

International Climbing Camaraderie and Returning to Denali (20310 feet), Churchill Peaks

Text by Dan Koepke



Midnight sun alpenglow on Mount Foraker and Mount Hunter panorama just above Windy Corner on Denali.

Photo by Dan Koepke

Returning to Denali 2017 and 2018 expeditions introduced in April's issue of *the Scree*, I extol a profound, pure camaraderie of the cord shared in the mountains for some of the greatest experiences and lessons in my entire life that continue to thrill me looking ahead to the future.

Climbing Denali repeatedly returns to my mind almost daily ever since Denali National Park expedition Ruth Glacier Expedition Fun-hogs Anonymous in June 2013 (*Scree* November 2014). I still feel connected with Alex Honnold, Freddie Wilkinson, Renan Ozturk, Alex Blümel, and Gerry Fiegl remembering sharing classic whiteout downtime camaraderie with our team of amateurs. Of course we were not aiming for Denali's summit that expedition on the Ruth, yet I literally fell asleep with my eye on Denali and while there definitely began dreaming of returning to climb Denali.

Later Freddie encouraged me about my writing projects exalting quality relationships, and he always reminds me that if it's important, your story might live on because bold, yet modest, inspiration lives on. Dynamic everyday heroes *live on* in our international community of alpinists that makes the hills and high mountains feel like home for those *Born to be Wild* – the name of the Steppenwolf song played via my request the last time I saw Alex Blümel and Gerry at the Fairview Inn when we returned to Talkeetna in June 2013.

In October 2015 Gerry Fiegl (27) passed away after falling while descending with Alex Blümel and Hansjörg Auer after their first ascent of the south face of Nilgiri South (22438 feet) – only the second ascent of the peak – in the Annapurna massif. Gerry Fiegl

lives on. RIP, Gerry. Live on.

*Wild men & women still run free
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Returning to Denali: Expedition Alaskan International Ohana, May – June 2017



Team Alaskan International Ohana on the Kahiltna Glacier.

Photo by Van Loral

Compassion and a camaraderie of the cord weave fascinating stories in the mountains, like sacrificing my best chance at summing during our Denali 2017 Expedition Alaskan International

Ohana due to managing a friend's frostbite. Frostbite below Camp 4 (14000 feet) is relatively uncommon on Denali, but Ed Shred and a buddy, Gaber, were bitten a bit after a sunny day turned into a frigid subzero night that froze their sweaty feet en route to Camp 4. That lesson remained with me on Cerro Aconcagua (22841 feet) and other mountains when sunny, clear days quickly transitioned to cold evenings at high-altitude that impaired circulation.

Gaber displayed a sort of psychological denial about the severity of his toes' frostbite. In his defense, frostbite manifests somewhat slowly and subtly before returning to lower altitudes and warmer conditions. A Salt Lake City climber / emergency-room nurse / frostbite specialist administered a neurological exam showing there was deep nerve damage in the foot and not just the toes. Medically-licensed climbers, rangers, and frostbitten gnardogs alike coached Gaber to descend, but he tenaciously held onto a fantasy for the summit and even suggested he could summit solo when I explained his responsibilities to himself and the team to turn around. Especially as team leader, ethically I could not ascend any higher with him and I encouraged him to retreat mostly for his own sake since exposing his frostbitten toes to step-kicking trauma on the fixed lines, frigid temperatures above 14000 feet, and de-creased circulation at altitude would all jeopardize chances for keeping his toes and being able to climb and hike with his son.

Shred's toes were more frost-nipped than -bitten, so we decided to ascend the headwall's fixed lines while Gaber rested his toes' growing blebs. Reaching the ridge after ascending the fixed lines for our first time and passing Kiwis Matty Knar and Van Loral descending from their first summit push after turning around near Camp 5 (17100 feet), a rock immediately broke my crampon's center bar. For fun Ed climbed to Washburn's Thumb (16500 feet) – his highest ever – before we descended the fixed lines, me with only one crampon. Then we retrieved our skis just beneath the bergschrund and enjoyed skiing the headwall back home to camp.

While I devoted hours and days and nights to imploring and pleading that later proved effective enough when Gaber finally descended, the Kiwis wisely left for another shot at the summit. I was fully aware how much time and effort we expended convincing him to descend, especially when the Kiwis returned to Camp 4 after their long marathoners' push to the summit with two nights at Camp 5. I particularly respect the Kiwis' aggressive approach and their willingness to suffer when necessary, and I was so elated for them! I truly shared a little of their joy, and Ed Shred and I hooked up tea and snacks to celebrate. This also encouraged us immensely finally seeing our chance right around the corner after almost three

weeks on the mountain. Gaber's frostbite hampered me in certain ways, but also enabled me to swap crampons without needing to fix, replace, or even sweat my broken center bar.

Ed Shred and I soon ascended to Camp 5 where winds hammered camp. Over and over a brief window opened, everyone prepared to go, started up, and were turned around by the intensifying wind and lack of visibility. Guides described their groups getting spanked. That happened for two days until all at once the storm sent an exodus of every ranger and climber back down to Camp 4 on our Day 23.

Keeping Ed Shred's injured toes safe and warm was certainly a priority and he was ready to descend, especially in order to share his upcoming birthday with his wife at home rather than holed up with me for another week at Camp 4 still taxing his toes. Even without frostbite I was on the same page; there were many things I would rather do than invest another week or more of stormy tent-time just hoping for a chance at the summit. I knew I would be back.

Denali 2017 Expedition Alaskan International Ohana taught humbling lessons about frostbite, team leadership, and how uncooperative weather conditions could be. Another big takeaway lesson was learning that regulations prohibit solo-ascents using a group permit if all other teammates descend. Thus a solo permit would allow climbing both with others and also independently. Soloing Mount Rainier (14411 feet), Pico de Orizaba (18490 feet), and Aconcagua already made the idea realistic. Our first week during the Denali 2017 expedition at 9600 feet, Ed Shred saved the life of a very novice permitted soloist by digging him out of his tent buried in snow: I knew a permit would be the easy part and I began considering my own solo adventure.

Bozeman bros who had recently arrived to Camp 4 and whose trip was partially funded by working odd jobs for an old Bozeman climbing buddy, Adam Fruh, shared hot drinks and hearty hospitality as Ed Shred and I retrieved our cache from Camp 4 before we descended in gorgeous golden midnight sun to Camp 3, where we crashed. The next day while waiting until night for temperatures to fall so we could travel more safely, we handed out extra food and chocolate to happy helpful people like Ranger Mel Coady. After walking our sleds down to Camp 1 (7800 feet), the adventure and camaraderie of two best friends roped-up and gliding over the



Above Denali's fixed lines at 16,000 feet. Photo by Dan Koepke

Kahiltna's yawny June crevasses through the dusky night back to base camp (7200 feet) after 24 days on Denali still stands out as much as any solo-summit or any other memory in my entire life.

These precious people, connections, and memories make the mountains alive for me and make it easy to focus on the *people* of the stories, rather than my own achievements and adventures which are rather mellow even when successful. That's what Freddie was getting at regarding relationships. Returning to Denali, for me, is all about boldly yet modestly facing personal failure and accepting a conservative level of risk while chasing dreams and growing in my backyard to become the best human and mountaineer possible. What does it take to be the best mountaineer?

Classic Montana in the age of Hollywood, Alex Lowe modestly reminded us: *The best climber in the world is the one having the most fun.*

Returning to Denali Solo in June 2018 and Exploring Peru's Cordillera Blanca in July 2018



Above: Camp 4 on Denali.

Below: Suspended Snow Angel.

Photos by Dan Koepke



Picking up the story from April's issue of *the Scree*, I arrived to Camp 4 (14000 feet) on June 6, 2018, as mountaineers were skiing from Denali's summit literally thrilled about the best day in their entire life. That's a real feeling for some fortunate people: one told me personally and everyone was talking all about it around Camp 4. When's the last time you felt even nearly that good?!

Mount Shasta's lesson about failure resounded: *Do not let fear of failure limit opportunities to grow and succeed.* I was growing, suc-

ceeding, and psyched doing exactly what I loved, enjoying the time of my life. There was no place I'd rather be. I felt grateful and ecstatic.

Perfect conditions vanished and yet the stoke around Camp 4 lived on. Rest during bad weather then spring outside when it cleared and grab the skis to go play and acclimate with international mountaineers all there for the love of the game and sharing the stoke like it's the last day on Earth or first day in heaven. Basking in the active joy of being alive in paradise and doing what I loved most, I will always remember afternoons blissfully skiing fresh powder above 15000 feet on Denali's headwall and West Rib Cut-off beneath the Orient Express and evenings sharing classic alpine camaraderie with mountaineers from around Alaska, around the country, and around the world.

Denali earns a reputation for fickle weather. Suddenly facing another week or more on Denali in a tent above 14000 feet with no chance for even an attempt at the summit while also feeling super strong, it seemed like a luxurious no-brainer to sneak out and finally fly to Peru like I initially planned in May. A complementary aspect of any fearlessness about failure also implies failure may always be imminent: *maybe you're not pushing yourself hard enough if you're not failing sometimes – accept failure and move on.*

I appreciated confidently giving myself a realistic chance to summit Denali via the solo permit, but also didn't feel like I had to stay indefinitely until sumitting. The stage was already set for a very social and successful attempt at Denali's summit in 2019 teaming up with the Fantastic Four from Aconcagua and Ed Shred. Was I wimping out or just living the good life with sweet options?

A two-day weather window suddenly opened. Of course everyone at Camp 4 was talking about it, even though not everyone cared to push toward the summit. I made the rounds and discussed plans with teams I knew. I felt pretty strong and there were also some descending teams' abandoned caches up there they begged me to grab so they would not be fined. For me this meant the bonus of not carrying as much food up there while also helping them out.

Ascending the fixed lines, feeling fantastic physiologically, everything seemed to be coming together for a legit chance at the summit. With the brief relief of reaching the ridge soon came the disappointment that there was a monster lenticular cloud atop the summit with legit flagging all around the ridges. The storm predicted to arrive in roughly 36 hours was obviously coming early and there was no time for a summit attempt before it would roll in big. I heard there were still maybe a couple teams at Camp 5 (17100 feet). It seemed downright irresponsible to try withstanding the storm with hurricane-force (more than 70 mile-per-hour) winds as a soloist when the rangers were discouraging everyone from going and all staying at Camp 4.

On the way down the fixed lines I ran into Norwegian Thomas Lone who was going for it – and who recently summited Mount Everest on May 16, 2019. Congratulations, Tom! I had recently explained the significance of lenticular clouds and knew he might actually head to Camp 5 anyway even after reaching the ridge, and he did. To their credit Tom and his partner Didrik eventually earned Denali's summit with their respectable turn-it-on approach – but only when the storm was gone about 10 days later after both 8 days at high camp and a return to 14000 feet. Call it sour grapes, but not my idea of a great decision or good time especially for me so close to home in Anchorage. I was thrilled about my decision communicating with them via the satellite phone while they were still hunkered down at Camp 5 and I was in Huaraz (10000 feet) after rock climbing around town, eating two-dollar three-course lunches in restaurants, and summiting Urus Este (17782 feet) in the Cordillera Blanca.

Everything worked well and according to my plan for descending Denali solo: I enjoyed skiing sledless down from Camp 4 over crevasses and crashing at 11000 feet where I could almost taste all the thick oxygen in the air. After skiing down to Camp 1 with my sled, I retrieved my cache there, and luckily met Paul Strickland and his partner Alexander who both agreed to rope up together back to base camp. Paul and Alexander were scooped up from base camp right away by Talkeetna Air Taxi, and I waited just long enough to fully appreciate the pretty purr of a K2 Super Cub coming to pick me up just before the storm. That evening climbers were everywhere in Talkeetna and soon I ran into Carlos Petersen, Max Alvarez, and Daniel Araiza at the brewpub. Many summitless mountaineers ate, sharing solid feel-good camaraderie due to relief about being off the mountain just in time. Storms prevented flights in or out for seven to nine days straight *twice* in 2018.

First thing in the morning the next day, I stopped by the Talkeetna Ranger Station to check in and shake hands with Ranger Tucker Chenoweth before driving Alexander, Paul, and a Romanian solo mountaineer from Talkeetna to Anchorage in the rain of the encroaching storm. We immediately stopped at the Ding How all-you-can-eat Mongolian grill and buffet for a team feast; then I dropped Alexander and Paul off at the airport. I flew to Los Angeles for Lima the next day.

Aiming for Denali solo was spontaneous, if not even somewhat whimsical, and my businesses needed attention, too: it turned out a very important shipment of packrafts did not arrive when they should have, and I was barely able to resolve the company's error to get them to Alaska by late July, just in the nick of time. I was acclimated with three weeks before needing to explore the Aleutian Range's potential for skiing remote volcanoes and coordinating eco-expeditions, and then packrafting in the Brooks Range's Arctic Circle in early August. Like realizing I had three weeks to ex-

plore the Himalaya while traveling around the world in 2017, the opportunity was not ideal, but certainly sufficient for a scouting trip. *If you always wait for something perfect, you may wait your entire life.*

I hoped the Cordillera Blanca would challenge me and develop my social and solo mountaineering skills among singular mountains like Alpamayo (19511 feet) and Artesonraju (19682 feet) in order to help transition to technical high-altitude Himalayan mountaineering. Rock climbing around Huaraz with temperatures in the 60s appealed to me, too. The proximity of the Cordillera Blanca's 16 20000-foot and 33 18000-foot peaks to nice high-altitude towns like Huaraz makes for easy approaches to base camps above 14000 feet a matter of a few dollars' bus ride – after only \$1,000-plus in airfare and 30-plus hours to Lima, a \$25 overnight bus ride to Huaraz, and a few hours in a packed *collectivo* bus on one of the bounciest, wildest rides of your life.

I immediately headed for the Ishinca Valley to test how well I kept my acclimatization. Urus Este's steep exposed snow on a small glacier afforded a wonderful view from the peak and I felt excellent. Call me a snob, but I got bored fast with brutal down-hiking and slipping in dirt descending. I'm a skier! Wanting more technical climbs rather than continuing with moderates, I focused on finding teammates and expanding my climbing network.



Peru's Ishinca Valley
Photo by Dan Koepke

Checking and posting messages for partners at gear shops and the Huaraz Casa de las Guías, I met a young local guide, David, and for fun we walked together outside of town to Los Olivos to boulder a long traverse route by a babbling brook while another climber played a didgeridoo. Then another day David and I bussed to the Monterrey rock-climbing area where a big climbing event, part of their alpinism festival, was taking place the next couple days. David and I climbed briefly and then began working to clean up the area of trash and also the rock around new routes that the local guides were setting for the event. I seized that small opportunity to contribute as a climbing ambassador for my country and state. One of the older guys ran off and brought back drinks and snacks for everyone. I never, ever drink soda as a matter of nutrition and principle, but I politely accepted their generous gesture with a "Salud! Cheers!" and a swig.

I homed in more and more on the gem of Alpamayo, which seemed almost as dangerous and logistically intense as it was technical to climb. It's a short ice-climbing route of moderate technical difficulty, but I needed a partner, lots of gear, mules, and some good fortune regarding timing because the route was so crowded. I met some potential partners, some bad and some good, like stud Josh Worley during his Vertical Year, and also ran into my *tocayo*, or twin, Daniel Araiza.

I first met Daniel Araiza in January 2018 at 18370 feet on Aconcagua a few days before I summited just ahead of his Mexican team of eight. We shared a congratulatory hug on Aconcagua's summit, and serendipitously I ran into him next in June 2018 outside Denali's Camp 3 (11000 feet). We shared quality laughs and good times around Denali's Camp 4, especially since he stopped by every day for medicine to sooth his respiratory crud. Carlos and I stayed in touch after Denali and he mentioned Daniel would be around Huaraz.

I immediately recognized Daniel in the Andean Kingdom shop and he invited me to join his team of 8 to 10 climbers and guides for dinner next door when I was done. Daniel briefly introduced me to them and he addressed their expeditions' objectives and logistics in Spanish while I dug into my meal and listened. It was an ambitious plan that seemed almost like another day at the office for Daniel, although he recognized it was ambitious, too, and I particularly respected his expertise when he told me this was his eighth expedition in the Cordillera Blanca after I asked – I later learned his first was at 18. We were both planning to be busy, but we hugged and agreed to meet up again soon for a beer or a climb nearby and we stayed in touch, chatting about it.

Literally the very evening I met up with a newly-formed group of four to finalize logistics and start for Alpamayo the next day, we learned the tragic news of three climbers dead on Alpamayo after a large serac fell on the route. Some of the local guides from the day at Monterrey jumped in a van outside Casa de la Guias to investigate and retrieve the buried bodies, including a guide and a client from the company of a renowned mountaineer who was staying at the same hotel. Earlier in the morning, we were cheerfully watching the World Cup and that evening he was hurting badly when I passed him on the street. *Let it be a lesson to myself*, I thought: *I don't ever want to make that type of call to victims'*

families as a friend or on behalf of my company. Of course nobody does.

An Alpamayo expedition was now out of the question for my timeframe and most everyone around that little town in big mountains was shaken up – especially locals and climbers. I began feeling much more conservative about the abundant objective risk in the Cordillera Blanca after the big snow year. Running out of time, I aimed for a solo attempt of Nevado Pisco (18871 feet) and enjoyed an amazing experience aside from a gastrointestinal explosion that sent me down humbly from advanced camp the day I was finally ready to make my summit push. I rested back in Huaraz and on July 11th began preparing for my long return to Lima and Alaska for upcoming adventures in the Aleutian and Brooks Ranges.

It became obvious that I need to return with a strong team for more technical climbs around Huaraz. *Who's coming with me?* I was so happy to return to Alaska on July 12 after finally exploring Peru, learning so much, staying healthy (aside from my gut), and living to climb another day.

Back in Anchorage between Aleutian and Brooks Range expeditions in late July, I learned about the death of Daniel Araiza (29) and Enrique Gonzalez (24) on Artesonraju while rappelling after summittig on July 18. Anyone who knows Daniel's spirit knows that Daniel Araiza *lives on*. Daniel Araiza lives on through Max and Carlos and Uncle Charlie's next generation of young Mexican climbers with whom I ice-climbed around Ouray at "Dexter's Lab" and in the Ice Park in December 2018; Carlos and Daniel teach so much about passionate alpinism and chasing dreams. Of course it still hurts. I

had shared time in the mountains with Daniel more casually and more frequently than family that first half of 2018. We shared a high-quality, quick camaraderie of the cord and sometimes that's all you get with the most charismatic, dynamic people in the world who live at home in the mountains until their dying day. RIP, Danny. *Live on.*

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Carlos Petersen and Julio Rebora leading

"Dexter's Lab" (WI3-4).

Photo by Dan Koepke

Epilogue: Returning to Denali 2019 and Looking Beyond

Returning to climb Denali in May 2019 on a solo permit, I'm still not willing to take any extraordinary risks, especially with a heavy heart thinking about Gerry and Daniel, as well as Auer, David Lama, and Jess Roskelley who were recently killed by an avalanche after climbing "M16" on the Canadian Rockies' Howse Peak.

Mountaineers better fully understand the risks taken in this game that proves to be a matter of life and death – especially when we make it one. In his *Alpinist* article, Auer dramatically said they had "no choice" but to push up Nilgiri South's South Face before Gerry died, like they were in war or something – similar to all-or-nothing Maurice Herzog climbing Annapurna and barely making it out alive and losing fingers, toes, and more on the retreat because he was so possessed by summit fever. These days I'll take humbly skiing out with my best friend for modest, summitless memories anytime, compared to an evacuation – and you should, too! Talk about this with your climbing partners and make sure everyone agrees! Perhaps the mountaineering community needs more role models who are willing to walk on the living side of the sharp line between risk and reward, yet perhaps these mountaineers lived and died exactly how they would have wished, too.

Respecting risk, I have also recognized that – far from simply endangering my well-being – mountaineering has enriched and saved my life, and I plan to keep it that way. I would rather live and die in the mountains more than anywhere else, but I have much more climbing and living to do. We all die eventually, but we do not all live on.
Live on.

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Camp 4 from the West Rib Cutoff on Denali.

Photo by Dan Koepke



Mountaineers on Denali at Windy Corner, 13,000 feet.

Photo by Dan Koepke



Denali's Windy Corner at 13,000 feet.

Photo by Dan Koepke