

ALL QUIET ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT:

THE REGENERATION OF MOUNT ST. HELENS

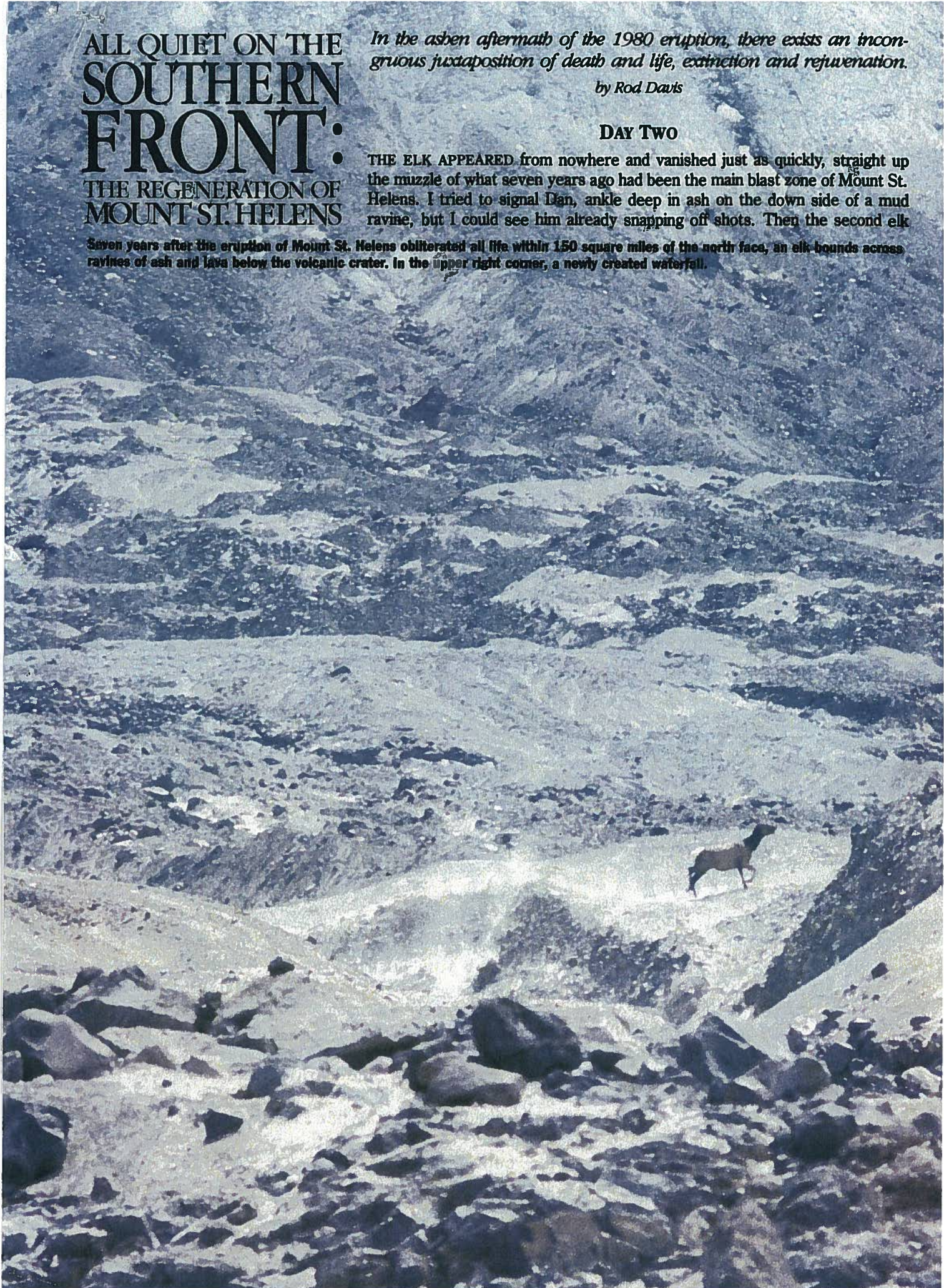
In the ashen aftermath of the 1980 eruption, there exists an incongruous juxtaposition of death and life, extinction and rejuvenation.

by Rod Davis

DAY TWO

THE ELK APPEARED from nowhere and vanished just as quickly, straight up the muzzle of what seven years ago had been the main blast zone of Mount St. Helens. I tried to signal Dan, ankle deep in ash on the down side of a mud ravine, but I could see him already snapping off shots. Then the second elk

Seven years after the eruption of Mount St. Helens obliterated all life within 150 square miles of the north face, an elk bounds across ravines of ash and lava below the volcanic crater. In the upper right corner, a newly created waterfall.





popped, leaping a flat plateau and scrambling for cover. Dan lowered his lens and said they were too far away, but to me, the distance was unimportant. For 7 hours and 10 miles we had been picking our way through a fraction of the 150-square-mile apocalypse 50 miles northeast of Portland that killed 57 people, 2,300 big-game animals, and untold smaller ones — a deadly force that destroyed, on national land alone, 1.6 billion board feet of timber, 100 miles of streams, 63 miles of roads, 13 bridges, 197 miles of trails, and 27 recreation sites. Total public and private damage, including the ashing of dozens of communities, exceeded \$1 billion. We had been traversing a monster, a geological dragon, below which all forms of life had been humbled by a mere spasm of earth. I had been drawn to that scene — who among us has not been stunned by St. Helens? — but to be in the presence of the effects of the cataclysm, even years afterward, had riveted me with more than intimations of mortality. The elk were life — random and capricious as death here had been. They could not have appeared at a better moment.

It was now 4 PM, and if Dan and I, on a special U.S. Forest Service pass, were to make it to the base of the lava dome inside Mount St. Helens's north face — the face that vanished May 18, 1980, reducing the Cascade mountain from 9,677 feet to 8,307 feet — we had to hump it. We faced a decision familiar to climbers: Was extra terrain worth extra risk? In this case, the issue was returning to our camp at Lahar Viewpoint in the dark. Since much of the 12-mile return trail along St. Helens's east flank would be along steep cliffs, over rocky ravines, across rubble-strewn plain as foreign as the moons of Jupiter, and then down a hairpin ridge in a dense fir forest, the amount of light was pertinent.

On the other hand, the lava dome inside the volcanic crater, now 800 feet high, 2,500 feet across, and rising at the rate of 100 feet per year, was steaming and gurgling ahead. Still, we were bone tired. Just yesterday we'd spent 13 hours on the newly opened south face, slogging up and down snowfields leading to the summit. The terrain ahead, known as the Pumice Plains, might have been great for curious elk, but for humans it was a labyrinth of poor footholds and sudden drop-offs. We'd be lucky to make it in less than two hours. I looked at Dan, a burly ex-Marine whose family in nearby Kelso had lived with this volcano all their lives. "We've got to do it," he said. "We're too close." I looked at my watch, the sinking sun, and the crater. If he was crazy enough, so was I. We dropped our pack — we'd left the other back at camp — and set off.

The climb was not just exhausting but punishing. Ridges of dried mud, called lahars, squiggled into box gorges. If the gorge was too deep, you had to turn back and walk around it. Otherwise, you could slither down as if on a sand dune and carve your way up the other side with an ice ax.

Dan beat me to the crest of the breach, the summit of Pumice Plains, by a good 15 minutes. I could see he was in photographer heaven. Had we taken a slightly different route several hours earlier we would have come in to the east, through a glacier pass, and arrived at the crater floor, which is one mile wide and two miles long. But this way seemed better, for the view of the inside of the crater was unobstructed. Dead ahead rose the mass of the dome, and to its right ran a hot-water river through a gully of stone, hundreds of feet below. We'd already skirted a steep waterfall. Thousands of feet above, we could see the snowcapped cornices of the interior of the south face. Just yesterday we had stood up there looking down. No wonder, standing up there on the rim, I'd gotten the willies. I had been walking on air, except for the snow pack.

Looking up from the last piece of earth on the north side that the explosion (equivalent to an estimated 400 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs) hadn't vaporized, I realized I had no feeling except sensory overload. Even humility had no meaning. It was a matter of being. I was alive, here, now, and this mountain was alive around me. I could hear it breathe, talk. Constant cascades of boulders and stone streamed down the rust-colored interior walls, as if to forever eliminate the distinction between animate and inanimate forces in nature.

Something ferocious had happened here, on a scale not rationally comprehensible. Those who dwelt on the surface had perished, incinerated in a 300-



ROGER WERTH

A 12-mile ash cloud rises from what remains of the peak of Mount St. Helens



after the May 18, 1980, eruption that killed 57 persons, thousands of animals,



and destroyed 150,000 acres of prime forest in the surrounding Cascade

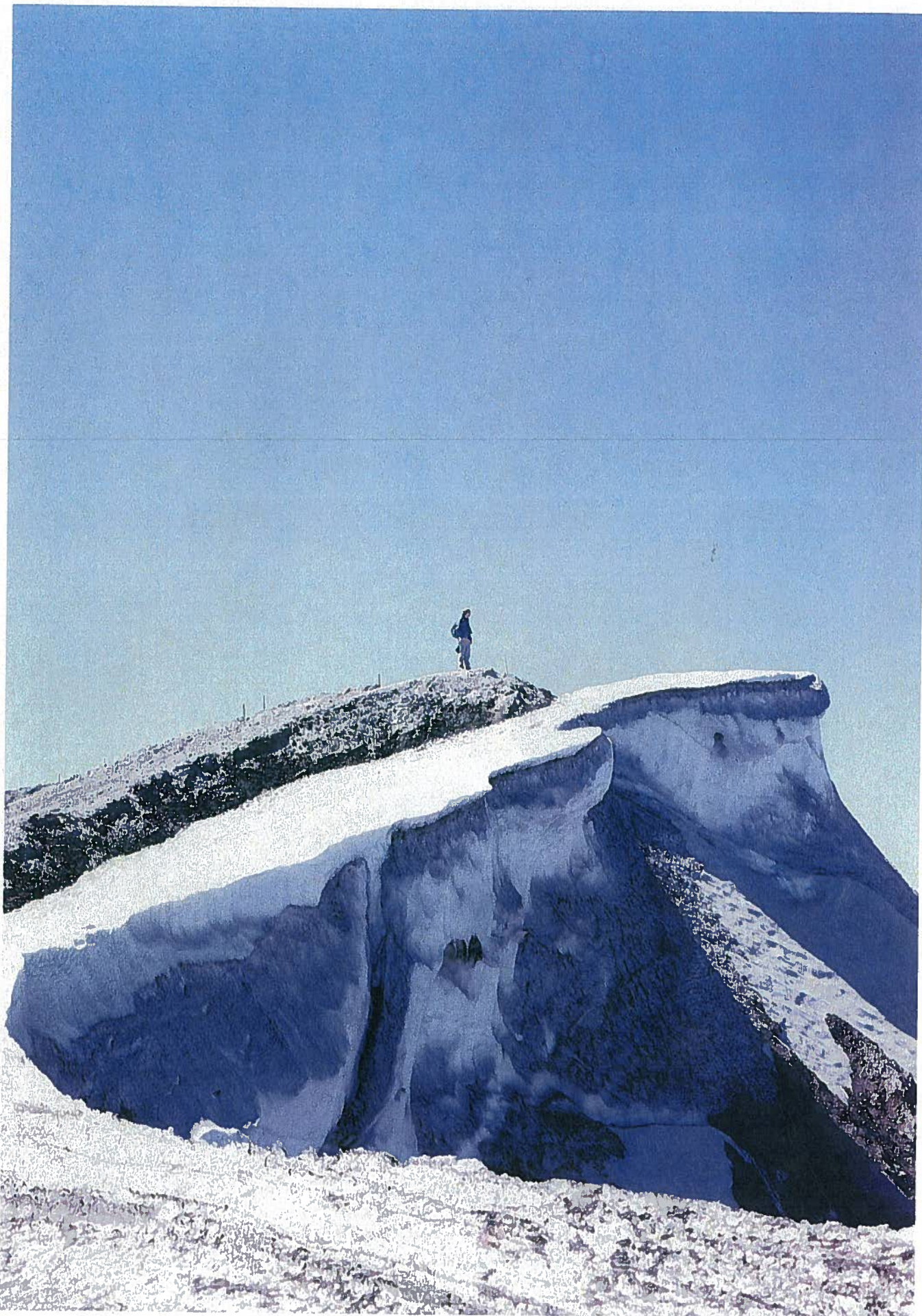


RALPH B. PERRY/APERTURE (3)

mountain range. The sudden eruption — faster and more forceful than had been expected — dropped the volcano from 9,677 feet to 8,307 and blew away the north face. Although little lava coursed out, the blast incinerated all in its path.



DAN MORRISON



DAN MORRISON PHOTOS



In climbing Mount St. Helens, Rod Davis moved from forest to snow pack to blast zone. So complete was the devastation that nothing in the blast zone survived, and scientists were doubtful that anything would regenerate, at least in the foreseeable future. But



nature has come back early. Snow-melt streams and rainfall runoff have cut through lava and pumice to open patches of soil capable of sustaining a variety of small, colorful plants, lichen to lupine. The U.S. Forest Service has declared many parts of the eruption area



off-limits and hopes to monitor the stages by which Earth replenishes itself. The silver firs and other large trees that once covered the area in lush greenery are still generations away, although seedlings are being planted near some areas such as Spirit Lake.



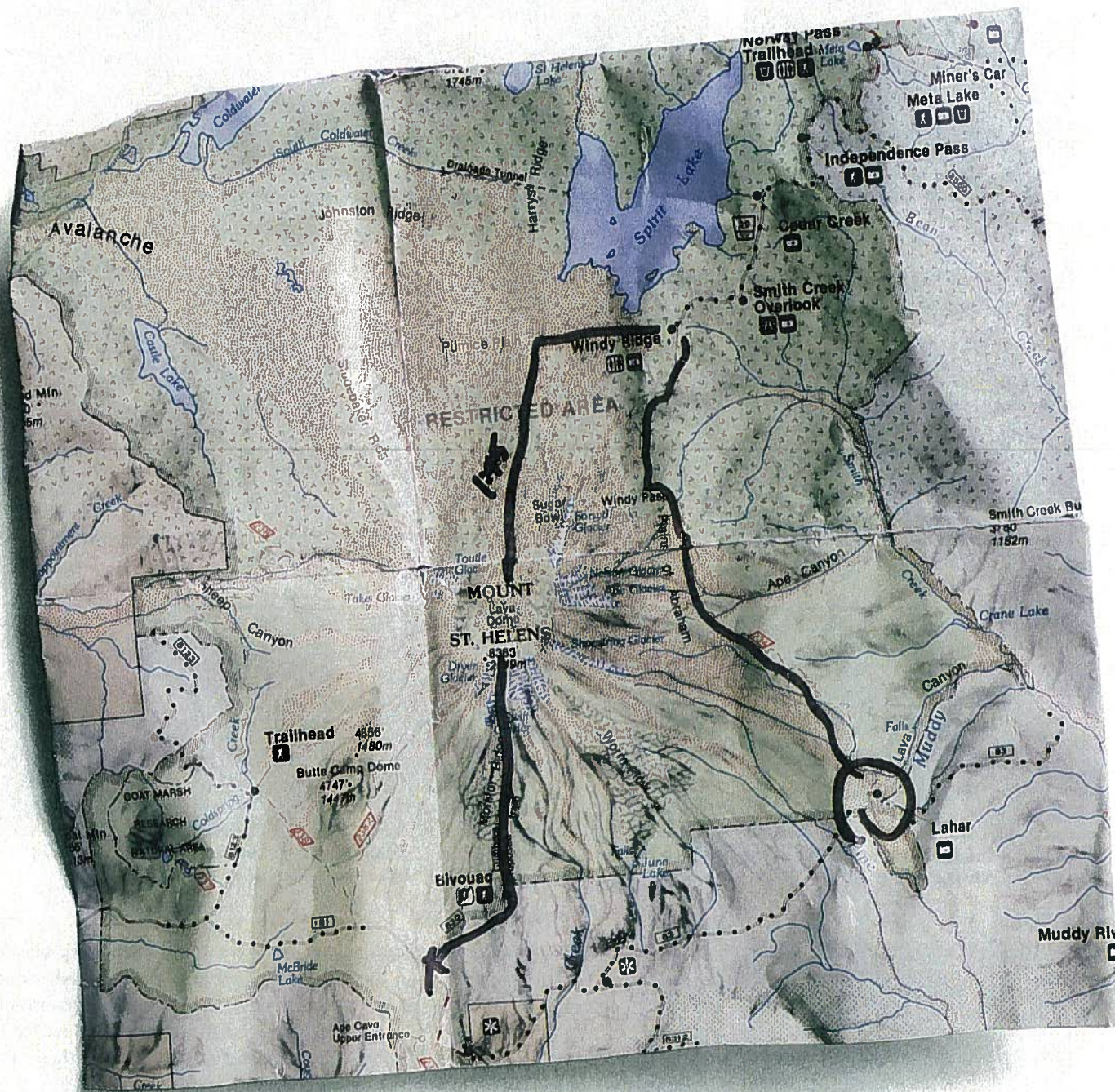
Opposite: On the summit of the south face a snowy cornice lines the jagged crown. The crater's interior wall abruptly drops thousands of feet. Above: Even today, evidence the volcano is alive and growing is clearly visible.

mile-per-hour traveling wall of 6,000 degree heat and ash (the pyroclastic blast). The surrounding range had been flattened and then buried by an ash cloud 70,000 feet high, dark as night, and filled with terrifying bolts of self-generating lightning. It was as if hell itself had spewed through a crack in Earth's surface.

But for me it wasn't metaphorical. Hell, heaven, terror, happiness — these are concepts within the minds of humans, and the meaning of Mount St. Helens was that Earth has its own lexicon and its own pace. It also has its own ritual of life, and even in the horror that was May 18 was the simple act of re-creation for the planet. For millennia, the shape of the land has been formed by such explosions. The fascination with Mount St. Helens is not with destruction but with birth. In my stupefaction at standing before the dome, the rim of the hollowed-out mountain rising like three batwings around me, I knew I was in a womb.

DAY ONE

Two mornings earlier, I had just been in line. It was 5 AM at Yale Park, a half-hour drive from the mountain. Eight cars waited in the breaking dawn before a small hut where Valerie Pierson issued U.S. Forest Service permits to the first 30 persons who arrived. It was chilly outside, in the upper 30s, but inside the heated hut, Ms. Pierson's two children lay asleep on a quilt. An accountant from Seattle was waiting to sign up; so was a young couple from Wisconsin who dropped by on impulse (he finished the climb; she didn't); and



a car filled with young Seattle professionals who inquired about the snow condition on St. Helens, because they planned to ski down.

"The ridges are fair and the gullies are good," replied Roland Emetaz, the wire-thin, 54-year-old recreation manager of the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, the official designation for the 110,000-acre reservation surrounding the mountain. The skiers decided to go up. So did I. As of May 15, the volcano has been reopened to limited-access climbing and camping.

Mr. Emetaz, a New Jersey native of Swiss stock who was drafted from the Portland Regional Forest Service office to handle the crush of media after the

U.S. Forest Service map of Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. Routes go up south face and around east flank into the north-face crater as marked. Red dots indicate mud and debris flow. Small "v"s indicate blast zone.

(Continued on page 72)

ALL QUIET ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

(Continued from page 42)

1980 eruption, knows the mystique that the mountain, now Washington's 77th highest peak instead of its 5th, possesses. About two million visitors have journeyed to the monument grounds since 1980, thanks to Mr. Emetaz, among others, who pressured officials to give it back to climbers. Under a plan based on consultations with northwestern area climbing clubs such as Ptarmigan and Mazamas, and federal and state officials who are primarily concerned about injury liability, 100 people a day, from May 15 through October 31, may obtain permission to climb the volcano. Thirty spaces are first-come, first-served, while the remaining 70 must be reserved in advance. In winter months, climbers must sign in at the registry office, but no permits are required, on the theory that the snow base protects the flora and the weather discourages all but the experienced.

A few miles down highway 503, through deep, green forests and clear, cold lakes, the monument headquarters processes 60 to 100 calls and 40 applications per day. Administrator Re-

nee Corso, who on busy days handles as many as 400 inquiries and has pressed every ranger in the office into telephone duty, had made more than 8,000 bookings by early June, just two weeks after the program began. The most distant permit was received by a man in Iceland. But the weirdest request came from an ex-logger in Seattle who wanted to fly in to Pumice Plains by helicopter with his fiancée and get married. "There's kind of a logic to it," says Ms. Corso, who is legally blind. "The guy used to be a logger and now he makes helicopters. . . ."

By 6 AM, the waiting line was gone and the permits — required to climb and camp above 4,800 feet — had been issued. A dozen or more spaces were left, a relief to Ms. Pierson. She often is confronted by irate visitor number 31 who, like Rachel mourning her children, will not be comforted.

Mr. Emetaz was going halfway up St. Helens with Dan and me, and we decided to get started. "You got your ice axes and crampons [metal cleats attachable to climbing boots] — that's good," he said, looking me over. "I tell

people when they call in they ought to take at least minimal equipment you'd need on any mountain, but we're getting climbers here we haven't seen before. People need to use good judgment. We've set up a good system here, but you can't check for judgment, which is the cause of most climbing errors."

St. Helens is not considered a difficult ascent by veterans — it's no Everest. Neither is it Central Park. Before the eruption, about 15,000 people a year went up the mountain, often a training ground for more difficult nearby peaks such as Mounts Hood, Adams, and Rainier. Some climbers didn't come down — in 1975, an unexpected avalanche caught a party of 29, burying 26. Five persons never got out of their sleeping bags. Other deaths and countless injuries attest to the dangers. A mountain is a mountain is a mountain. A wrong step, a careless pick, a miscalculated route — errors are not forgiven.

Mr. Emetaz's Forest Service jeep moved rapidly past Cougar, the closest town, and by 6:30 AM we were

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alongside a gravel-road campsite marking the beginning of Ptarmigan Trail. Through silver and Douglas fir and mountain hemlock brightened by snowbanks, the trail, recently cut at a cost of about \$10,000 per mile, snaked its way from 3,700 feet to 4,700. With 35-pound packs, it would take an hour and a half to climb. At its entryway was posted a sign: "Climbers and hikers. You may encounter hazardous conditions. You are responsible for informing yourself of these risks and for taking appropriate precautions."

It is one of the few signs Mr. Emetaz thinks is appropriate. He wants the mountain to be open but not "regulated." It seems an irony: Let the public in, but don't give them any breaks; visit nature, but not so she'll notice. "It's a matter of balance," said Mr. Emetaz, tramping behind us with the enthusiasm of a man freed from a 9 AM meeting back in Portland. By the time we paused at 4,500 feet to look out like eagles over 300-foot firs far below us, Mounts Hood and Adams protruded snowy white from a cotton field of low clouds. Mr. Emetaz watched a bird

glide up out of the valley. Something ascetic and serene, joyful and merciless — an odd and compelling objectivity — marked his expression. Balance covers plenty of ground.

Ptarmigan Trail, named for and maintained by the local Ptarmigan climbing club, at last broke through the forest and into a broad snowfield that marked the start of the real climb. We were at 4,700 feet, by Mr. Emetaz's altimeter. Ahead rose a series of rock- or snow-covered abutments that, in time, would yield a view of the summit. The first major ascent was Monitor Ridge, sloping out and up like a playground slide, ever more steeply, to crest the timberline. We took off our packs to rest. Dan and I replaced our sneakers with hiking boots. We could either walk farther, but at a softer angle, up the rock line, or take the snowfield elevator. We decided on the latter.

Mr. Emetaz hadn't been up the newly finished trail yet, and as he pointed out that our prospective route to Monitor Ridge, wide at the base and funneling up to a slender ribbon of white, was actually a classic avalanche

zone, a thought occurred to us simultaneously: strange place to end the trail. Mr. Emetaz reacted as if he'd just remembered he locked his keys inside the jeep. Avalanches, along with rapid weather changes and judgment errors, are a leading cause of mountain accidents. The prize new trail of St. Helens led to the run-out basin of what could be a hefty tumble of snow. Somebody was going to catch hell.

Today there was no danger. The snow was firm and not bunched up at the top. All we'd need were our crampons and axes to dig in when the climb became acute, a few degrees short of vertical. Before starting, leaving Mr. Emetaz to work his way back down Ptarmigan Trail, we heard voices coming from the meadow behind us. The four skiers we'd seen down at the registry booth that morning came into view.

Judith Ames, a 35-year-old furniture maker from Seattle, was in the lead. She and her companions, Marge, Hank, and Steve, all from Seattle, were regular climbers and skiers. They had packed light and would move faster than Dan and I. It hadn't occurred to



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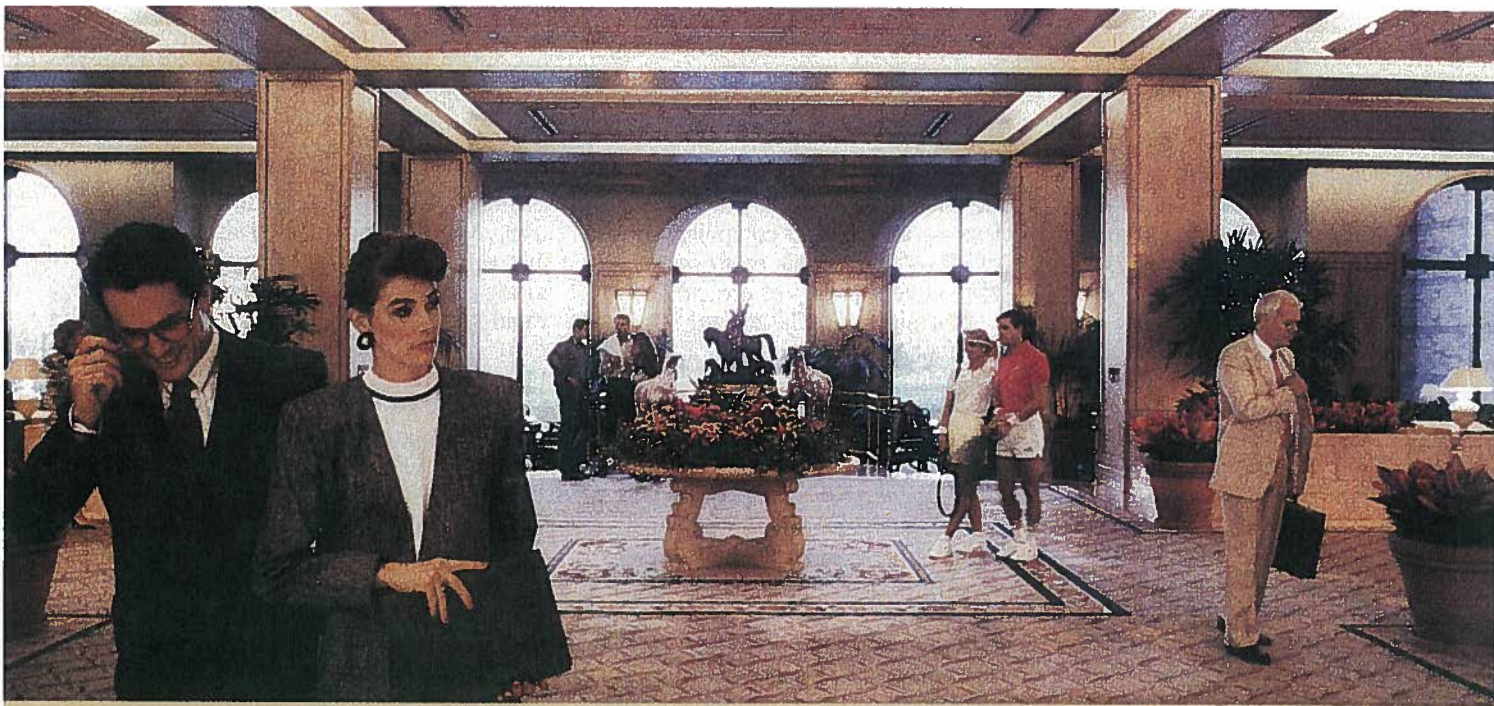
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me that people would want to ski down St. Helens — it seemed incongruous, somehow, and Mounts Hood, Adams, and Rainier probably have better snow. I asked why they came to St. Helens. The answer was what mine would have been, the same rationale that will draw up to 17,000 climbers each season: "Because it blew up."

Going up Monitor Ridge convinced me mountaineering was not to be my sport, and simultaneously filled me with awe at the James W. Whittakers of the world who go out for weeks or months to climb mountains, carrying with them all they will need to survive, in conditions where survival takes everything you've got. It took an hour to reach Monitor Ridge peak, the last few hundred feet 15 to 20 steps at a time, kick stepping into the ice-glazed snow with crampon spikes, picking for inches with my ice ax, keeping my vision uphill, because looking down caused untoward speculation.

We gained a rocky promontory and rested. Looking up, I thought the next ridge was the summit, but it was wish-

ful thinking. We resumed the climb, moving up the south face east of the usual route. Our ascent was through channels of snowfields bounded by rock lines cordoning one field from another as neatly as stone fence rows. The sun stayed with us, but as we gained elevation the wind increased, and by the time we reached a weather monitor I had put my long-sleeved shirt back on. My skin was reddening, so I slapped on blocking lotion. The summit was still two hours away, but now I could see it, a ragged semicircle. It was an odd feeling — like encountering someone undressing. Private, personal. I was climbing something that had humbled my life form, and I was standing in its sanctum. The price of its triumph could be seen as cold and clear as a stranger's face the morning after.

This sense of witnessing a violation, a mutilation of both life and geology, pervaded the reactions of most other climbers. In the interminable final snowfield below the summit, four men were glissading, a fancy name for sliding on your butt down the hill. "I climbed the mountain every year be-

fore the blast," sighed Park Peterson, a Seattle salesman in a bright-red snowmobile suit. "To go to the top now and see it that way. . . ." He shook his head. "You have no idea." He pushed himself off with his ice ax, down the hill, carving a smooth rut in the snow behind him.

Mr. Peterson was right. I had no idea what the mountain had been, but on reaching the summit, I could see what it was now. Make a mound of mud, scoop out the north side with your hand, and you have St. Helens. Not a mountain as much as the perimeter of one; a shell around the emptiness of spent power.

Standing on the rim of the shell I first saw evidence of the force that had been here. Fanned out like a cone of gray was the signature of the eruption and 5.0 earthquake. All that had stood was gone. On that terrible day, photographer Reid Blackburn had set up a camera eight miles away, thinking he would be safe. He was found in his car, suffocated, unable to snap more than a few frames before the curtain of white heat and gray-black ash enveloped him.

A geologist who came to monitor the anticipated blow also underestimated the pent-up energy. Instead of three hours' warning, as scientists had predicted, there were seconds. "Vancouver, Vancouver, this is it," said David Johnston, and he was buried.

The summit was overlaid with thick, grayish snow, forming a cornice. Sections of the snow were crackling, and few who made the climb that day wanted to tread upon it long. But I had not come eight hours up the south face to let the chance of a sudden, 2,000-foot fall stop me from a peek into the crater. I inched out and stared down.

In the middle was the dome, growing as we watched it. Quiet at the moment, but there have been 24 eruptions since 1980 — the last one in October, 1986. Bursts of dried lava speckled its exterior like tumors. By permit, you could climb onto the crater floor, provided there was a snow covering to protect new soil and flora.

Beyond the crater and dome, dried mud and lava had coursed down to form Pumice Plains, the crinkled, new surface I would invade the next day. It led

to Spirit Lake, once the most beautiful resort in the Cascades, now half full of timber and debris. The water has slowly come back to life, and some plants are regenerating. Along the shore of the lake, somewhere underneath the ash flow, lies Harry Truman, a stubborn widower who refused to evacuate. All the hills north, nearly as far as I could see, were skinned clean.

I retreated from the cornice and walked eastward to another vantage point on the rim. I had never seen anything like it. Short of atomic-bomb sites, no one has. I sat down on a gravel ledge several yards in from the edge and looked back to the green, fir-lined south. "That's what the north side used to look like," said Dan, retrieving a cook pan from his pack. I thought about that and watched another group of climbers coming up the snowfield. We boiled water for dehydrated stew and drank a quart of lemonade each and shared the last Toblerone bar. It was still sunny. The wind had calmed. I thought about Yeats's phrase "A terrible beauty is born." I lay back against the crest of Mount St. Helens and fell asleep.

DAY TWO, CONTINUED

In the Pumice Plains, there was no time for rest. Having deliberately pushed our assault on the breach point to late afternoon, Dan and I faced a certain homeward hike in the dark. Already we were feeling the effects of fatigue. Turning our backs on the dome at nearly 5 PM, we scrambled to retrieve our pack and other gear. We'd been three hours without water, and the combination of strenuous exertion, altitude, and choking ash left my throat parched and sore. By the time we realized we had taken the wrong plateau down the plains and had lost the pack among the dozens of ravines and gullies, I was tempted to drink from one of the snow-melt streams cutting through the new earth. But the water was brown with silt.

We had made a judgment error. Now it was 6 PM — three hours from sunset. It would take at least five hours to reach our campsite, and if we couldn't find the pack left en route, we could spend the last of the sunlight looking for it, or abandon it and head

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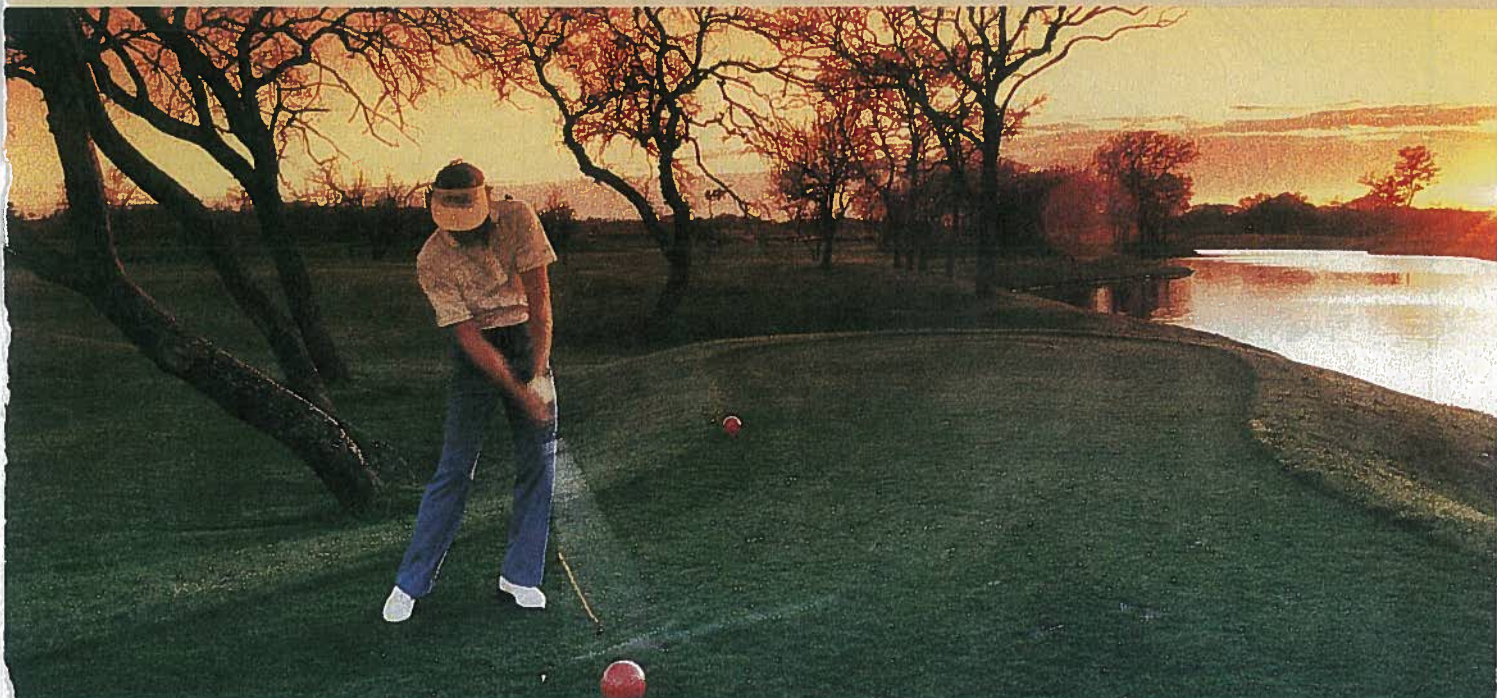
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back. But the pack contained warm clothing as well as water (no bedrolls), and if for any reason we didn't make it back that night, freezing temperatures would, at the least, make our lives miserable. How thin the line between excitement and disaster. The sight of the dome and the crater and the elk had pumped us up so high that we'd made a foolish blunder and not marked our pack position. Nor had we retraced our own footsteps coming down

— we thought we could find a faster way. Enough helicopters and light planes were flying overhead to remove the risk that we could be stranded if we were in serious trouble, but trouble on the mountain creeps up, and after sundown there would be no air patrols.

Dan foraged 100 meters down and to my left. I worked the ridges up and to the right. Each time I looked back to take a fix on the dome and waterfall,

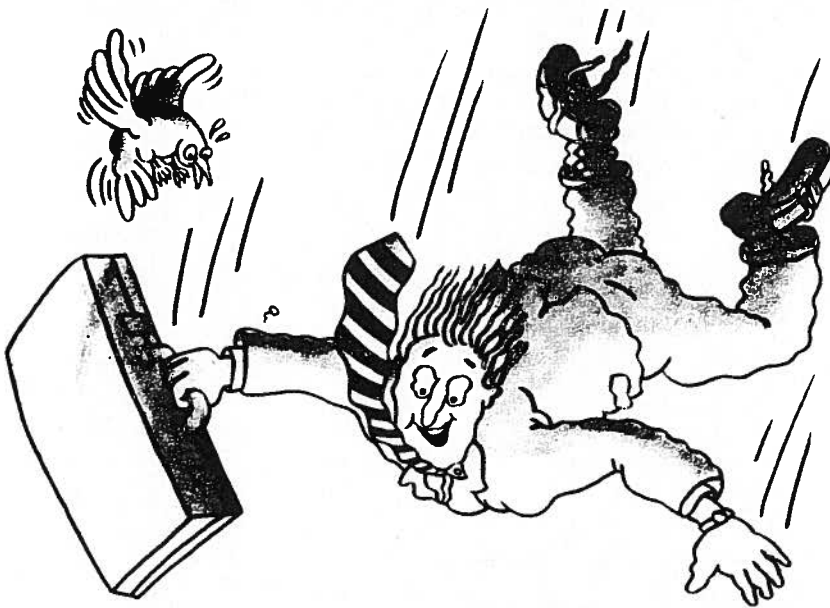
I was incredulous we couldn't spot a bright-blue pack against flat gray dust. Clambering up a gully, swearing at myself and more than a little reckless, I suddenly saw Dan sitting down, at least 300 meters farther downhill than I knew the pack could have been dropped. I was wrong, and he was drinking water. "Man," I exhaled, dropping beside him and unscrewing a plastic flask. "Yeah," he said. We didn't move for five minutes.

We figured if we could make it past the Plains of Abraham, a flat, rubble-strewn corridor along the eastern edge of the blast zone, we could cross the clifftop near Ape Canyon and follow the forest ridge trail home under the full moon. We each downed a Jolt cola and chocolate bars and headed off; we would be living off sugar and caffeine the rest of the trip. We'd taken no food, thinking the journey was about half as long as it became. Although we had two pounds of Hi-Pro Trail Mix bought at REI Co-op, the outdoor provisions nirvana in Portland, we'd already sickened of it. I would have starved before taking another mouthful of carob chips, coconut, sunflower seeds, and dried fruit. We came off the plains and worked our way up an old logging road to the trail along Windy Ridge. An elk, perhaps the one we'd already seen, had been on the path since we came in, its footprints fresh and deep in the powdery ash. For a couple of miles we traversed Afghanistan-like terrain, hugging steep cliffsides, past 100-foot tree trunks snapped off seven years ago and poking up from the ashen hillsides like bones in a compound fracture. At the base of one ravine, a fresh and clear stream ran under a snow coverlet. We filled our canteens and water jugs.

The sun was still above the horizon behind us when we hit the wide, desolate Plains of Abraham, but shadows were rapidly overtaking our path. We lost the lava cairns (pyramid-shaped markers) once, costing us 10 to 15 minutes, but slogged across a mud and snow ditch to pick up the trail. Just before the mountains blocked the sun, we crossed the Ape Canyon lookout and headed into the forested ridge.

For a while I took the lead. The trail was only a few feet wide. In daylight, that was plenty, but at night the edge often blurred, and the dark colors of the plants and trees offered little com-

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pensating guidance. I tried to set a good pace — there was still a twinkling of light — but about a third of the way down I slowed considerably, distracted by small white flowers strewn along the way that began to have a hypnotic effect.

Any concerns about falling off the ridge gave way to exhaustion and a single-minded determination to make the campsite. Not since army days had I experienced this kind of dumb, numb fatigue. We didn't stop during the final two hours because it was too hard to start up again. I'm in reasonably good shape for a 40-year-old man — run with Heavy Hands every other day, eat healthily, non-smoker — but this 22-mile, 14-hour night-marching business was a test of will rather than stamina; stamina was spent.


By 10:30 PM, my mind was playing tricks. I saw shapes move in the forest, had all manner of weird thoughts. My body was on automatic pilot, but my head was strictly free form. I came to a place in the trail where two big firs had fallen, blocking the way. I stood there several seconds, trying to compute an alternate course. I saw a man walking toward me.

"Dan?" I couldn't imagine who else it could have been, but I wasn't sure.

"Yeah. Here, let me have the camera case." I yielded it, thinking he wanted a moonlit shot of the mudslide area off to the right. But he slung the case over his shoulder and walked on. It came to me that he was taking some of my weight.

After crossing a rock-laden stream, we reached the campsite. Later, Dan told me he'd been going on adrenaline the last few miles, and when we got to the camp he was completely used up.

Around midnight we reached Cougar, hungry and tired past acknowledgment. The bartender at the Wildwood Inn, a logger's roadhouse, obliged us with ham sandwiches, microwave pizza, and coffee. The way we looked and smelled, she might just as easily have thrown us out. It was all sinking in, the scope of what we'd done — a long march into the very lair of creation and back, in a single day.

Driving to Portland two days later, my legs stiff and my ears stinging with sunburn, I glanced over to the west and saw St. Helens rising in the dawn. I was surprised at how big it looked, and I thought, yeah, I took you. 

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