

Mount Sanford...errrr, Mount Jarvis. Wait, what?? Mount Who??

It was roughly around Thanksgiving 2016 and the time had come for me to book my next IMG adventure. With two young children at home and no family close by, I had settled into a routine of doing a big climb every other year. This year was a bit different, as I normally book my major climbs around September for an April or May departure the following year. However, due to a Mt. Blackburn (Alaska) trip falling through, I had to book another expedition.

In 2015, I was on an IMG team that summited Mt. Bona from the north side, not the original plan (jot that down – this will become a theme in Alaska), and really enjoyed the solitude, adventure, physical challenge, small team, and lack of schedule the Wrangell & St Elias Mountains had to offer. So, I hopped on IMG's website, checked out the scheduled Alaskan climb for 2017, which was Mt. Sanford, and peppered George with my typical questions. Everything lined up, so I completed the pile of paperwork (do I really have to sign another waiver?!?), sent in my deposit (still no AMEX, ugh...), set my training schedule, and started Googling trip reports about Mt. Sanford. Little did I know that **READING** about Mt. Sanford was the closest I would ever get to it!

Pulling from my previous Alaskan climbing experience, I was better prepared for this trip than for Mt Bona in 2015. Due to our bush pilot's inability to safely land us on the south side of Bona two years prior, we flew up, around, and over the mountain and landed on the north side. So coming into this trip I engrained in my mind only two guarantees:

1. I would be on a flight from Atlanta to Anchorage on April 21st.
2. The team would be on a van that left Anchorage early Sunday morning for the Chitina airstrip to, once again, meet Paul Claus our bush pilot.

Outside of that – would we fly that day, where we would fly that day, what side of the mountain we would land on, the weather - all bets were off. I mentally planned for a “hurry up and wait” schedule, mixed with a LOT of patience, and a “don't worry about tomorrow” mantra. On a trip the team would jokingly change the official name of to “PLAN B”, this proved to be the absolute best strategy.

Friday, April 21st: Departure Day

As is always the case when you're excited for anything, the last couple days before departure seems to take foorrreevvveerr. After going through the standard living room, gear check explosion the night before, my wife and kids whisked me off to the airport to catch my 11am flight to Anchorage. After a quick stop in Chicago, we were on to Alaska for an 8pm arrival. The trip was fairly uneventful, outside of the fact we had to go north into the Yukon Territory due to a strong jet stream. The terrain in Northern Canada is absolutely breath taking and the sky is just a different shade of blue.



Saturday, April 22nd: Team Arrival Day

The day the team arrives is always exciting to me; it's a chance to meet new guides (Aaron Mainer), reconnect with old ones (3rd climb with Mike Haft), and to experience mountain climbers' version of speed dating – a dinner where you have very little time to become acquainted with 6 people you've never met before, but will soon be tethered to, possibly rely on to save your life, and share an outdoor toilet with that doesn't flush!

As customary, the group met in the hotel lobby with plans of heading to a local watering hole for dinner. We had one climber staying in a neighboring hotel, so we swung by to pick him up and conduct official introductions. This took a bit of extra time because Gonzalo, who would also become my tent mate, was sleeping. We quickly learned that in a week's time, he had been to Rome, Paris, somewhere else in Europe, Mexico, and Los Angeles for work. In 7 days! Insane. He literally didn't know what day it was. Or what time it was. Or where his bags were. Plan B, anyone?

Aaron immediately leaped into action, made some phone calls, and tried to work out a strategy to get his bags to us prior to the next morning's departure. I believe we were told the bags would arrive by 10pm that night, so, satisfied with that potential outcome, off to dinner we went. An empty restaurant was tough to find, as it was the first "nice" day in Anchorage since winter broke, so the locals were out in force.

While on the way to dinner, Mike sprung on us that the van would be leaving Anchorage at 4:45am the next morning. Wait, 4:45?!?! Aren't we on vacation? You could hear the collective groan from the group. Thankfully, Mike likes to sleep in, so he jumped on the horn, tossed around his IMG street cred, and got our departure time moved back.....to 5:00am. Ouch.

A great dinner was had by all while Aaron and Mike explained the virtue of patience, detailed a plan-less plan, and spit-balled a few ideas in case Gonzalo's missing gear didn't show up. Full off our last big meal, coupled with a long day of travel, and an upcoming early wake-up call, we all crashed for the evening.

Sunday, April 23rd: Departure Day

Regardless of how early you normally get up, 4:30am in any time zone is never easy. Like zombies, the team lugged all their duffels, as well as about 7-8 IMG duffels with the team gear, out to the curb. Our van arrived soon after and with the sun starting to create a pink glow over the horizon, and Denali making an appearance to our north, we piled into the van and began the 5 hour ride to Chitina.

Given the early wake up call, this is one of those drives that you desperately want to sleep through, however, the scenery, or you picking a seat that sits right over a vent blowing 200 degree heat up your backside, makes it impossible. With the Chugach Range to your south and potential elk and moose sightings, it's very easy to take 50 pictures before the van is even half way to Chitina.

Roughly 3.5 hours into the ride, the group starts to stir as Mt. Sanford and Mt. Drum became visible over the horizon – towering over all the other mountains at the western end of the Wrangells. As the road dead ends in Glenallen, we make a right turn onto Richardson Hwy and continue our journey to meet Paul, all while burning up our cameras with amazing views of Mt Sanford, Mt Drum, and Mt Wrangell.

Sunday, April 23rd: The Airstrip, Briefing, and Flight

As we approached the airstrip, you could feel the excitement and energy growing! There were very few, if any, clouds in the sky so we knew we would be flying SOMEWHERE, we just didn't know where (there was chatter that we may end up at The Ultima Thule Lodge if the weather around Sanford wasn't clear). Our van driver made a quick phone call and let us know Paul was on his way. The team quickly changed into mountain clothes/boots, did a miniature version of the Duffel Shuffle, and grabbed their cameras. Within 20 minutes, we heard the buzz of airplane engines and watched as the Super Cub and Paul's famous red Otter dropped out of the sky and onto the runway (We still don't know where we are going...).



With the engine roaring, Paul turned the plane around, sprayed everyone with prop blast, and then finally killed the engine. I've met Paul a couple times and for some reason it always feels like you are about to meet a celebrity. Everyone is aware of his reputation as the best bush pilot in Alaska and all his mountain landing records, so maybe it's based on that – oh, and the fact that he is your only resource for getting on and off the mountain! (We still don't know where we are going...)

Without farther adieu, Paul jumps out, says hi to the group and unlocks our storage shed where we will be leaving all our extra gear. He is in a particular jolly mood today and gathers the group around and immediately starts telling stories about various climbing groups/mountains in the Wrangell's – you could literally sit there and listen to him talk for days and never get bored. (We still don't know where we are going...)

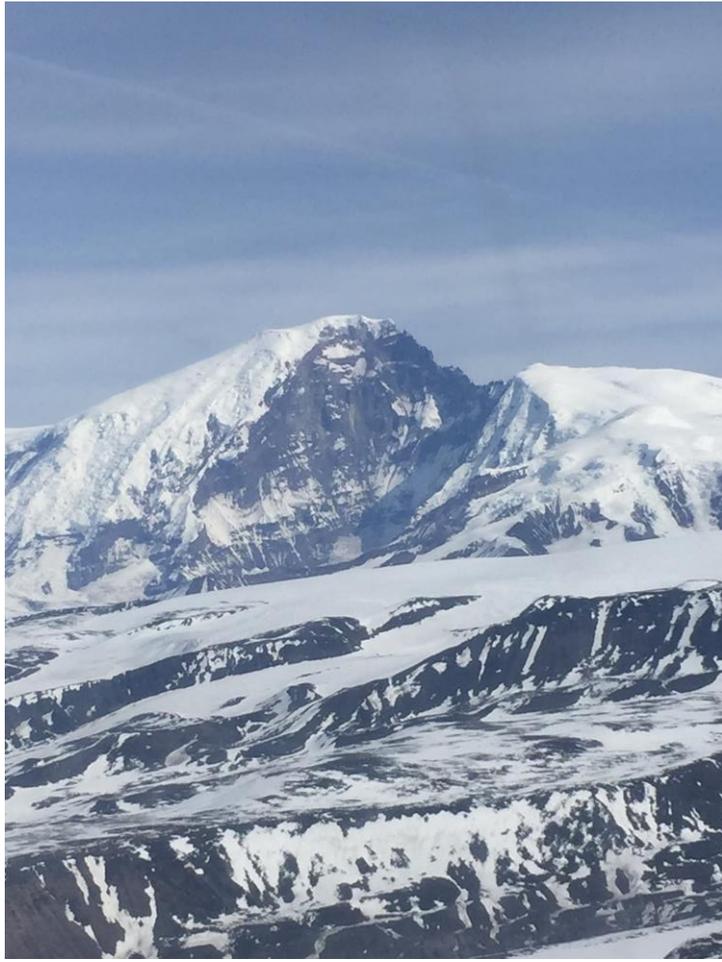
As he wraps up his speech, he finally turns his attention to the rules of the airplane and Mt. Sanford. Woohoo, we finally know where we are going! He talks about the mountains' features, the climbing history (or lack thereof), and the famous Northwest Airlines crash of 1948. He concludes his speech by saying "I'm not trying to scare you, but just being honest, this is a dangerous mountain and it's likely that every one of you will fall into a crevasse at some point." Ummmm, thanks Paul. I think.

With that, Mike jumps into the Super Cub (the group was too big to all fit in the Otter), Aaron jumps in the co-pilot seat of the Otter, and the rest us, along with probably 800-1000 pounds of gear, cram into the back of the plane. Paul fires up the engine, pulls to the end of the runway, and away we go!

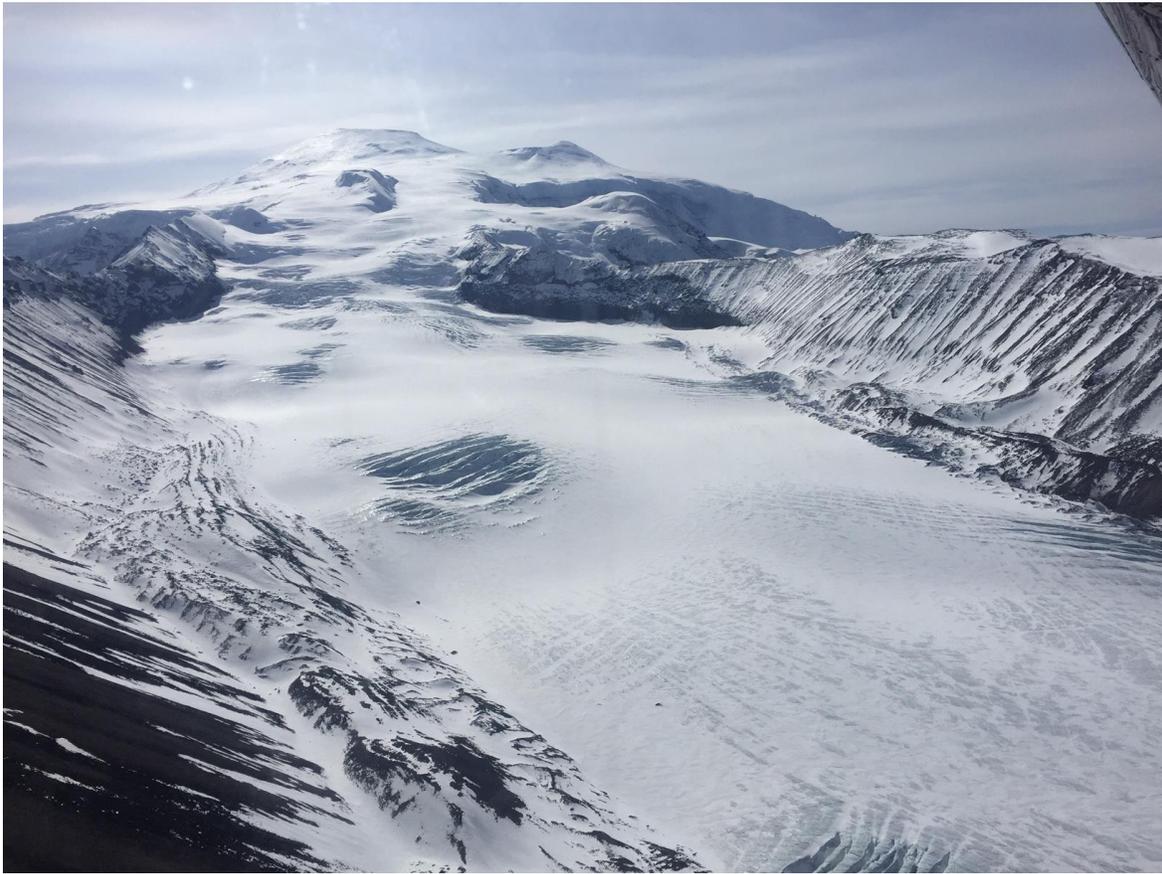
Now, if you have never climbed in Alaska, this is one of the most scenic flights you can take. I've experienced it multiple times, and it takes your breath away every single time. It's just endless 10-16K peaks for as far as the eye can see, surrounded by low plains to the north and west. For me, what makes this flight so impressive, is you are flying incredibly low – down valleys, around towering mountain features, barely scraping over the top of steep ridges, and watching the summits of behemoth mountains, like Mt Blackburn, pass above your line of sight. Just awe-inspiring views that make the mind wander with climbing possibilities.



As we leave the Chitina airstrip, we turn towards the northwest, make a beeline for Mt Sanford, and start racing Mike in the Super Cub around Mt Wrangell.



Eventually, we catch, and pass him, and lead the way for about 20 minutes flying over several ridges. As we fly, Paul is speaking to us over the radio pointing out different mountains, features, and about how little snow is on several of the steeper, exposed faces. We make one final right hand turn over the last ridge and the Sheep Glacier, as well as our path up the mountain and the summit of Mt. Sanford, come into view.



As we get our first full view of the objective, everyone loosens their seatbelts and shifts around in the plane to snap some amazing pictures. Then Paul goes quiet. Umm, why is Paul quiet?? Maybe because he needs to land a plane equipped with skis on a glacier, duh! Wait, now he's circling. And he is still quiet. Ut oh....Remember that part about "Plan B?"

Someone Help, Now Aaron Is Speechless:

As the Sheep Glacier comes into view, it doesn't take a 30-year mountain climbing veteran to recognize the glacier is HEAVILY crevassed and there's an extremely limited area to land an airplane. If any space at all.



After probably 3-5 minutes of circling, Paul finally breaks the silence with an “Ut oh, this isn’t good, guys” over the radio. What do you mean this isn’t good? We are on a small plane, flying through the mountains, in Alaska, with no one within a hundred of miles of us. Its ALL good.

He starts pointing out the issues with the glacier, outside of the obvious crevasses. There were less cracks lower on the glacier so Paul brought the plane in for a low pass to check the terrain for a possible landing. After a fly-by though, it was determined the snow just wasn’t deep enough to provide enough bite for the skis, and resistance, for us to stop. Blue ice was poking through the light snow patches and this option was quickly eliminated and the Otter was pulled back into the sky. So much for our first Plan B.

Backup option number two was landing above the crevasses on a flatter area that appeared to have a snowpack deep enough to land the plane. After additional discussions with Aaron though, it was determined this also wasn’t an optimal solution because we would have been dropped somewhere between 9,000 – 10,000 feet, bringing potential altitude sickness problems into the equation. So much for Plan C.

Paul’s next idea was to fly back over the last ridge we passed coming in to see if there was a landing spot on that glacier. This was an intriguing option because it would present us with a nice rock scramble/climb to get over the ridge and back onto the Sheep Glacier, adding an additional element to the climb. Ultimately, a low snow pack produced the

same results as the lower Sheep Glacier and it just wasn't safe to land. As the Otter was pulled back into the sky again, Paul did one last fly over of the Sheep Glacier to make sure he wasn't missing any available landing spots. He wasn't. Remember that part in paragraph two about adventure in the Wrangells?

Having exhausted all possible landing options on Mt. Sanford, I'm sure everyone was thinking the same thing as me, "What the hell happens now?" Then Paul comes on the radio and asks Aaron "What's your group's backup plan?" In one of those 'you had to be there' comedic moments, Aaron goes completely silent. Not a word. We had no backup plan. Mt. Sanford was Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C.

During what seemed like an eternity of silence, all that was going through my mind at this point was "Don't say Mt. Bona, don't say Mt. Bona..." Although I loved that climb, I selfishly didn't want to spend another two weeks in Alaska on a mountain I already climbed – especially in a range with unlimited options. Ultimately, many of the more popular mountains in the area like Bona, Churchhill, Blackburn, and Drum, weren't feasible due to our lack of proper technical gear and supplies.

Two For The Price Of One: Mount Jarvis and Mount Wrangell

Paul finally breaks the silence with a "How about Mt Jarvis or Mt Wrangell? Or both?" Two mountains for the price of one? Sign me up! We proceed to fly back over the Sheep Glacier and around the north and northwest sides of Mt. Sanford, presenting us with incredibly clear views of the upper mountain, which looked to be in better shape than the lower mountain. As we circled the north side of the mountain, we were looking at amazing views of vertical walls, hanging ice cliffs, and ridges that I swear we flew over by less than 200 feet - Just stellar photo opportunities!



Continuing on, Paul immediately pointed out the summits of Mt. Jarvis on our left, of which only Mike had heard of, and Mt. Wrangell on the right. These two peaks were connected by one of the largest saddles I've ever seen, the Nabesna Glacier. We decided to attempt Jarvis first, mainly because it was a shorter climb so we could more or less guarantee ourselves at least one summit attempt, and then, time permitting, could take a stab at Mt. Wrangell. Paul landed in a western direction, slightly closer to the Jarvis side, performed a u-turn, and carried us back up the glacier probably about a half mile to save us a little walking distance.

After we stopped, Paul powered down the engine to an idling speed and, one-by-one, we jumped out of the plane onto this vast, flat saddle and prepared to remove all the duffel bags from the plane. Like a human conveyor belt, we spread out about 20 yards from the plane and unloaded all our gear into a giant pile as Mike landed in the Super Cub just a few yards away.



Once this process was complete, Paul fired back up the Otter, waved good bye, and off he went. The Super Cub followed close behind, but not before turning around and giving us a fly-by to remember - The pilot had our entire group ducking down and cheering. And with that, SILENCE. No cars. No talking. No planes. No cell phones. No wind. No other people. No noise pollution, whatsoever. Just a beautiful reminder of why we love the mountains.

Base Camp:

Immediately after the planes left, the group took a few minutes to take in their surroundings. An absolute picturesque, blue-bird day with clear views of Jarvis, Sanford, Wrangell, Bona, Drum, Atna Peaks, Churchill, and several other mountains. As impressive as all those mountains were, they were dwarfed by the massive size of Mt. Blackburn, as it just seemed to loom over us. Little did we know that this would be one of the only times we would see the sun over the next week.

After a few minutes of admiring where we were, the team immediately got to work building our base camp. This is another thing about climbing in Alaska - you work. And you work A LOT. Whether it's digging tent platforms, building wind walls, digging the kitchen, or digging out a toilet, there's always work. Even on days you aren't moving camps, there's maintenance to perform around camp to keep the entire operation running smoothly. Whether it's clearing tents of drifting snow from the night before, solidifying walls that may have shifted from the wind, helping the guides with gear shuffling, whatever, there's always something to do. So it's really important that you are on a good team, which we were, where everyone is pulling their weight with chores around camp. And of course, as soon as you get settled in, it's time to pack up and move camp and start the charade all over again!



Camp 1 / Carry:

Being that we landed at 8,500 feet and the summit of Mount Jarvis was only 13,500 feet, we “planned” on setting up only one additional camp above base camp for a night, summiting the next day, then retreating to base camp the day after. Funny how those plans in Alaska work out...

During night one, right on cue, rough weather moved in. Knowing we had 11 - 12 days ahead of us, we decided to hang tight on day 2 - sort gear, acclimatize, fortify camp, etc... We woke up on day 3 with marginal weather in the AM, but the group was ready to go, so we packed up our cache, tied into the sleds, roped up, and began our carry. Within minutes of leaving camp, the skies cleared somewhat and presented us with a decent climbing day.



The carry was just over 3 miles in distance with only 800 feet of elevation gain (most of that towards the end of the day), so, by most considerations, not a challenging day. We followed the relatively flat glacier up three mild “ramps” into a small valley that had Mount Jarvis’ lower flanks on our left, and shorter, unnamed peaks on our right. With the sun playing hide and seek, and the varying heights of mountains in the valley, our biggest challenge all day was controlling our body temperature. The group had to stop multiple times to layer up or layer down, sometimes with 15 minutes of each other. Personally, I started the climb with a base layer, soft shell, and a light fleece. At certain points I had those 3 layers on plus a Patagonia Puffy and a hard shell to block the wind, then, 30 minutes later, I was down to nothing but a base layer and sweating profusely. The joys of climbing in Alaska! As the saying goes, ‘if you don’t like the weather, wait 5 minutes!’

Our carry for the day was uneventful - the way we like it. We found a nice spot in a bowl type area, generally protected from the wind, dug out tent platforms, cached our gear and high-tailed it back to base camp. The following day, it was more of the same. Up early with OK weather, but definitely not blue skies, so we broke down camp, dug our base camp cache, loaded up, and headed out. It was almost identical to the previous day, just slightly cloudier. The clothing shuffle continued on day 4 as we began to recognize the patterns in the valley that were cold vs hot. Once again, an uneventful moving day and we pulled into high camp slightly faster than the day before. Due to the blowing snow on the previous night, and to make the tent platforms bigger, we had about 2 hours worth of camp maintenance and, within four hours, our entire camp was set up. We all moved into our new homes, relaxed, and got ready for dinner.

High Camp / Summit Attempt #1:

After a fairly comfortable night sleep with light wind and temperatures in the high teens to low 20’s, we woke to extremely poor visibility. All of the members on our team had significant climbing experience, so we knew immediately we were staying put for the day. Our 3-day, up, summit, and down plan gone with the ever-increasing winds. A classic mountain rest day – Read a book, go pee, sleep, pee, eat, pee, listen to music, pee, pee, repeat. Can you tell I was taking Diamox?

The following morning we awoke to SLIGHTLY better conditions and decided to make our first summit attempt. Leaving camp you could feel the cautious optimism amongst the group, but in Alaska you never know so you take a shot. Worst case, it would be a good acclimatization climb and a chance to perform some reconnaissance of the upper mountain.

As we left camp, our first objective was getting up the 500 or so foot head wall that led to the upper mountain. Steep features about 100 yards out of camp first thing in the morning are a love/hate relationship. For those of us that no longer have knees of a 25-year old, it makes for an increased heart rate while shaking off the morning stiffness. On the other hand, it wakes you up and puts you in a focused, "climbing mode" right out of the gate. We made fairly quick work of the wall, which brought us up to another large plateau. At this point the sky actually cleared a bit and we could see the neighboring mountains. It also gave Aaron a chance to do some route finding in clear conditions and wand our path.

We continued to climb for a couple more hours, and, all things considered (visibility, crevasses, cold temps), movement was efficient. Unfortunately, during those few hours, the weather did nothing but deteriorate into white-out conditions. I was at the end of Mike's rope and couldn't even see Aaron's team ahead of me. Visibility finally decreased to the point where we could no longer see where we were going and our path was filling in with snow within minutes of me passing through – very similar to conditions on Mt Bona two years before. The frustrating part was the wind was creating a ground blizzard, so we would occasionally look straight up and see blue skies, yet you couldn't see more than 30 yards ahead of you.

With small windows of blue making random appearances, the group wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel. So, we decided to stop for a break, refuel, and give the weather a chance to blow through. After everyone ate, Aaron and Mike did a quick check in with the team and we all agreed to wait a few extra minutes for a potential crack in the weather. Everyone pulled out there heaviest down jackets, assumed the curled-up fetal position, and tried to stay warm. A few minutes turned to 10. Then 20. Then 30. Another guide re-check and we all agreed to wait longer. Who says mountain climbers are stubborn?



35 minutes. 40. 45. 50. 1 hour. Nothing. Except worse conditions. Another guide check-in. We all decided to wait 15 more minutes and then we would bag it. This time, we all stuck to our guns and after no improvement, our path we ascended gone, wands invisible, we let discretion be the better part of valor and pulled the plug. Aaron did an amazing job of leading us down the mountain via GPS, as the only thing we could see were the 3 climbers in front of us. After roughly 2.5 hours, a couple u-turns, and magically appearing wands, we reached the head wall and dropped back down into high camp. A day that was more mentally taxing than physical, finally over.

The Restock:

After we returned to camp, Aaron called back to George to get an updated weather forecast. The next day sounded like more of the same, with a possible opening two days later. We decided to wait until the morning to get the “look outside your tent forecast” and then make any decisions. After a decent day of climbing, we plowed through dinner and crashed for the evening.

Early the next morning, like gophers popping out of a hole, we all began anxiously sticking our heads outside the tent to check the weather. No dice. Knowing we weren’t going anywhere, we moseyed on over to the mess tent for a lazy breakfast. At this point, the weather really started to become an issue because the following day wasn’t looking as

good as we originally hoped now, and the next few days after that were out of the question as well. Tomorrow could be our last shot.

We found ourselves in one of those unusual Alaskan scheduling situations, where you have 6-7 days left, which appears to be a lot on paper, but you are hunkered down today, want to make a summit attempt the next day, return to basecamp the following day, and then, with even worse weather looming, we had to use the last remaining “good” day for Paul to get us off the mountain. This ultimately would leave us exiting the mountain 1-2 days earlier than scheduled, but the Mt Wrangell summit was over 17 miles away (so that was no longer feasible) and there were no other good weather windows for Paul. With Mt Wrangell now out of the question, we decided to go all-in on Jarvis. Aaron asked for volunteers to run back down to base camp to restock on food and fuel, giving us the opportunity to hunker down at Jarvis high camp for 3-4 more days, so Gonzalo and I volunteered. We left high camp in white out conditions, and, as had been the trend, the weather continued to clear and temperatures increase as we headed down to the Nabesna saddle. Once back to base camp, we did some quick food shuffling, re-packed our backpacks, and headed back up hill. A little over 6 miles round trip and a good, active rest day.

Summit Attempt #2:

Knowing time was eventually going to get tight, we decided even if the weather was marginal over the next few days, we would make as many attempts as possible. The following morning we woke to slightly better conditions early on, matching the forecast, and set off for summit attempt #2. Despite not summiting on our 1st attempt two days prior, there were still some benefits from that day in terms of acclimatization. I think everyone felt just THAT much stronger and we powered up the hill out of camp and back up to the higher plateau. Once we reached the second plateau, the cloud layer lowered and provided some amazing views. About 1.5 hours in we stopped for our first break sandwiched in between a lower cloud layer in the valley and a higher cloud layer above us. It was clear enough to see though and I felt the team was as optimistic as we had been on the whole trip.

But, it’s Alaska and the only guarantee is change. By our second break - we had already reached our high point from attempt #1 - the weather turned again. From my vantage point at the end of Mikes rope I could no longer see Aaron’s rope team – hell, I could barely see Mike three slots ahead of me. On the bright side, the marginally clear weather earlier in the day allowed Aaron to figure out which way he wanted to take us and navigate completely via GPS.

As we climbed higher, I was again presented with one of the more unique climbing experiences you can have as a mountaineer – putting one foot in front of the other as the freezing wind and blowing snow desperately try to resist your progress. Your teammates ceasing to exist - Just disappearing into the noisy, white abyss ahead of you - no sense of direction, except what’s up and what’s down. As you trudge along trying to decide what to think about next, you use your intuition of time, steepness of the slope, and occasional altitude updates from other climbers during breaks, in an attempt to determine how close you are to the summit. Playing seemingly endless climbing “mind games” to pass the time, all the while maintaining your mental awareness in the event of a sudden crevasse fall. This charade continues for hours.

Several hours in, we reached a point where the cramponing reached its highest level of difficulty yet - due to the steepness of the slope and the incredibly hard ice. However, with an experienced climbing team, it was like watching a rhythmic march up the mountain. Kick step, roll the ankle to gain relief, listen to the cracking of the ice, cross over step, repeat. When the team is moving efficiently, time goes by so much faster. After roughly an hour and a half of steep cramponing, Aaron pulled both teams in for a break. Lost in the “one foot in front of the other” trance, I completely expected the guides to tell us we had a few more hours to go, however, that wasn’t the case. Aaron told us this would be our last break and we were only about 500-600 feet below the summit. Where did time go?!

From our break position, we made a left hand turn directly up the slope and the weather cleared just enough so I could see both rope teams. As it always does after your last break below the summit, the energy returned to the group. There was now talking, or shouting into the wind, between members on each rope team as we worked our way up the last few hundred feet. We still had very little visibility, but at this point no one cared because we knew we were going to

summit! Roughly 45 minutes later, we approached the final long ramp up to the true summit. Engulfed in thick clouds, I, for the umpteenth time, lost sight of Aaron's rope team. It seemed like another 45 minutes, but was probably more like 15-20, when outlines of Aaron's team members hugging began emerging from the clouds. At that point, we knew it, we reached the top of a mountain we had never heard of! Mount Jarvis!



Summitting a mountain NEVER gets old – I don't care if its 8,000 feet or 19,000 feet – there's always an amazing feeling of accomplishment. All the hours training, climbing, running, and preparing all pay off in that glorious summit photo, even if you can't see anything. It wasn't that cold on the summit and we had the benefit of the never-setting spring sun in Alaska, so we stayed on top for a while taking pictures, eating, drinking, and celebrating what was a great reward on a trip that had given us endless weather fits. But the best reward was yet to come...

As the team was gearing up for the climb down, we were discussing how nice it would be for the Mountain Gods to give us just 5 minutes of unobstructed views. Then, with no warning, on a trip where we hadn't seen a blue bird day since we landed on the mountain, and what took maybe 10 minutes max, the cloud layer plummeted into the valleys to our east and south and completely disappeared to our north and west. One of those total "hair standing up on your arms" type moments!

One by one, from the smaller, northwest summit of Mount Jarvis, to every big mountain in the Wrangell and St Elias range, all of them made an appearance. Suddenly, we were looking up at the bluest sky for as far as the eye could see and there was NO WAY we could leave the summit at this point! God only knows how many pictures we took in the next 20 minutes as we were now looking down on an uncountable number of mountains that we were looking up at just a week before.

With bad weather predicted to move in once again, and fearing the weather could deteriorate as quickly as it improved, we packed up and began our walk back down the long summit ramp. Walking down the gentle ramp towards the steeper slopes of the descent took us about another 30 minutes, as we kept stopping to capture breath-taking photos.



All I could think about the entire time were those people who ask me the age-old question of “Why do you climb?” Why do I climb? Simply answered, THIS is why I climb. For moments like this. To be on top of a mountain, in Alaska, where no other human being was climbing in a wilderness area that spans 13.2 million square miles. To experience the raw power and beauty of Mother Nature all in a matter of minutes of each other. To be taking pictures that would leave anyone completely speechless. And, to be experiencing a moment so amazing that I’m left asking myself “How the hell am I going to explain this to people?”

As fitting as it could be, we approached the steeper slopes of our descent and, immediately after our first big break on the way down, we disappeared back into the clouds. We meandered our way down the mountain back to high camp in an uneventful trip, with the joys of success fueling our legs. The summit of Mt Jarvis no longer visible. The surrounding mountains gone. The color of blue replaced with the color of white. Again.

Back To Base Camp:

The following morning after an enormous dinner – who wants to carry all that weight down when you can just eat it?! – and a solid night sleep, the team woke up, broke down camp, packed our bags and/or sleds, and began the move back to base camp. However, Mount Jarvis wasn’t done with us yet. As we left camp, the weather deteriorated yet again and we had some of the strongest wind on the trip – our trail disappearing behind us within 5 minutes of breaking

it – and I was left pulling the hood of my hard shell over my face to prevent the rime ice from freezing to my face and beard.

In what was now my 6th pass on this trail, even in poor conditions, I was starting to get a solid sense of the time needed to get between camps. The lower we got, and as we escaped the confines of the upper bowl that high camp sat in, the clouds would thin out to provide some reasonable visibility. As we dropped down onto the Nabesna Glacier, the faint outline of our base camp walls would come and go, seemingly never getting closer. As they appeared, we would start a beeline for our target, only to have them disappear, causing us to veer slightly off course. They'd reappear, we'd correct. They'd disappear, we'd veer off. This cat and mouse game continued until we got within several hundred yards of camp and they could no longer hide.

Relieved to be back in camp, our goal was to get off the mountain that day. We technically still had 2-3 days before our scheduled pick up, but with more impending weather in the forecast, there wasn't enough time to attempt Mt Wrangell. We could occasionally see blue skies above us, but they came and went and didn't provide enough sustained visibility for Paul to land. So, we decided to set up a minimalist camp for the evening and take our chances the next day.

The following morning Aaron excitedly woke us up to blue skies coupled with wisps of high clouds. He immediately called Paul and decided on a pick-up time. In an effort to help Paul's depth perception, we spread duffel bags out over an 80-yard stretch to form a mock "runway" that he could use as a landing guide. The team anxiously waited for the buzzing of the airplane engines and, let me tell you, when you are out in the middle of nowhere with no noise pollution, you continuously "think" you hear a plane coming! Then it doesn't.

After sitting around for about 40 minutes the unmistakable buzz of the Otter became evident and Paul emerged over the ridge that ran west towards Mount Sanford. After a fly-over to scout the landing area, he flew towards the west, pulled a u-turn, and headed back towards the group. Once he touched down, he made two passes down the runway to compact the snow and then pulled into camp. The reverse conveyor belt of gear bags started as we loaded the plane and prepared for take-off.

As Paul fired the engine up, we slowly began to travel west down the glacier. With the combined weight of the plane, our gear, and the soft snow, you could feel a significant difference in the plane's ability to take off. Eventually, we inched our way off the ground directly back towards Mount Sanford before gaining enough altitude to turn west over the ridge back towards Chitina and the color green!

It was also at this time that Paul informed the group of the unfortunate passing of Ueli Steck. Many of us had never met him, but if you are a climber you are certainly aware of him, his accomplishments, and what he has done for the sport of climbing. Truly a sad situation.

Return To Chitina:

After a 35 minute flight, Paul landed us safely back in Chitina. It's always such an awkward feeling going from the freezing cold temperatures of the mountain (I'm not sure we felt above 35 degrees for 10 days), to the warm spring temperatures of Chitina. From down jackets and freezing, to t-shirts, humongous mosquitoes, and sweating in a matter of 35 minutes!

Since we were a couple days ahead of our scheduled pick-up date, we camped at the Chitina airstrip for the evening. Once Paul dropped us off, we began to unpack our bags and repack them in a matter more fitting for commercial airline flights home.

Not wanting to sit around for the night, we decided to walk the 4 miles into Chitina and grab dinner. Unfortunately, we walked 4 miles to find out nothing was open but the general store. We ran in, grabbed some snacks, and, in a stroke of good luck, the woman who ran the general store was married to the man who ran the town restaurant. Why wouldn't she be, right?! She placed a call to him and, as he said, "I never turn down a chance to make money," so he drove over and opened his restaurant. The only food option on the menu was frozen pizza, but that's like prime rib to 8 people coming off a mountain after 10 days! Thankfully he was well stocked!

It was great to hang out with the team without the planning and stress of the mountain and we spent 9 hours just relaxing, watching sports, playing pool, and throwing back a couple cold ones. Ok, many, many cold ones. After a generous tip, the owner was nice enough to offer us a ride back to the airstrip so we didn't have to walk the 4 miles. All 8 of us piled into this guy's pickup truck and headed back to the airport for the night. A perfect way to end a perfect trip!

Conclusion:

Once again, Alaska and IMG didn't disappoint! If you are considering where to go with your next climb, I highly recommend you reach out to IMG and jump on one of their spring, Alaskan climbs. Just be prepared to leave your planner at home! There's a good chance you won't end up on the route, or even mountain, you signed up for, but, that, coupled with the beauty and isolation of the Wrangell and St Elias range, are what makes this a PERFECT adventure and, in my opinion, one of IMG's best offerings.

Finally, I'd like to personally thank our guides Aaron Mainier and Mike Haft. Both are experts at walking that fine line of risk vs reward, especially in a hostile environment where your rescue options could be days, or weeks, away due to the ever-changing weather.

This is the first time I've climbed with Aaron and he's a professional in every sense of the word. His calm demeanor and Alaskan climbing experience are perfect for climbing in the Wrangells, where patience is vital to success – and your sanity – and not to mention his mad GPS navigation skills!

Mike and I have climbed together 3 times and I couldn't have been more thrilled to tag an Alaskan peak with him! He is a Senior Guide who brings energy, knowledge, and entertainment to any climb – Even after 11 years of climbing, I've yet to go on a climb with him and not learn something!

Thanks again IMG and see you back in Alaska!