

THE THIRD ATTEMPT

The Snow is Melting: Departure Time

From Fred Braches, a respectable Canadian journalist, I learned that snow levels were still high in the mountains. I also received similar messages from Rob Nicholson. Meanwhile it was mid-August 2008. Was there still a realistic chance that the snow would have melted at the target elevation?

My friend Hans checked the nearest Webcams daily and made predictions with stoic optimism. During spring we had superbly prepared ourselves. Detailed plans had been made and our physical condition had to reach a high level. Then, at short notice, another project required our total involvement and tied us up for several months. During winter and spring we waited for a promised extension of the project but administrative complications brought it to a temporary halt.

By now we were worse prepared than in spring. Of course, equipment and knowhow had not changed. Hans made daily hikes in the park with a loaded backpack, but my day-to-day routine did not allow me doing such necessary exercises.

Time was running damned short. "We want to, we must go into the Coast Mountains!" In the course of our work of last year I had met Gottfried Grass. This marketing person recommended strongly: "Finish that story and come back with good pictures." He arranged for tickets at a considerable discount and graciously made his excellent camera available for our use. Unfortunately we could not use his tickets because we had booked flights only a few hours earlier, and in the hectic hours before our departure we simply forgot to take the spare batteries for his camera along with us. Nevertheless we did return with memorable pictures and their documentary value is only slightly diminished by the lack in resolution.

Hurdles Overcome

The day after we four and my dog landed in Vancouver we visited the helicopter pilot we knew from previous years. In spite of our talking and urging he could or would not take us because of his commitments to regular customers. So we had to resort to plan B and do it the hard way. We had to find suitable lightweight food high in calories. We could not bring this with us because of strict import restrictions on foodstuffs by the Canadians. We could not find any outdoor equipment shops and we looked without success through a number of supermarkets for dehydrated food suitable to take on the expedition to keep us fit. We took along some salamis and powdered drinks, but in the end we heard about a well-stocked outdoor shop in Squamish where we struck it rich. Hans had prepared a food plan and assigned the daily food rations for the seven-day hike and climb.

After several hours of driving we reached the spot where we had our base camp back in 2003. In the streambed of the creek running close by we discovered two bottles of Argentine beer—how could someone forget those! By way of an admonition we confiscated the bottles and passed them around for general wellbeing and relaxation.

The Climb

It took us five days to climb up to the mountains. On average we needed one hour to advance a miserable 200 metres. Much work with the machete was needed. Because of climate change shrubs, and in particular the annoying, thorny devils club, had grown more in the last four years than before in forty years. Old logging roads, where five years earlier we could proceed with relative ease, were now fully covered with thick shrubbery. Land slides and dangerous scree fields required much attention and sweat and every now and then one heard a suppressed but also loud a profanity when someone slipped or hurt himself. I cursed my rifle, as I never had both hands free. The thick shrubs only allowed a visibility of a few metres and the noise from the nearby creek precluded our hearing anything else. That is why I did not carry the rifle over my shoulder, and had a hard time keeping branches and thorny growth away.

When we reached the steep mountains, Lutz and I found a sleeping spot on a 70 by 160 centimetre mini ledge. Hans and Sven had to rope up to secure themselves on their sloping beds. Sven is a tough

guy, ex-paratrooper, sport student etc. but by the third day he had enough and his nerves were raw. He felt overtaxed by the climbing and did not want to see any rope or carabiner clip for some time.

As even our lightest tent would have been too heavy, we slept under the stars. We had to pass several "rock-and-boulder slides," juggled across tree trunks and rocks of all kind of unimaginable sizes. It is almost a miracle that none of us broke any bones. I was always the first to be roped down and that kept the adrenalin level high. At one point when I talked with Gottfried's wife via satellite phone I could, overcome by emotion, not speak because of a lump in my throat. Here I listened to the normal world and only a few minutes ago I had almost dropped, backpack and all, holding on to only two roots. The feeling of helplessness and being totally dependent of the help of others had shaken me deeply—it was just too much.

We conquered the 120-metre waterfall where we turned back in 2003 and also numerous steep snowfields. Using a rifle as a walking stick is problematic, but it works, or so I imagined in order to stop cursing unhappily all the time. I envied my terrier for its claws. Kinski put up his radar ears in the evening and when he heard or smelled something strange he barked and kept our camp free of bears and cougars. Therefore we never had to shoot and slept well protected.

Wishes and reality

Then frustration set in. Ahead of the severely reduced glacier the melting water now filled a one-hectare (ca. 2.5 acres) lake that blocked our way. Rising up on the sides were steep and smooth rock-faces, leaving us no way to pass. On Google Earth 2007 it had looked quite different, but this was the shocking fact. A kingdom for a Zodiac! With the glacier water just about freezing no one would want to enter it or go through it. It would have killed us in a few minutes. Should we go around it all and approach from the other side? That would have taken us two days and we did not have the time to do that—our airline tickets had fixed dates. Okay, let's get out. When we return everything will still be there as Stu Brown left it decades ago and considering the conditions no one will hit upon it by chance. With that thought I already felt somewhat better.

Painful facts

Sven did not want to walk anymore and talked about flying out. Our knees and knee tendons bothered us. After all one isn't born to rope up and carry a backpack. My large bumps and hematomas on the shin and several infections on open wounds troubled me. Even my Kinsky had visible traces of all the mosquito attacks.

Because of the peculiarity of the rental agreement of our satellite phone we only had ten call units available. The man at the phone rental office had all our credit card information and said to me: "You can start calling right away." Because we did not realize the limitation, Sven wasted eight call units talking with his daddy so there were only two units left on this Friday evening. To call for a recharge would have meant one more call. The service number was free of charge, but staff would not be available until Monday morning. How much would I have liked to slowly strangle the man at phone rental office in the presence of the hotline staff! So, only two calls left and we wanted and had to get out—our flight home would not wait for us. Because of the short time available the only option was a descent via another route over a ridge; not overgrown, but on either side going 400 metres straight down.

Rescue Plan

Putting aside democracy, I then decided that we would call for an airlift out, although it is strictly prohibited to land there. Therefore we agreed to fake a limp so that at least from the air the situation would look like an emergency. I then called Rob Nicholson, my Canadian friend in Kelowna, leaving a message describing our situation and asking him to call us back at the hour—that worked like a charm.

The next day, to give the expected helicopter crew a clear sign where we were, we spread our light-coloured textiles on the ground in the shape of a cross. Using our camp stove we put fire to some moist small shrubs as a fire signal. Then the helicopter came but disappeared in the wrong valley and the noise of the engine diminished. We held our breath and listened. Never before did the creek

nearby sound so loud and even disturbing. Suddenly the helicopter appeared again very small and high in the sky above us. It was flying so high that we could not hear the noise of the engine and it disappeared again behind the mountains. At last the chopper reappeared over a ridge and we tried to intensify our smoke signal, while Hans and I reflected the sunlight to the helicopter with the mirror of our compass. They saw us and after a few turns and flying around the helicopter stood a stonethrow away from us. At first we limped as agreed, but the situation was so pleasant and relaxed that we soon forgot the nonsense and focused on these nice people. They offered us power-bars of the kind of which we were sick by now and had joked about in the last few days.

And there, our pretended injury would not have been necessary. The helicopter crew thought highly of our efforts calling them "great." They flew us back to our car and did not need our signature or any other obligations. What had my great friend Rob done for us? I was a bit ashamed but enjoyed the most beautiful flight of my life, because the pilot took us to all those spots I wanted to see from close up and he commented about our efforts as if we had discovered the stone of wisdom. Did I make sufficiently clear how grateful I and we were and will be forever?

Goodbye and see you again.

Immediately after that we drove to Kelowna to meet Rob Nicholson [...] We shared our latest experiences with him and arrived at final conclusions. Since then we have known that we'll give it another go.

From an e-mail by Rob Nicholson dated 29 November 2010:

What he [Lennartz] wrote in his journal is unbelievable to me actually. If you listen to his voice on the video you can hear him ask, almost in a panic voice, where the Rescue people were. He did have me believing he was in an emergency situation in 2008 so I of course initiated the rescue only to find out when he arrived in Kelowna that there was in fact no emergency....they simply ran out of time to be able to make their flight at the Vancouver Airport so they faked the emergency.

The rescue this year, in my opinion, was under similar pretext.....no one looked the worse for wear on the news broadcast....everyone looked healthy and no one was limping or appeared to be injured.

Anyway, no sense in rambling...just hope everyone understands why and it has nothing to do with him looking for the gold.