are fooling around, making echoes, but as I move toward the noise, it begins to resemble at one moment that of a drunken shepherd, the next, an injured wild animal. I start running, listening intently, and it suddenly dawns on me that what I'm hearing are bloodcurdling cries for help.*

It was day 28 of our NOLS expedition trekking through the Himalayas—the “Abode of Snow”—and the highest mountain range in the world. Our group, composed of twelve students, me, and two co-instructors, had been having the time of our lives. My co-instructors, Sameera and Rajan, were both from India and had also attended a NOLS Instructor Course in the United States. They were talented wilderness educators but had less experience

working for NOLS than I had. Their depth of local knowledge and ability to speak the language made them a tremendous asset. Combined with my extensive NOLS experience, we were a well-balanced team. One of the things I most love about traveling the Himalayas in India and Nepal are the cultural experiences of passing through remote villages not accessible by vehicles.



Shawn capturing an image of the children in a remote village after playing kick ball.
Pindari Valley, India. *Bryan Schmidt*

With most other mountain ranges in the world, you miss out on this opportunity because roads bypass communities and take you directly to the trailheads. Early on in our trip we'd been fortunate to hike through isolated communities, spending time in schools and with local families. We even stumbled into the thick of a huge, 10-foot-high marijuana field. Picture that: college students suddenly face-to-face with marijuana plants almost twice

their size. Of course no one was allowed to test the local product, which is farmed as much for medicine and making rope, fencing, and other building materials as it is for recreational purposes. But there were certainly lots of faces buried in the foliage, endless photos taken, and no doubt later on, back home, several Facebook profile pictures updated.

As we climbed higher into the mountains, we came across beautiful shrines. They were a multicolored line upon line of bells, hanging as intentions of safe passage for the people who passed by. The tradition was that each time one of the bells was rung, it sent a prayer out into the wind. We had come prepared with a bell of our own, bearing all our names, which we hung up and rang many times.



Students checking out a marijuana plantation. Pindari Valley, India. *Shawn Stratton*

Before long we realized we could use those prayers. The trail became unusually challenging, with late monsoon rains causing landslides and washouts that at one point closed our intended route for 10 days, forcing us to go in the opposite direction. The team was forced to improvise. Several times we had to cross steep and exposed slopes where normally there would have been a four-foot-wide stone path. Although the towering mountains were wearing their ever-present caps of snow, it was only October and we had expected the valleys and pathways to remain clear. A little snow wouldn't have mattered, but we hadn't factored in such excessive rain. It was an ominous feeling to be heading deeper into the mountains as we passed other trekkers and shepherds heading out, telling us to turn around because the trails had been washed away.

But we weren't about to walk out on day seven of our 34-day section without first giving it an honest effort. The Himalayan Mountains provide just the sort of invigorating environment many wilderness lovers thrive on. It's a life-changing, character-building sort of trip, and with the right equipment, food, and techniques it can offer what I call "camping in style." Fortunately (or unfortunately), NOLS is probably the only company operating in the Indian Himalayas that doesn't use mules or porters to transport participants' equipment. Carrying our own gear (packs weighing 60 pounds) and being self-sufficient allowed us to travel over much more challenging terrain than mules and porters could usually manage. So we persevered.

With just six days left to go, we were nearing the end of our expedition. The students had just returned to camp after a four-hour solo hike and we were having a layover day. Our location was deep in the Shalang Valley at 12,000 feet, surrounded by 20,000-foot mountains, a long three-day walk from the nearest road. The ground cover was dotted with grassy tussocks and three-foot-high shrubs. The weather was cool and the sky overcast, shedding light snow flurries throughout the day. The previous night, a foot of snow had fallen, but it had melted away after a few hours.

Mike's Misstep

Around 3 p.m., Mike, one of the students, headed off to get water for his tent group from a nearby stream located 40 feet below a hard packed dirt slope. Tall and athletic, Mike was a popular, happy-go-lucky guy from New York. He had a thirst for adventure and had been doing well on the course.

He walked along the ridge above the stream, swinging his water bag and scoping out the area. He sprang up onto a small boulder, trying to determine the best way down: either a steep but quick, 35- to 45-degree direct route in front of him, or a less steep but more time-consuming route a few hundred yards away. As he stood half-pondering, half-enjoying his surroundings, the sodden ground beneath his feet, weary of being pummeled by rain, hail, and melted snow, suddenly made the decision for him. It crumbled loose, sending Mike's 200 pounds tumbling down a

slope equivalent in steepness to a black diamond ski run.

Taken completely by surprise, Mike crashed into the stream as his left leg flailed across a rock, snapping in a way that, despite an odd absence of pain, he knew was bad. At the same time, several large rocks slithered down, striking him in the back, sending panicked thoughts of spinal injuries flying through his head.

At first, he just lay where he was, struggling for breath, afraid to move and risk further injury. But the water was icy and the unwelcome prospect of hypothermia began to beat out his other fears, so he slowly nudged his way out of the stream until he was half-sitting on a rock, his damaged leg still dragging in the water.

Shivering, Mike took a deep breath and clasped his left knee with both hands, pulling his leg closer. His rain pants were soaked through and ripped and he could make out a bleeding gash just below the knee. There was something sticking to the area and automatically he reached down to pull it away. It was small and hard and, as he picked it up, he felt he should know what it was, but his brain wouldn't kick in. Dazed, he dropped his hand and tried to rinse the object in the rushing water. When it suddenly slipped from his fingers and disappeared, he made the connection. It was a piece of bone. His bone. And he'd just washed it away. The enormity of the situation hit him like a truck. And he opened his mouth, drew air deep into his lungs, and screamed for help.

Ten minutes later, Mike was still yelling. His cries seemed to be swallowed up by the rushing water. Exhausted and clearly failing

to attract his team's attention, he fell silent, suddenly focusing instead on how incredibly cold he felt. He tried to give himself a sternum rub to warm up his core, but this only worked momentarily. He was suddenly terrified that no one would hear him. No one would find him.

Time ticked on. He continued yelling and screaming as he shivered and stared longingly at the ridge above, willing someone to appear. The wind blew, sending mocking puffs of earth rolling down the slope and, still, there was no sign of life. He dropped his head, feeling utterly defeated and desperately alone. He started to lose hope.

Suddenly he heard something. It was a girl's voice calling his name. "Mike? Mike!" His head snapped up. It was Mary, one of his fellow students, standing like a savior at the top of the ridge.

"My Bone's Sticking Out of My Leg"

At around 3:30 p.m. I was taking notes in the instructor's tent when Janet, one of the students, rushed over. She said she and her friends could hear strange noises coming from the drainage area near camp.

"Is everyone *in* camp?" I asked.

"Yes... I think," she replied tentatively. I stood up and we rushed out of the tent, heading toward the stream. I stopped and listened. Janet was right. I could hear strange cries floating on the

wind. The closer we got, the more urgent they became. And the more they sounded like panicked cries for help.

Minutes later we reached the edge of the slope. By this time, the cries had fallen silent. Several students who were already standing there clustered around us.

“Mike’s down there,” someone began to explain. “He’s broken his leg. We thought he was just acting out a first-aid scenario at first, but Mary went down, all annoyed, to tell him it was too cold and it was about to start snowing and to give it up, but then I think he showed her his leg and it’s broken. It’s definitely broken.”

It was as if time stopped. I took a deep breath and thought, *Oh boy, here we go.* Although I had more than 15 years of first-aid training, I’d never had to treat a broken bone, let alone treat one in such a remote and harsh environment. Thankfully, my brain clicked into crisis mode and, as if on automatic, my training took over. I quickly set the students to collecting splinting materials, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads. Fortunately, the team had recently finished a five-day wilderness advanced first-aid program as part of their semester.

As soon as I’d delegated jobs, I scoped out a safe route down the slope and carefully made my way toward Mike, who was in a semi-reclined position on a small rock beside Mary. When I reached him, his face looked ghostly pale behind his dark beard. He shivered, and smiled.

“Hey, Shawn,” he quavered. The color had drained from his

face. My bone's sticking out of my leg."

Huh. *This guy's definitely in shock.*

I knew he must be in tremendous pain and, realizing that shock can be even more dangerous than a broken limb, I asked a student to get Rajan to bring the drug kit so I could administer some immediate relief.

Although obviously dazed, Mike appeared coherent and reliable and, in addition to his leg injury, which I still hadn't examined, was complaining of low right-sided back pain from being struck by rolling rocks. Deciding that possible spinal or internal injuries might be the more serious issue at hand, I first did a head-to-toe exam, starting with his back. He had some bruising, but I couldn't see any indication of other injuries, although I was worried about possible internal damage.

Rajan arrived with the drug kit and Mike was given a strong narcotic pain reliever. Other students had brought additional supplies by this point, so Rajan went back to camp to call Mandep, the NOLS India program director, on the satellite phone to request a helicopter evacuation for a limb-threatening injury.

The team's first-aid training was now a significant asset. Mike was shivering and complaining of being cold, so before doing anything else, we carefully moved him in a seated position about 10 feet back from the stream. We then reclined him onto a sleeping pad, with his injured leg supported by more pads, and wrapped him in several sleeping bags. I asked Mary to sit by his

head as a reassuring presence to comfort and distract him from any pain he might experience once we started working on his injury. Two students performed another thorough head-to-toe exam, measured vitals, and asked Mike key assessment questions about his injury. This was helpful because it allowed me to focus on the break itself. I had to take a moment before cutting away the material of Mike's pant leg because I knew what I was about to see would be gruesome, most likely the worst injury any of us had ever encountered. I picked up my scissors and carefully sliced through his sodden, blood-soaked Gore-Tex rain layer and then his fleece pants.



Mike's open fracture wound. Dave Nathanson

I peeled away the material and sat back to observe the large bloody gash. Strangely, my first thought was, *Oh, bones are grey*. I guess I'd been imagining white bone, like a chicken leg. The wound was a bad one: It was 2.5 inches in diameter. It looked as if the insides of Mike's leg were clamoring to force their way outside with the protruding bone, a mess of fatty tissue, muscle, and, of course, blood. There was an additional injury, a small puncture, closer to his knee, and several bleeding but minor abrasions.

We got straight to work. Something clicked in my head, like a parent jumping to the aid of a child in need. Surprisingly, I didn't feel scared or queasy; failure wasn't an option. I had to stabilize this injury and everything was going to work out fine. I'd trained for this kind of scenario for years, but I'd never had to use that training. I irrigated the wound with water from Mike's dromedary bag. Disinfected water wasn't immediately available and I wasn't willing to wait, so I made the call that at 12,000 feet the water from the nearby spring was clean enough. The wound, which had been covered up by the pant leg, appeared to be free of dirt and grit.

Next came the tricky and painful part. Mike was semi-comfortable, and his wounds were clean. It was time to apply traction in order to line up his shin with his ankle in the hope that the exposed bone would slide back under the skin. Our intent was to provide some pain relief in the long run, but this would likely be an excruciating procedure. Until now, Mike had been admirably self-possessed, brave, and strong. We knew he had to be in ex-

treme pain, but we barely heard a whimper out of him. But even Mike bellowed like a bull moose when Sameera clasped his ankle and pulled with all her might to force his bone back into place. She gave it a considerable effort, but Mike's tibia stubbornly resisted. Seeing his terrible pain, we abandoned the exercise.

I set about treating the injury as an open wound, dressing it with three sterile gauze pads, wet to dry. The first pad was soaked in water and placed directly over the exposed wound, the second dampened lightly, and the third dry. I then wrapped the pads in place with gauze cling and treated the smaller abrasions with adhesive bandages. Suddenly I noticed a thick, two-inch cylinder of partially coagulated blood spurt from the puncture just below his knee. Up until then it had appeared blood-free, but it was as if by applying pressure to the main wound blood had been forced out through this other injury. I quickly cleaned and covered that area and then wrapped his entire lower leg, from knee to ankle, in a secure bandage. It was difficult to judge the tightness, so we kept monitoring the circulation in Mike's left foot.

By this time, around 4:15 p.m., the students had amassed a supply of splinting materials from the camp. I didn't want them using their own clothes in the splint. They still had another five days in the snowy mountains and we literally had only the clothes on our backs. Mike was already wearing nearly all his clothes (which, of course, he also needed) so I wasn't left with many items to use for insulation and padding. In the end, we splinted Mike's leg using his fleece vest and two foam half-pads. A sock

was placed under his slightly bent knee and another sock with the toe cut off was taped around his foot to keep it warm. Two trekking poles, extending from mid thigh to several inches below his foot, were tied in place with cord from the tents. Both legs were then wrapped in a semi-inflated sleeping pad that was tied with cord and then inflated to make an improvised air cast. Mike would remain in this for the next 24 hours.

A Slippery Slope

Around 5 p.m., we prepared to carry Mike up the slope into a more comfortable, warmer environment. Students had moved a tent closer to the top of the drainage area to shorten the journey. But first we had to figure out how to hoist him safely up the crumbling incline. To get up and down the drainage area we'd used a less steep route than the one Mike had fallen down, but it was located 200 yards away, which seemed like a mile when faced with carrying a seriously injured six-foot, one-inch, 200-pound patient. Sameera and I considered the immediate, steeper, but also quicker route as a way out. We experimented with cutting steps into the hard packed earth with our ice axes. We had no rope and no time to make a stretcher with our packs, so we'd have to carry him as a human stretcher instead. I didn't think we could slog it out on the longer route. So with much consternation and feeling considerable stress about it, I made the call to haul him up the direct, steeper way.

By this time it was getting dark and only half of us in the drainage area had headlamps. The temperature was dropping, light snow was falling, and Mike, now paler, was still in shock. The sense of urgency to get him up the slope and into a warm tent was palpable. I organized the carry and, with Mike lying flat, I had people line up on either side and stretch their hands underneath him to grasp the hands of the person on the other side. Carrying Mike up the first 10 feet was slow, but relatively smooth. But a quarter of the way up, the route steepened and the hard packed dirt stopped giving traction and, even when chopped into steps, crumbled away. People on the uphill side of the carry were beginning to lose their footing, letting go of Mike as they slithered on their backs underneath him. I had terrifying visions of a tumbleweed of students cascading down the slope, but fortunately there were enough people so that when one tapped out, another could immediately take his or her place. We reached a point where we were moving one step at a time before strategically repositioning.

“Okay! We’re going to do a step. One, two, THREE!”

I hadn’t planned on being part of the human stretcher. Instead I would guide the group up the slope and chop steps where necessary, but, by now, I was also carrying Mike, after replacing an exhausted student. I was terrified of dropping him and of losing my own balance and getting hurt. My muscles felt as if they would snap; my toes clenched inside my boots as if to better cling to the earth. I could see the exertion on everyone’s faces. Each member of the human stretcher pushed themselves closer to the breaking

point, knowing that Mike was relying on them to act as a strong team unit. Less than 10 feet from the top, I suddenly doubted if we could make it. I didn't think we could lift Mike that last short distance without dropping him. I looked back in desperation at Sameera, who was holding Mike's legs.

"I don't think we can do this," I called out. "Do you think we should go back?"

She shook her head. "No! We can't go back. We can do this. We're almost there."

Inch by painful inch, we gained the edge of the lip. Mike reached up above his head to clasp Jim's hand, a student who was waiting at the top to help pull him up. Despite his excruciating pain, Mike was now doing his part to help. Mac had a death grip on him and there was no way he was going to let him fall. With a burst of monumental determination and effort, we got him up and over the edge. We laid him in a safe spot, and collapsed. I've never been under such physical strain as I was during our ascent of the last few feet of that slope.

Light snow had begun to fall and we hurried to carry Mike the remaining 30 feet to the tent that had been prepared for him. Once he was settled inside, it began to snow heavily and continued for the next 12 hours, shrouding the valley and mountains in a chilled, white blanket, two and a half feet thick. I hoped the weather wouldn't affect Mike's rescue. At the NOLS office, Man-deep had initiated the emergency response plan, which included

contacting the United States Embassy to request their assistance in arranging a helicopter with the Indian Air Force, the only organization authorized, and equipped, to handle a challenging evacuation in the middle of the Himalayas.

Snow Camp

Once in the tent, Mike was made as comfortable as possible. Before long, after the pain medication took effect, his color returned and he became more relaxed, even joking about the situation. While all of this was going on, I was amazed at how well the students reacted and took on their various roles. They were happy to donate their personal equipment to help Mike to a point where I had to stop them because they'd need it themselves. Everyone selflessly pitched in: making hot drinks and food, running medical notes so Rajan could update Mandeep, sitting with Mike and reassuring him for hours, or helping provide first aid and building the splint. Later that night, some students even shared sleeping bags and pads because they'd donated their own to increase Mike's comfort, and several three-man tents were crammed with four or five students because Mike needed a tent of his own. Around 7 p.m., having left Mike with two friends to keep him comfortable and monitor his vital signs, I headed to my own tent. Rajan asked me to call Mandeep with an update, but I was more mentally and physically exhausted than I could ever remember being on any NOLS course, so I asked him to give me a minute.

For the first time throughout the ordeal, I stepped outside my controlled leader role. I crawled into my tent, buried my head in my sleeping bag, and cried. All the stress, physical exhaustion, fear, and anxiety streamed out of me. I cried with relief that the worst seemed to be over. Still, I couldn't stop my mind from worrying. Had I done everything I possibly could to help Mike? I was no medical doctor. Had I made any mistakes?

After a few minutes I snapped back into course leader mode and made the update call to Mandeep. He told me that the Indian Air Force had been given authority to attempt a rescue mission at first light the next morning, weather permitting. Craving some professional reassurance, I asked him if he could connect me with a doctor or medical professional who could advise me on Mike's condition and tell me how to administer short-term care of an open fracture and how to best handle his pain management. Our small supply of medication was rapidly being depleted. It was arranged that I call the Curriculum Director at the Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS, and author of the *NOLS Wilderness First Aid* book. He reassured me that I was doing a good job—which was a huge relief—and that I should look at the wound and evaluate Mike's foot for circulation, sensation, and movement, as well as for any signs of dead tissue. He also suggested starting Mike on an antibiotic to fight possible infection. As Mike's father, who had been informed of the accident, had requested to speak to him, we made the call and brought the phone over to Mike's tent. After speaking with his father, Mike seemed in good spirits,

and I hunkered down and chatted with him for a while. Eventually he got an awkward look on his face and told me he needed to use the bathroom. Number two. *Okay*, I thought. *Well, we can do this*. I was hoping it wouldn't happen, but you know, if he's gotta go... And there was no way Mike—who was resembling a trussed-up mummy at this point—would be able to leave the tent and go on his own. It was quite the procedure to partially unwrap Mike and get him into a position to be able to take care of the matter. After several improvised methods failed, I ended up lining a cooking pot with a plastic bag and, trouser that he was, Mike made it work. I also got him to pee in a bottle so I could inspect his urine for any trace of blood. I was still concerned he might have internal injuries as a result of the bruises on his lower back. Thankfully he checked out okay and I left him to pass the night monitored by Sameera and another student, Ron.



The valley the day of the accident. Shawn Stratton



The valley the day after the accident. *Shawn Stratton*

The snow continued to fall heavily. Around 3 a.m., I had to clear it away from our tent while Rajan made the rounds checking on the students and waking them so they could do the same. If snow accumulated too heavily on the walls of our tents, it would block airflow in the tent. As it was an early fall expedition, we weren't fully prepared for these extreme conditions and had to resort to shoveling with frying pans and pot lids. No one got much sleep that night.

By 6:30 a.m. the cloud ceiling was very low and snow was still falling. The helicopter pilot was on standby 200 miles away at an air force base, waiting for the weather to clear. I periodically checked on Mike, who was in too much pain to get any proper rest. At one point he admitted, "I don't think I can make it

through another night like this.” I desperately wished I could do something. But all I could hope was that the relentless snow, the only heavy snowfall we’d encountered the entire trip, would ease up and grant our rescue helicopter safe passage through the mountains.

“Take Me to the Choppaa!”

As the cloud cover lifted and the first fingers of dawn traced the sweeps and plains of the mountains, all I could think of was getting the chopper in safely, and soon. The previous night when I’d described our location to Mandeep, I hadn’t been sure a helicopter could land near our site. We were on a small ledge on the side hill of a steep valley. Mandeep had told me that the Indian Air Force helicopter was equipped with a lowering winch and, if they couldn’t land, they would send down a padded strap to go under Mike’s armpits and lift him up. My first thought had been: *Holy shit! A padded strap? This guy has a broken leg with a bone sticking out. Can’t you do anything better than a padded strap?*

Time ticked on and the snow continued to fall. I had my eyes glued to a gadget that was reading the barometric pressure. I sent intermittent updates to Mandeep, which he relayed to the pilot who was on standby. My optimism stirred with every slight rise in pressure and, at 9:30 a.m., Mandeep called to tell us the helicopter was due to arrive around 10:30 a.m. I was surprised they were even going to leave, because the conditions were still so bad,

but he assured me that the satellite image showed pockets of clear sky approaching.

The group now scrambled to move tents to clear a landing platform while I prepared Mike's splint for the flight. Knowing the consequences for Mike if the helicopter couldn't land, I was determined to make the best possible landing pad. The snow was beneficial because the tussocks were covered and we were able to make an adequate landing zone. We marked the parameters with weighted food zip bags. We also painted a large X in the middle of the landing pad with red Kool-Aid. Miraculously, by 10 a.m. the snowfall finally eased and the promised patches of blue sky began to peek out from above. It was as if we were holding one collective breath as we scrutinized the sky, anticipating the helicopter's appearance.

At last I heard an unmistakable *thump, thump, thump* and, straining my eyes, I spotted the tiny dot coming up the valley. The helicopter was flying extremely high because of the treacherous mountain terrain and unreliable weather conditions. I watched as the speck passed over our location without seeing us. As I watched it fly farther up the valley, I was getting concerned, but finally the helicopter turned around, dropping in elevation, and spotted our landing zone. At the same time we realized our tents were too close to the area and we hastily set about moving them. As the helicopter got closer, I ran to the tents while yelling at the two students who had remained by our tents to hold on to them and to watch out for the ferocious spindrift. I imagined

one of the tents getting sucked up into the helicopter rotors and causing it to crash. The students held on with all their might as the helicopter descended.



The Indian Air Force rescue helicopter coming in for a landing, directly over the tents. *Connor Flanagan*

The helicopter was suddenly right above us. It hovered over the landing zone for about 30 seconds, which seemed like an eternity, like a giant humming insect, inspecting and weighing the strange environment. *LAND, GODDAMMIT, LAND!* I was saying to myself. But just as fast as it had come in, the helicopter rose and flew off.

My heart sank.

But after a few moments, it appeared as if the helicopter was turning around. Perhaps the pilot just wanted to have a closer

look at the area before landing. We didn't have time to collapse the tents before the helicopter was above us again and we just had to hold on to them and bury our heads as an enormous wall of blowing snow thundered our way. The pilot powered down but left the engine and rotor running. Most helicopters don't like to fly above 9,000 feet, let alone land at 12,000 feet in challenging weather, where ice build-up on the rotors is a possibility. The dramatic landing was received with whoops and hollers of excitement. Our team was on cloud nine. One student yelled "This is so cool!" and, as uniformed men looking like paratroopers jumped out, Mike turned into Arnold Schwarzenegger from *Terminator II*, announcing in a cheery, heavily accented voice, "Take me to the choppaa!"

Within minutes he was loaded safely inside and, with another blast of snow, the helicopter left to carry him to Delhi, several hundred miles away.

The group was elated and amazed by what had taken place over the last 20 hours. People were laughing and hugging each other. For the second time in less than a day, I buried my head—in the snow this time—and wept. Then I jumped up and triumphantly rugby-tackled the first guy I saw in celebration. We'd done it. We'd pulled together and we'd pulled it off: a daring rescue in the middle of a snowstorm deep in the Himalayas.

After the Storm

Mike arrived safely at the Apollo Hospital in Delhi roughly 25 hours after his accident. He kept detailed notes throughout his hospital stay, so that when we wrapped up the Himalayan Mountains course five days later and I headed to Delhi to catch up with him, he had plenty of stories to tell—many entertaining, a few disgusting. He was meticulous about documenting, in photos, the various stages of his leg reconstruction. He told me that when the ER team removed his splint, they were amused by the random objects it encompassed. His dressings were saturated with blood, the sign of a seeping wound we hadn't detected due to the dark red fleece vest I'd used as part of the splint.

Ironically, despite the fact that Mike had reached a place of professional medical care, his first three hours at the hospital were some of his most painful. First, his wound was cleaned and bandaged. Then, when the orthopedic surgeon came to take a look, it was unwrapped and bandaged again. Another doctor came to review the leg and, once again, it was undressed and redressed, all the while without any pain medication, because apparently he'd already received the maximum he could take before surgery. Mike went in for surgery at 7:30 p.m. He underwent three more surgeries over the next two weeks in Delhi before heading back home. In New York he was admitted to the NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases, where he once more endured another battery of surgeries. In the two and half years following his accident, Mike

had a total of nine surgical procedures. He still has a rod and several pins in his leg, and he deals with intermittent pain when the weather changes. Running, especially downhill, is a challenge because of the lack of muscle and ligaments, and he sports a “pretty vicious” scar, which he says he loves because it’s a part of him now and it shows what he went through. Undeterred from wilderness exploration, Mike took an internship at NOLS the summer after his accident with the dream of one day becoming an instructor when his leg fully healed. As of 2013 Mike is living in New York and working for a publishing firm that creates publications for doctors continuing their medical education.

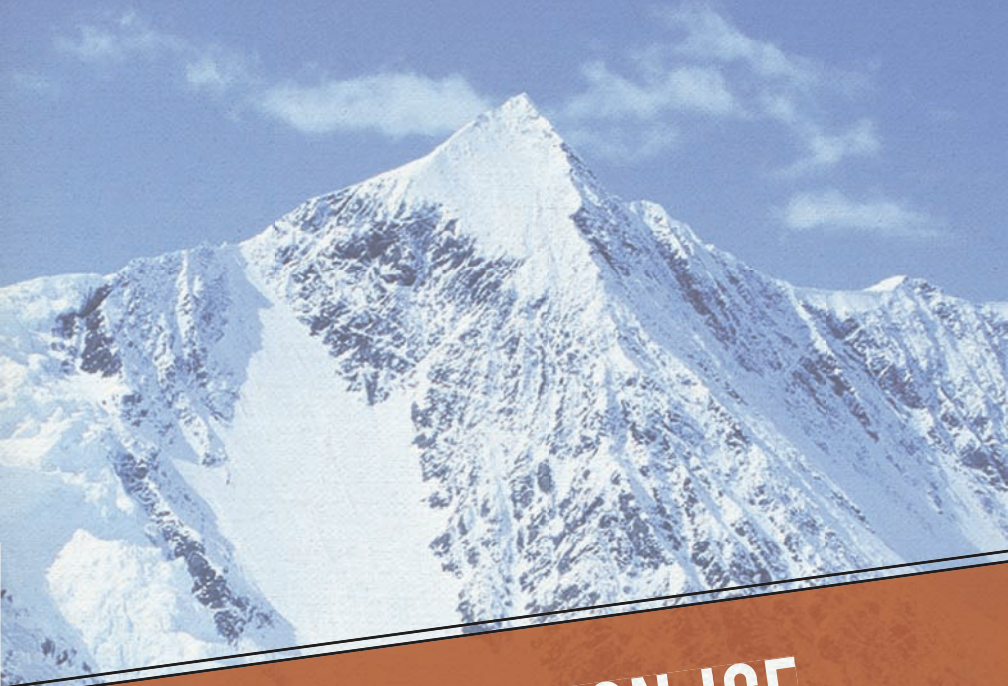
In retrospect, I see that experience as one of the best examples of real-life teamwork I’ve ever encountered. Every member of the group pulled together to help Mike. It was fortunate that the accident happened toward the end of the course, because by that time the group was a gelled unit, equipped with key survival skills they had learned in the course. Each member played an integral role, which is crucial for a team’s success, especially in a crisis situation. If it had been just me and one student with a phone, or even me and two instructors and a phone, we wouldn’t have managed such a daring rescue.

To this day, whenever I hear a helicopter I get flashbacks to Mike’s rescue in the middle of a snowstorm, surrounded by towering mountains, deep within the Himalayas.

Lesson: Know Your Role

To be a high-performance team, each member should know his or her role, accept it, and take pride in their contribution. One person's role may seem mundane, like moving a tent or making soup, while someone else is responsible for something more critical, like carrying a victim or administering emergency first aid. Yet, each role is critical to the overall success of the mission. Furthermore, every role should be performed to the best ability of each person... And Then Some.

Do the members on your team know their roles?



ABANDONED ON ICE

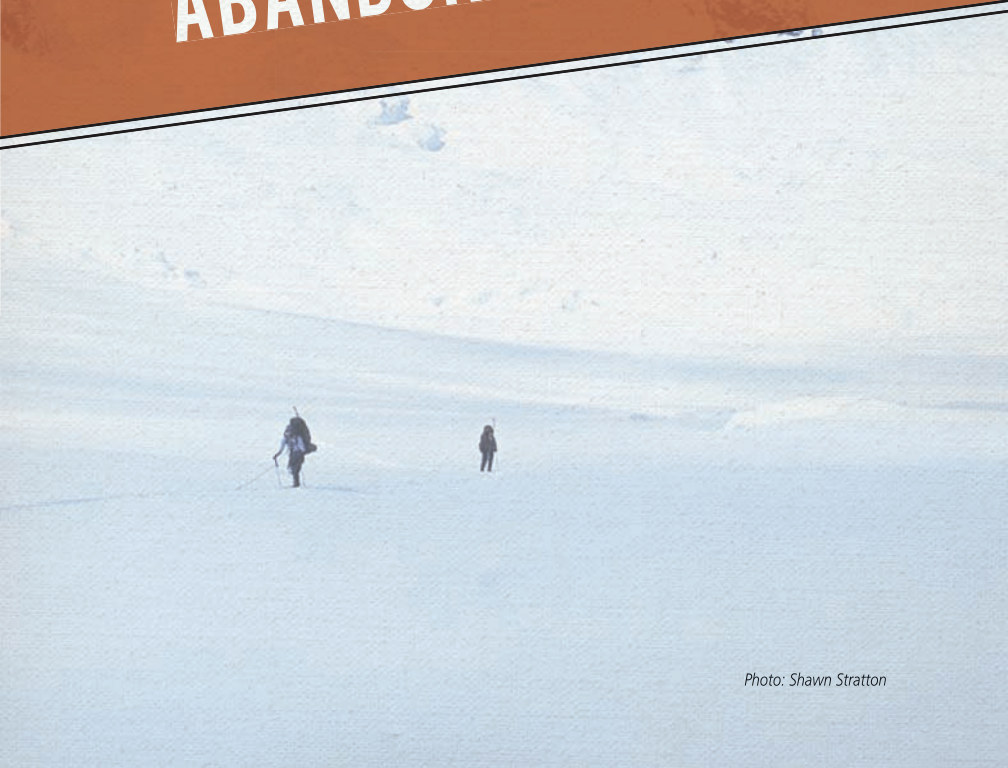


Photo: Shawn Stratton

CHAPTER 5

THE NOLS WADDINGTON RANGE GLACIER mountaineering expeditions are some of the most technical and remote courses the organization offers in the world. One particularly beautiful and difficult route is the immense landscape of the Homathko Icefield in British Columbia's Coast Range Mountains, Canada. Although, like all NOLS courses, no wilderness travel experience is required for signing up, this course attracts a different kind of NOLS student. Waddington Range students are typically more experienced, fitter, and stronger, both mentally and physically. Most don't just want to experience the exhilaration of a remote expedition; they also want to achieve set goals. Glacier mountaineering is an extreme challenge, no matter how much you crave the personal test and love climbing.

And it's dangerous. To move across a glacier, you have to travel roped to your partners, roughly 20 yards from each other, three

or four to a rope in case someone falls down a crevasse. Deep crevasses are common, which is why you also navigate slowly, sometimes like tiptoeing through a minefield, poking and prodding at the ice around you. If one person on the line slips, the others have to be ready to body-slam themselves down and haul the errant climber back up. On a glacier, you can't duck out for alone time. And, if you need a bathroom break en route, it's a matter of saying, "Guys, I gotta go. Can you avert your eyes?" You *cannot* untie. At times, you can be stuck inside a small tent with several other people for up to three days as a severe storm rages outside. Talk about cabin fever. To describe it as an intense living experience is putting it mildly.

It was the high-risk factor that drew me to the challenge of glacier mountaineering at first, but it was also, eventually, what led me to decide it was more the sort of adventure I preferred to keep for personal time with friends rather than as an opportunity to lead and teach. Stress levels ride high when you're an instructor responsible for the lives of 12 students negotiating a beautiful yet treacherous frozen wilderness. I'd wanted to work the Waddington Range expedition for several years because of the challenge and sense of accomplishment it would bring, but also because I wanted to experience the stark beauty of the area. I was thrilled and nervous when I finally received my contract to instruct the course. The goal for the expedition was to travel across the Homathko Icefield while teaching glacier mountaineering skills and climbing the nearby peaks. Although I'd been with NOLS

for years, I'd only worked a few mountaineering expeditions. I'd heard plenty of stories about Waddington, though, and was expecting my physical and technical abilities to be stretched to the limit.

I was excited to learn my fellow instructors would be Heather and Joel. I hadn't worked with either of them before but I knew Heather well from training seminars. A slight, but fiercely strong redhead, she worked mainly rock climbing and mountaineering courses. She was known as a great teacher and excellent climber. I'd heard Joel's distinctive laugh before I even saw him, and came to know him as a jack-of-all-trades talent who taught just about every type of NOLS course. He was a rare breed of instructor, one who was just as competent teaching white-water kayaking as multi-pitch rock climbing and glacier mountaineering.

We met at the NOLS Pacific Northwest Branch in Conway, Washington, in July, where I rallied with Heather, Joel, and 12 students to begin the expedition of a lifetime. Grinning happily, jittery, and full of adrenaline, we split into groups and made three separate trips in a small float plane that took us to an old logging camp at the mouth of the Bute River.

The Waddington Range course is so remote that float planes are the most time efficient and economical way to access it. Flying in a bush plane, although an adventure, can be disconcerting. I'm always nervous when it comes to landing, especially when the pilot shouts, "Look out for logs in the water!"



Our float plane leaving the dock on the Bute River. *Shawn Stratton*

As we flew into the Bute Inlet from the Campbell River, I didn't notice any menacing logs, but I caught my breath at the incredible landscape surrounding us. I could see many clear cuts scattered through the thick forests of the Coast Range Mountains. Squinting through the plane's windows, I caught glimpses of the great sparkling icefield looming in the distance, both enticing and intimidating with its prominent peaks, some rising up to 10,000 feet from the ocean.

At the logging camp we were greeted by a caretaker, who helped load our gear into his beat-up truck. He agreed to shuttle us up the horrendously overgrown logging road that would lead our way to the glacier, saving several hours hiking in mosquito-infested grizzly bear territory.

For two days we climbed steadily through dense willow and alder-covered vegetation, creeping slowly higher to the glacier, which was over 6,000 feet above where we'd started, at sea level. During that time, I encountered the steepest and most strenuous bushwhacking I'd ever experienced. There was no such thing as a trail. It was a relief for everyone when we finally scrabbled over boulders and loose rocks to emerge out from the treeline. Finally, we stood at the base of the icefield.



A student learning to ice climb. *Shawn Stratton*

The first eight days traveling across the glacier were ones of tempestuous weather. We faced driving wind and a rainstorm that forced us to secure our tent with climbing rope and soaked our nylon walls, forming puddles on the tent floor. As it was July, we also encountered broad blue skies, full of bright sunshine that bounced off the snow, creating temperatures reaching 70 degrees.

This sunshine was not necessarily a blessing; it spurred a rapid melt of the ice beneath our feet, opening countless yawning crevasses.



Practicing glacier travel techniques on the Homathko Icefield. *Shawn Stratton*

During this first week we focused on teaching basic wilderness/glacier living skills along with glacier travel techniques. We managed the occasional climb, too. We got to know each other well and I experienced what it was like to share a tent with Heather and Joel, two of the nicest, but messiest, people I've met. I was constantly amazed that it was always virtually impossible to find anything under the debris in our tiny three-person tent.

Heather and Joel were like two sides of the same happy-go-lucky coin; both full of the enthusiasm and passion that fuels a love for climbing and adventure. With so many challenging peaks around to climb, it was sometimes hard to focus on the technical logistics of teaching. Often Heather or Joel would spy an enticing mountain and bursting with excitement would point and shout, “I want to climb that! Who’s with me?”

Dwindling Supplies

By day 10 of our 31-day adventure we were making progress, but we were getting low on supplies and needed to re-ration. We’d organized for a helicopter to deliver our next 10 days of food to the snow-covered rocky outcrop that was our current campsite. Our location was on a ridge 7,500 feet to the west of the highest summit on the icefield, Mount Grenville, which we were preparing to climb. The cost and logistics of helicopter re-rations in this remote area are exorbitant. To ease the burden on the school, it was imperative to do two re-rations together. The plan was for the helicopter to land near our current camp and drop off the first ration, then one of the instructors would jump in and fly with the pilot to the location where we wanted to stash our second ration. The instructor would dig a deep hole in the snow and bury the food and fuel. They would mark the cache with several three-foot bamboo wands topped with small flags and on the GPS. The pilot would then fly the instructor back to camp

and pick up the accumulated garbage and head back to his base.

On the day our re-rations were scheduled to arrive, the weather was unsettled. One minute low clouds entirely surrounded our camp and the next a hole would break through, revealing sun and blue sky. Using our satellite phone we contacted the helicopter base and spoke to the pilot's wife to find out when we could expect our re-ration. At this time of year the pilot is often busy fighting forest fires and generally fits deliveries in when he has time or is in the area. She explained what we already knew: the weather was uncertain. She also told us a large storm was headed our way and that it might last four or five days. Helicopters are amazing aircraft but they don't like bad weather and above all need good visibility to fly. It was agreed we would call back after lunch and give a weather update at our location.

We ended the call deeply concerned and disheartened. A storm appeared imminent and we wouldn't get our rations for four or five days if we didn't get them in the next few hours. The large weather system moving in would prevent the helicopter from reaching us. We called a team meeting to let everyone know the situation. We asked the students to gather all the food and fuel we had left. As we sorted our rations, stress levels skyrocketed when we realized our food supply consisted of a few soup and oatmeal packets and spice kits. It wasn't much to sustain a group of hungry climbers planning to scale Mount Grenville, particularly several ravenous college guys. On these expeditions our packs are so heavy that we carry little extra food—plus we know we can

survive for a long time fairly comfortably on soup. Because we are backed by a large organization, we're also never likely to be stuck for too long before receiving an emergency food drop.

Our biggest concern was our fuel levels. We depended on fuel to melt snow to make water for drinking and cooking. Without fuel we'd have no drinking water. We could survive weeks without food but only days without water. Different techniques can be improvised, like laying snow on a black garbage bag, but that only produces a minimal amount of liquid and wouldn't sustain a group of 15 adults. It also required bright sunlight.

With our remaining food inventoried, we scouted the rocky outcropping that was our campsite for any signs of running water. After about an hour, we found a small trickle that we could make work in a pinch. In the early afternoon, we checked in with the pilot. We decided that if we could see the sun, the helicopter could most likely land. He said he needed 20 miles of visibility to reach us. At that time the cloud cover was opening and closing, definitely not giving us 20 miles. The pilot told us to call him when the sky cleared and the latest he would leave his base to safely return before dark was 6 p.m.

Throughout the afternoon as the weather continued to fluctuate, the atmosphere around camp grew increasingly tense as the prospect of being stranded without food for days loomed. At 4:30 p.m. we could see more clear patches of sky. It seemed the weather was starting to break toward the north. We looked at our maps and tried to determine what we should be able to see with

20 miles of visibility. Not being meteorologists or pilots, we were woefully unable to gauge proper weather conditions for a helicopter. But by 5:45 p.m., the group was confident that there was at least 20 miles of visibility in the direction from which we expected the pilot to fly. In other directions there was nowhere near 20 miles of visibility. Knowing the poor extended forecast, we knew it was critical for our food to arrive before the bad weather hit, so we called the pilot, updated him on the conditions, and asked him to attempt the drop. He agreed, saying he'd arrive in about an hour.

Our food was on the way! The energy at camp shot up. There's nothing like the threat of food deprivation to send the spirits of a team of outdoor adventurers plummeting. As we waited for the helicopter, we cleaned up camp, tightened the guidelines on the tents, and marked the landing area with bright weighted bags. We decided Heather would be the instructor to fly off with the pilot to bury the second re-ration. She'd only be gone approximately 30 minutes so there'd be no need for her to take much more than a shovel and some flagging wands.

At 7 p.m. the group was overjoyed to hear the drone of the helicopter in the distance. We were getting our supplies! The pilot touched down on our makeshift landing pad in the snow without incident. He opened the door and tossed out five large green army duffel bags full of provisions. Ducking low, we pulled the bags away from the helicopter and Heather jumped in with a wave. A cloud of snow billowed up as the pilot lifted off and

headed to the second re-ration location. The students frantically emptied the contents of the bags on a tarp to divide up the food equally into four cook groups. We had little time to reorganize our supplies before the helicopter returned to drop Heather and pick up the garbage. With the exorbitant cost of helicopters and fickle weather, we didn't want it to have to wait for us.



Helicopter delivering our re-ration. *Shawn Stratton*

Stranded

Ten minutes later, I looked behind me and gasped as I saw a wall of low-level cloud moving toward camp. I stared in disbelief, as within minutes we were totally socked in, the cloud engulfing us worse than it had all day. With snow all around and now dense fog, it felt like being trapped inside a ping-pong ball.

Heather was gone and we knew there was no way the helicopter could land in these conditions. Our visibility was now approaching 30 feet, a far cry from the 20 miles the pilot wanted. We waited another five minutes before trying to contact the pilot with our ground-to-air radio, willing a gust of wind to blow the clouds away. But they were heavy and showed no signs of moving. Eventually we reached the pilot on the radio. He and Heather were on their way back, having successfully delivered the supplies, which were now safely buried in the snow out of the reach of wild animals, namely grizzly bears and ravens. They'd spent a few minutes tracking a trail of grizzly bear footprints for fun, but then noticed the deteriorating weather and were now heading back to camp.

"It looks like you're completely soaked in," the pilot said. "Get the juniors out of the way!"

Joel and I looked at each other slightly panicked. Did the pilot seriously mean he was going to attempt to land the helicopter in near-zero visibility? We were shocked, but moved everyone well away from the landing pad and gathered below a small rocky ridge. We could hear Heather in the helicopter. She sounded a bit queasy as the pilot maneuvered the aircraft, taking it to different elevations and approaches as he tried to find a hole in the cloud that could give him enough visibility to land.

"We're 15 miles out," the pilot crackled over the radio. "It doesn't look like we can get much closer. I might have to bring your girl back with me."

Knowing the forecast for the next several days was extremely bad and also realizing the enormous cost of helicopter time, we didn't like this suggestion at all. Another few minutes went by before the pilot came on the radio again. "We're 10 miles out now. I may have to drop Heather off."

Drop Heather off? In the middle of a glacier? We hadn't even thought of this possibility. Joel, usually so jovial, looked shocked at first, then furious. We clamored to respond, explaining to the pilot that 10 miles was too far away to drop her off without camping gear. Heather didn't have much more with her than the clothes she was wearing and a shovel. The threat of unseen crevasses on a glacier makes solo travel extremely dangerous. If Heather were dropped off she'd have to stay put until a rope team from camp could reach her. With prep and travel time it could take us 10 long hours to travel 10 miles, most of which would be in the dark as it was already nearly 8 p.m. We feared the danger that Heather and the rescue crew would face if we had to make that trek.

Finally, Heather came on the radio and we could hear her encouraging the pilot to get closer as she followed the GPS coordinates. "Nine miles... seven miles... six miles!" By this time everyone had gathered around the radio, fingers tightly crossed, cheering them on. "Four miles... Oh, it looks like I'm getting out!"

It was all happening so quickly. I wanted to shout "No! Stop!" But I knew the only other alternative at this point was for Heather to fly back and potentially be weathered in for days. Fortunately,

before Heather had left camp, she'd grabbed one of our Motorola radios. At least we could still maintain contact. We waited, hearts in throats, the radio silent now as presumably the helicopter powered down and Heather leaped out.

Finally, we heard her breathless voice crackle over the line. "I'm out."

"Where are you exactly?" Joel asked. "Give us your location, Heather."

"I'm on a small sort of rocky island on the glacier... a little south from the large mountain directly to your west. I'm roughly four miles from camp."

We marked the spot on our map and promised we'd reach her as soon as possible.

"Heather, we're a bit worried about your radio battery potentially dying," I said. "Let's disconnect for now and check in every 30 minutes with an update."

"Okay," Heather said, sounding brave, but I thought I could detect a hint of nervousness. It's very rare for a NOLS instructor to be suddenly all alone in the middle of a vast and treacherous glacier. The team flew about gathering equipment to travel across the icy expanses to reach Heather. Joel and I debated which one of us should be the one to go. In the end we decided both of us, along with several students in two rope teams. If just one instructor had gone and then fallen into a crevasse, the remaining students on the rope, with their limited experience of glacier travel,

would be in trouble. We hadn't yet had a chance to teach them the full protocol for crevasse rescue. We knew that the students staying behind at camp weren't going anywhere; they'd be fine on their own.

Darkness was fast approaching and by the time we set out it was nearly 9:30 p.m. Navigating with a map and compass, we left camp in two lines of three and four tethered together. As if on cue, the clouds lifted, presenting a calm, starry night and we hit our stride, making good time. The glacial ground beneath our feet was predominantly flat as we followed Heather's earlier instructions and headed on a direct course toward the large mountain looming ahead. After a few hours, we decided we must be within sightline of Heather's location. We radioed her to ask if she could see the lights from our headlamps.

"No, I can't see them!" Her voice carried over the static.

We flicked the lights on and off and moved around. "How about now?" I said.

"No, nothing."

"That's weird. We should be in the right place." We rechecked our location. "Describe exactly where you are again, Heather."

"I'm at the north end of the large mountain to the west of camp."

North.

"Heather, you told us south."

“I did?”

In the stress of being dropped off in the middle of a glacier with no equipment, she’d made a mistake and told us to head south when she was actually at the north end.

“It’s okay, we’ll redirect. It shouldn’t take too long. Keep an eye out for our lights.”

We headed north and within 20 minutes Heather shouted over the radio that she could see our lights. She sounded elated and extremely relieved. We picked our way to her location, our progress slowing as the ground beneath our feet became more uneven. Suddenly, someone’s foot broke through what must have been a tenuous snow bridge hiding a crevasse. We froze, hearts racing. We stood in a minefield of crevasses, half covered or deceptively totally covered by thin snow. We kept moving, but our progress ground to a crawl as we carefully prodded the ground and navigated the treacherous terrain. Several people had more close calls, their feet slipping frighteningly through the surface.



A rope team traveling across the icefield. *Shawn Stratton*

Toward midnight, we finally got close to Heather. Shivering and ecstatic she darted over her rocky perch to throw her arms around us. She was a little cold and hungry, but delighted to have her teammates by her side again.

“I have to admit, I really wasn’t ready to spend a night out here,” she said, her face pale in the moonlight. “I was terrified when it started to get dark that you wouldn’t find me.”

We clipped her onto one of our ropes, all at once incredibly grateful for the close proximity of each person there. Turns out alone time on a glacier is overrated. Glacial travel, with its ever-lurking threat of falling into fatal crevasses, is an example of teamwork at its best. The purpose of any team is to reach a goal that would be impossible to achieve in the same way alone. There was no way for Heather to cross the glacier safely on her own after she was dropped off by the helicopter, but she was confident her team would find her and bring her back to camp. To make any progress, particularly in a risky situation, team members must be able to trust in their group; otherwise, all progress stalls. Furthermore, the team must be skillful enough to support the member in need. It’s a symbiotic relationship and, in the case of glacial travel, is essential for basic survival.

With Heather clipped onto the rope, our team was once more complete. We left her lonely, rocky island, two lines of four now, and retraced our tracks over the ice to camp. We were ready to navigate whatever other challenges the next 20 days held in store.

As it turned out, Heather and Joel were destined to be a team for life. Shortly after our Waddington Range expedition they started dating, and today are happily married. I can't help thinking they must have the messiest house with the absolute best climbing walls.

Lesson: Expedition Behavior

I often sum up Expedition Behavior on a team as "doing your part and then some." It's about being the best teammate you can be, the teammate you would want to have by your side. It's doing things without being asked because you know they need to be done, or selflessly putting your personal goals aside for the advancement of the group.

As a leader or a teammate, is there anything you can do to improve the health of your group?

TEAMS ON THE EDGE GIVES READERS A FRONT-ROW SEAT

during challenging wilderness expeditions to remote locations in India, Mexico, Alaska, British Columbia, and the Yukon. Along the way, Shawn Stratton highlights the power of team dynamics and



"This book is an example of how some of the best lessons are learned in 'a classroom without walls.' Shawn's easygoing, natural storytelling teaches about teamwork at every turn, yet you get so wrapped up in the stories you hardly notice you're learning along the way."

— David Breashears
Filmmaker, Mountaineer, Author,
and Founder of Glacier Works

life-saving decision-making skills—skills that were put to good use as his groups navigated isolated mountain ranges, treacherous glaciers, and raging rivers.

Stratton offers a behind-the-scenes look into his time as a former senior instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). Juggling the roles of expedition leader, teacher, and medical care provider, he discovers that the secret to success lies in the strength of the teams around him.

TEAMS ON THE EDGE shares valuable leadership and team-building lessons that can be applied anywhere, from the wilderness to the workplace.