

ACONCAGUA – THE SECOND ATTEMPT

DECEMBER 13TH TO JANUARY 4, 2008

As I write about the details of my successful climb on Aconcagua I do so with a heavy heart. I summited on December 29, 2008 at 4:30 pm. After I had returned home on January 4th I learned of five deaths that had occurred on the mountain between January 3 and 15, 2009.

On January 3rd, Michael Freeman, 47, from England died of a heart attack just as he summited.

On January 3rd Stephan Geromin, 42, of Germany died in a fall as he was descending after failing to summit via the Polish Direct Route.

On January 7th a sudden blizzard and white-out stranded a group of four climbers and a guide after they had summited. As they tried to descend from the summit and were at about 22,000 feet struggling to find their way in the white-out, an avalanche engulfed Elana Senin from Italy, and her guide Frederico Campanini and they were killed. Campanini was an Argentine citizen who lived with his wife in Utah, USA. The three remaining climbers managed to get down to safety where they were transported off the mountain and are being treated at Mendoza hospital for frozen fingers and toes some of which may have to be amputated.

On January 15th Arthur D'lisle of Westin or Weston, Washington, 51, died after being struck by a volley ball sized rock as he was climbing at 16,400 ft.

On January 16, A French climber due down on Jan. 4 was reported missing.

Stephan Geromin, a Friend

I knew Stephan Geromin. My son Erick and his wife Bobbie and I had met him on Aconcagua in 2007 on the Polish Traverse Route. He was climbing with a group of about 10 people from England, US, Germany, etc. Their climb schedule was one day behind ours. We shared meals with the group in the dining tent at Plaza Argentina, the base camp for the Polish Traverse Route. We had many interesting conversations about politics and other subjects. Stephan was very interested in US politics and tended to have a liberal point of view. He was an architect who designed energy efficient buildings. He got very excited when I asked him questions about his work and was eager to discuss the projects he had in mind to save energy.

Stephan was medium height and in great physical condition. His clothing and equipment were the best money could buy. He had successfully summited Denali (Mt. McKinley, 20,320ft) in June of 2007 and when we met on Aconcagua in December 2007 I was convinced that he would be able to summit without a problem.

2007 Summit Attempt Aborted

In 2007 I had developed an upper respiratory infection when we ascended to the first high base camp at 16,700ft above Plaza Argentina on the Polish Traverse Route. I felt it was too dangerous for me to go higher. So Erick, Bobbie and I decided to abandon our attempt to summit. I urged them to continue on without me but they chose to abandon the attempt with me. I was very disappointed because we all had been free from any symptoms of altitude sickness and were feeling good at 16,700ft.

Soon we were back at our hotel about a week ahead of schedule. After we had been there a few days we were surprised to see Stephan seated at a table at the hotel having breakfast. We soon learned that he had developed altitude sickness and had to be removed from the mountain by helicopter. He joined us for dinner and other activities and then decided to fly up to northern Argentina to see the large Iguazu water falls there and we did not see him again in 2007.

Second Summit Attempt

On December 13th 2008 we arrived in Santiago, Chile for our second attempt to summit Aconcagua. When we boarded our flight from there to Mendoza, Argentina, Erick, Bobbie and I were not seated together. As I took my seat, to prepare for take off I looked down the aisle and spotted Stephan. Since we were about to take off I couldn't walk up to talk with him.

When the plane got to the gate in Mendoza, Stephan was one of the first off the plane and he got through customs way ahead of us. We thought we had lost him but caught a glimpse of him looking for his bags. Erick managed to get his attention by shouting his name.

We learned that his plan was to climb solo via the Polish Direct Route. We visited some and then he went on his way saying we would see each other on the mountain. Actually we saw him again in the morning when we went to get our permit to climb.

We set off that day to our acclimatization area Vallecitos Reserve where we were to climb four mountains of various heights in preparation for our climb of Aconcagua. While we were at camp 1 we were surprised to see Stephan appear in camp. I offered him a cup of tea and we talked. He had hiked quite high up Mt. Vallecitos and was on his way down. We learned that he was staying at the hostel just 500 ft further up the mountain from where we stayed before we began our acclimatization climbing.

He thought our acclimatizing training was too rigorous and was concerned that our guides were over doing it and we would become too exhausted to make the big climb. I assured him that we had full confidence in our guides and that we were doing fine.

It was at Camp 1 during our visit over tea that Stephan told me how excited he was that Obama had won the election. He wanted to know how we felt about it. I told him that I did not vote for him but would not make any judgments about him until he had a

chance to prove himself. We visited for a short time before he continued down the mountain. I didn't see him after that for five or six days.

I was at Berlin, 19,356ft, enjoying a rest day. We were to try for the summit in the morning. Out of nowhere Stephan suddenly appeared. I told him that we were going to try for the summit in the morning. The weather was good and expected to hold for another day or more. He said he was going to try in a few days and he felt that he was fully acclimated and was having no altitude sickness symptoms.

After our visit he turned to leave but hesitated and then walked toward me and reached out and hugged me. I wished him a safe climb and wished me the same, and we parted. As I watched him leave, I thought how unusual it was for Stephan to be so demonstrative as to give me a hug. It was somewhat out of character for Stephan I thought. He always struck me as being quite reserved, in typical German fashion. I believe that I was probably the last person to hug him.

I was shocked to learn when I got home that Stephan had fallen to his death descending on the Polish Direct Route after failing to summit on January 3.

Second Summit Attempt Continued

Soon after our unsuccessful attempt to summit Aconcagua in December of 2007 my son Erick called and suggested that we try it again. I agreed. Erick and his wife Bobbie and I began immediately to plan our next expedition.

I left the details of finding a guide service for us to my son Erick who chose

“Andescrossing” Guide Service owned by Jorge Kosuljk. They would provide us with two guides, and a porter for the high camps.

On December 12th we departed for Argentina, arriving on the 13th in Santiago, Chile and from there a one hour flight over the Andes Mountains to Mendoza, Argentina. We met our lead guide Eduardo Depetris who took us to the hotel “El Portel”, where we could freshen up after the overnight flight.

At 4:30 in the afternoon Eduardo came to the hotel again to examine our equipment and gear. I actually had more gear than I needed and Eduardo suggested I leave it at the hotel. I did manage to keep two jars of Skippy peanut butter though. When he was satisfied that we had all of the necessary gear for the climb we made reservations at a local restaurant where we met later for dinner.

On December 14th Eduardo picked us up at the hotel in the morning and we went to the office to get our permit to climb Aconcagua. We needed three permits for 21 days, costing \$450.00 each. Later that afternoon we gathered our gear into Eduardo’s Toyota Pick up truck and we drove to Vallecitos Refuge, a hostel in the Vallecitos Reserve. The three of us shared a room with bunk beds.

After our long travel time from the US we were anxious to stretch our legs so we took a walk up the valley from the hostel to about 10,000ft.

The proprietor of the hostel was a pleasant Argentine woman who spoke only Spanish and French. The interior of the hostel was very quaint and comfortable. The evening meal was a relaxing way to begin our adventure. Our guide Louis grilled the beef while Eduardo prepared a salad. We enjoyed good conversation while we feasted on grilled beef and fresh vegetables accompanied by a good wine.

Our Acclimatizing Begins

On the morning of the 15th, after breakfast, we donned our packs and proceeded to climb to “Piedra Grande” (Big Stone) 12,467ft / 3800m. There we set up camp, I in a three man tent by my self, and Bobbie and Erick sharing another three man tent. The guides shared a two-man tent. We had a relaxing afternoon resting and preparing for the next days climb. Our goal here was to begin the acclimatizing process allowing our bodies to begin adjusting to the need for additional oxygen.

Beginning on the 15th our lead guide Eduardo began making a record of our blood oxygen level and heart rate using an oximeter. He also had a list of ten questions he asked us each day, such as, do you have a headache, are you nauseous, and other questions related to our bodily functions. He would also check our blood pressure.

Dec 16th Camp 1. We got up early and had our breakfast of porridge and sweet breads, and toast. Then we prepared to climb two nearby peaks, Mt. Adolfo Calle, and Mt. Stepanek, both 14,107ft / 4300 meters.

The trail to the top had a very steep incline and we kept a very slow pace to the summit. Speed was not a deciding factor on any of our climbs. Each person proceeded at their own comfortable pace. After a few hours of climbing, we summited the first mountain. There we took a few photos and had a snack while we rested.

Then we began descending about 500 to 600 feet to the floor of the valley separating us from the second mountain and began climbing up the steep trail to its summit. At the summit we rested and then continued down to our camp site. The way down was quite steep and the trail was covered with scree requiring careful maneuvering to avoid falling forward. Our hiking poles were extremely crucial to maintaining balance and preventing falls.

When we got back to camp we had tea and cookies and rested until our evening meal, after which we crawled into our sleeping bags for the night.

I listened to music and podcasts on my I-pod in the evenings before falling asleep.

Dec. 17th camp 1. Our goal today was to summit Mr. Franke (16,404ft / 5000m) and return to our camp at 3,800 meters to sleep. We started early, first following the river valley away from the mountain until we could begin to ascend along a ridge which sloped up gradually to a point where it became much steeper. After climbing for about 3 ½ hours we rested and decided that we had achieved our goal of altitude for the day. Reaching the summit of Mt. Franke wouldn't enhance the training experience, so we all decided to descend back to camp.

Instead of back tracking the route we took up, Eduardo suggested that we take the scree down to camp. Scree is fine sand, gravel, small rocks, and larger rocks some as big as basketballs or larger. Now imagine a pile of this material 2,400ft high and sloping away at an angle of 45 to 48 degrees. It was a very exciting trip down the scree to the valley below. It was something like skiing. But you had to be very careful not to fall forward. My toes were jammed into the tips of my boots so I had to stop and tape a few toes and tighten the laces. We saved several hours of hiking by coming down the scree slide.

On Dec. 18th we ascended to a second camp (El Salto. (13,779ft / 4200m) at the base of a group mountains known as the Vallecitos (5,500m) ring. It is formed formed by several mountains such as Rincon (5200m) and Adolfo Calle (4500m). The campsite is flat area with has a spectacular view of the Mendoza River Valley

It was at this camp that we experienced the most severe winds and cold weather. During the night the wind never ceased to blow. Steadily or in gusts, Erick measured the wind at 35 to 45 miles per hour. The winds literally tore at every loose flap of the tent and I thought at times it might rip the tent from its tie-downs.

Dec. 19th was a rest day. We lounged around napping, and entertaining ourselves with our I-pods and conversation with other campers. After breakfast Eduardo took my blood pressure reading and found it was a little high- 170/78. He was immediately concerned. He tried to contact a doctor friend in Mendoza but could not get a good cell phone signal. We offered our satellite phone for him to call but he was unable to

contact the doctor. So he decided to descend to his vehicle and drive into Mendoza to find the doctor. He was gone most of the day.

During the day a few more campers came and left. In the late morning a group of three climbers arrived and set up their tents. In the afternoon I had the opportunity to visit with them and I learned they were three brothers who spent a week together each year climbing nearby mountains. During our conversations I mentioned that we were on a rest day and that my guide was concerned about my blood pressure and had gone to Mendoza to consult with a doctor. Then one of brothers said, "I'm a cardiologist, tell me a little about you health history". I said I didn't want him to be consulting with a patient while he was on a holiday, but he insisted, saying he would like to do it. I gave him the information he needed and he said I had nothing to worry about and that he would talk with my guide and make a recommendation about a certain medication I could take in small doses which would reduce my blood pressure.

Dec. 20th. We all got up early and Erick and Bobbie left with Eduardo soon after breakfast to try and summit Mt. Vallecitos, (18044ft / 5,500m). I stayed behind because my guide Louis wanted to give me the low dosage of blood pressure medication that the doctor recommended. The guides always carried this drug with them. I took ¼ of regular dose and had to wait two hours before we could test to see if it was effective. The test indicated 135/74. Louis and I immediately headed out to try and summit Vallecitos.

We climbed for hours until we reached a plateau at 16,200 feet. There we rested and ate snacks. Louis was in radio contact with Eduardo and he Erick and Bobbie had reached 17,200ft. Eduardo thought that it was high enough for the day and they descended to meet us an hour later at 16,200ft. After a rest, Louis decided to climb to the summit because he had never been there before. We descended with Eduardo.

Dec. 21st. We arose early and after breakfast broke camp and prepared for the three hour hike back down to the Hostel. While we were waiting for Eduardo and Louis to pack things for the trip down, the cardiologist came up from the camp just below us. He wanted to know how I was doing. He asked if he could have a photo of me

because he wanted to show it to his colleagues. He seemed to be fascinated by my physical condition for my age. He gave me a big hug before we parted.

We hiked down to the Hostel where we loaded our gear into Eduardo's truck and headed for Puente del Inca, another Hostel where we were to spend one night.

When we arrived, after a few hours of driving through parts of the Andes mountain range, we settled into our rooms. I had a private room and so did Bobbie and Erick. A group of about 8 people who arrived just after us were all booked in the same room, all strangers, and men and women together, sharing one bath/shower. I heard a lot of grumbling from them.

We had dinner that evening with our guides and some very good local Mendoza wine. We were all excited because tomorrow we would be starting our long hike up the valley toward Mt. Aconcagua. We felt ready.

Dec. 22nd. We left early for the Provincial Park entrance. There we registered, and donned our packs for the three plus hour hike to Confluencia,

(10,862ft. / 3,300m) We entered the park at Quebrada de Horcones, and were astonished to see a spectacular view of the South Face of Aconcagua, our objective.

Over the next three or more hours we hiked through a beautiful valley enclosed by mountains on both sides. Our trail was rocky, dusty and we gradually gained altitude as we neared Camp Confluencia which lies at the intersection of two main routes to the mountain.

When we reached the camp we were shown to a Quonset type structure where we were served a very delicious lunch, two courses, and various cheeses and fruit and a juice to drink.

We set up our tents and spent the night. In the morning after a hearty breakfast of eggs (powdered) and ham, toast, coffee, juice and fruit we began our hike to Plaza de Mulas, (14,337ft / 4370m).

Dec. 24th. It would prove to a long demanding day of 8 ½ hours. We hiked 12.2 miles and traversed Aconcagua along the west side crossing rivers along the way. Our path crossed Playa Ancha (Wide Beach), an extensive flat and sandy glacial valley which allowed us to slowly gain altitude. After crossing Playa Ancha the terrain became markedly steeper, allowing us to quickly gain altitude until we arrived at Columbia Refuge, two brick buildings destroyed years ago by avalanches.

A short break allowed us time to gather our strength again for the most demanding part of the day: the steep Cuesta Brava. This was a real killer of a hike very steep and almost never ending. I was exhausted when we finally arrived at Plaza de Mulas Refuge in the mid afternoon.

After we got settled we had to reorganize our gear because we had hired a porter to take some of gear up to the high camps. He could only carry about 20 kilos, or about 42 lbs. He would take sleeping bags and air mattresses, extra clothing, and misc. articles that were needed at the high camps or for the summit attempt.

Each day he would carry these items on ahead as we hiked up the mountain. When reached the camp site for the night he would leave the gear and go back down the mountain. The next morning he would arrive at camp in time take the load to the next camp and then descend for the night. He did this until he got to Berlin, the last camp, where he stayed with us sharing a tent with my guide.

Plaza de Mulas (the square of the mules) is actually a hotel like structure with private rooms and large open rooms with many bunks. We slept on the bunks. Meals were served in a dining room and were quite good. You had to keep your jacket on at all times in the building because it was not heated.

In the dining room there was a small gas space heater which could only be felt if you were within three feet of it. We used it to make toast.

I did enjoy mixing with and conversing with other climbers from England, Argentina, Italy and Peru. An individual that stands out in my mind is Jeff, a gentleman from England, who was planning a solo attempt at the summit from Plaza de Mulas on January 1st. He was a very interesting conversationalist and quite knowledgeable about English and US politics.

We also met two teachers from Waconia, Minnesota, Brian Honkomp and Christian Gilbert. There were relaying e-mails to their classes while on the mountain and generated a lot of excitement for the students about their climb. We would be at various camps together along the route up, but I lost track of them when I got to Berlin. They may have been in the lower camp I recall, at one of the high camps Brian was suffering from headaches so I offered him some extra strength Excedrin which said later "saved his life".

Dec. 25th. We awoke early and prepared for a good days climb to "Camp 1, Canada :) 16,568ft / 5050m). We were anxious to move higher up the mountain and were ready for it.

After breakfast we started out across the valley from the hotel to the Plaza de Mulas camp site about a mile away. When we arrived there we checked in at the park ranger station and the doctor's office. Earlier Erick had been examined by a doctor who detected fluid in one of lungs so she asked him to stop in before he proceeded higher.

As we stopped at the hut Erick went in and after about 15 minutes he came out and I noticed he had this very serious look on his face. I said what's the matter and he said "she told me I couldn't proceed up the mountain because my blood oxygen level was too low. It registered 70%. As a comparison my oxygen registered 93%. It is normal for the blood oxygen level to decrease some as you gain altitude. At the top of the

mountain there is 50% less oxygen in the air than at sea level, but 70% is dangerously low.

This was a devastating blow to our well laid plans and the fact that we were doing so well in acclimatizing to the altitude. Erick was a strong climber and I was amazed at how much stamina Bobbie had during our long days of hiking up to this point. I was convinced that we could all summit. I thought, if anyone failed it would be me, and I had already got Erick and Bobbie to agree to continue if that happened.

We gathered together and shed a few tears over this new and unexpected development. It was so frustrating. We planned for nearly a year, spent the money for equipment, and the trip, and had high expectations of reaching the top together. Now as we were within reach of our final goal Erick was stopped. I suggested that Bobbie and I could continue and Bobbie initially agreed but after discussing it with Erick decided to stay with him.

We found a dining tent with a few empty tables and laid out our gear from the pack sacks because we were sharing certain items such as the satellite phone, and the solar charger, etc. I had to take these items in my pack.

So we parted with hugs and tears, I to continue up the mountain, and Erick and Bobbie to the hostel where they would spend the night and then take the 16 mile hike out to the park entrance. They hiked out on December 26th.

On Alone

Dec. 26th. With a strange mix of anticipation, and sadness, I set off with Eduardo on the 5 or 6 hour climb from Camp Canada, Camp 1, to Camp 2, “Nido de Condors, (Nest of the Condors) (18,241ft / 5,560m).

This was another grueling, steep, scree strewn, difficult trail. We gained nearly 2,000ft over a distance of maybe two or three miles. It was slow progress, but I was encouraged because I found my heart rate was ranging between 104 and 118 beats per minute.

I wore a heart monitor all the while I was on the mountain. It is a device that strapped around my chest and sent a signal to a wrist watch/monitor which displayed the number of beats per minute. Early in our acclimating climbs I noted my heart rate occasionally exceeded my lactate threshold of 121 BPM to levels of 124-134 BPM.

Above 121 my activity level was exceeding my blood's ability to rid my muscles of lactic acid which builds up due to overworking the muscles. Whenever I noticed my heart rate above 121 I would slow my pace and concentrate on my breathing technique to increase my oxygen intake. Within a few minutes my heart rate would drop below 121 and my legs felt more comfortable.

After days of climbing I noticed that I seldom reached my lactate threshold of 121 BPM. I was seeing readings consistently from 104 to 118. As we hiked, I would shout out my heart rate to Eduardo every five minutes or so. He would then adjust his pace to allow me to maintain a lower heart rate.

I have to say that the heart monitor was a most crucial piece of equipment during my climb and contributed immensely to my success. As we neared the summit, my heart rate was averaging about 108 BPM. This was a clear indication that the acclimatization process had been very successful and my body had responded to the elevation changes by producing more red blood cells. If I felt the least bit of fatigue in my calves or thighs while climbing I simply slowed the pace and adjusted my breathing and the feeling of fatigue faded away.

We reached Nido de Condores (The Condors Nest) in mid afternoon. I was quite tired and Eduardo made me some tea and I ate some chocolate and cookies. We ate a lot of sweets while hiking. It was quick energy.

The sun was very bright and the camp was absolutely desolate looking. The temperature was below freezing maybe 20 degrees. I took a few photos and after my tent was set up I crawled into my sleeping bag and took a nap.

As the sun went down the temperature plummeted to zero or lower and the wind picked up. A grey layer of clouds released a few inches of snow.

At about 7:00 pm Eduardo brought me my evening meal, spaghetti and meat sauce. I was hungry and ate it all. I made myself a cup of hot chocolate using dried milk, and cocoa, and hot water from a thermos. I did all of this while sitting in my sleeping bag.

I tucked my climbing boots into my sleeping bag so they would be warm in the morning. I was thankful that I had the foresight to buy a long sized sleeping bag. The boots fit down at the bottom and they really didn't bother me during the night. I also put a liter of water in my bag because it would freeze over night if left out. I listened to some podcasts on my Ipod and then slept.

You have to keep hydrated while climbing. This is especially critical at the higher altitudes. The air on Aconcagua was extremely dry, parching your nasal passages and throat as you slept. I generally drank about four liters of water each day. At lower altitudes we drank the water from the streams without treatment. Above 16,000ft we melted snow for water and I added a flavoring. At night when I got up to relieve myself, never much fun, I drank as much water as you could before settling in again. Eduardo was very careful to monitor my water intake and would get on my case if I wasn't drinking enough.

I'm warm in my sleeping bag, very tired, and missing Erick and Bobbie. Tomorrow we climb to the last camp from which we will make the summit attempt. Lord, help me through this please.

Dec. 27th. On our original climbing schedule, today was to be a rest day. However, after breakfast of oatmeal and toast (with peanut butter) Eduardo asked me if I felt rested enough to make the next leg of the climb to Berlin.

I said I was ready to go. We set off early on the four hour climb to Berlin, (19,356ft / 5,900m. It was a very difficult climb. The trail was undefined and covered with snow and was very hazardous.

As you hike/climb you use your two hiking poles for balance, shortening them for upward climbs, and lengthening them for descents. On any trail you have sections of up and down. It is very difficult to give up hard won altitude to a downward grade while attempting to gain altitude.

As you climb you have little time to enjoy the scenery. It is actually quite boring. Only when you stop to rest or eat can you enjoy the surrounding beauty of the mountains. Every step must be calculated to be placed on solid ground or footing. Your attention is riveted constantly to the path with an eye ahead to determine where the next few steps should be taken. As I climbed I was always aware that a single misstep could mean a fall which could break a bone, sprain an ankle, or end my life. I didn't want a broken bone or sprain to end my attempt at the summit. I was extremely cautious. Often my guide would have to wait for me while I negotiated a particularly difficult part of the trail, making sure every step was on firm footing. Where I had to jump down a few feet I had to be sure of my landing spot.

As I was slowly climbing up steep grades I found it very helpful to concentrate on only the trail and set little goals, of say 20 or 30 yards at a time. I tried not to look up the mountain ahead because each time I did I saw the trail disappear into the distance at a discouraging height. I became satisfied with small gains in altitude until after hours of climbing I found myself at the top.

During my time on the mountain I took a few tumbles. The most serious was coming down from our first day's practice climb while crossing a field of large boulders. I missed a step and fell forward but managed to turn in midair to land on my shoulder and back. I ended up with a few gashes and a few black and blue spots but was able to continue without too much trouble. The other falls were not serious. These usually occurred as I was descending a slope or path and stepped on loose gravel or rocks

which slid out from under my foot and I fell on my back and my back pack broke the fall. Often I prevented this type of fall with one of my hiking poles if I had it in the right position behind me.

As we neared the camp the trail took a serious upward tilt which required us to use our hands to thread between very narrow openings and steep areas. Here also were dangerous areas where one could lose balance and tumble down the mountain. Eduardo would often very carefully position himself between the hazard and me to stop me if I stumbled or slipped.

Stepping up over the edge to a relatively flat area of ground with maybe five or six tents already set up, I surveyed a very bleak wind and snow swept landscape like none I had ever seen before. Jutting rock formations accented the baroness of the camp. We were at Berlin, 19,356ft. After ten days of gut wrenching practice climbing, hiking and more climbing on Aconcagua, I was now in position to make an attempt on the summit. Everything that had been planned for the past year was for the purpose of getting to this point on the mountain. I thought of Erick and Bobbie and was overwhelmed with sadness as I gazed upon this bleak area clinging to the side of the gigantic mountain which loomed over it in the background. I thought how Erick and Bobbie's dream was shattered so unexpectedly. I would have gladly given up my chance to summit if they could be here instead of me.

The sky darkened and it began to snow and wind picked up and the wind chill increased dramatically. Eduardo and the porter got my tent set up and I quickly got inside. After a meal of pasta and a warm drink I settled into my bag to rest. The wind and snow continued until morning and the snow was about 8 inches deep and had to be brushed away from the tents. Before I went to sleep, Eduardo shouted from his tent to me that tomorrow was a rest day and I should sleep late. Sleep came to me quickly.

Dec. 28th, Berlin (19,356ft / 5,900m) The sun was brightly warming my tent as I woke. I made myself some tea and stayed in my sleeping bag waiting for Eduardo to deliver my breakfast to me. I wanted a large bowl of oat meal with brown sugar and raisins. After breakfast I stayed in my sleeping bag and didn't go out until I had to

relieve myself. I spent most of the day in my tent in my bag going out only on a few occasions.

It was when I was out briefly in the afternoon that I encountered Stephan. I remember thinking how strange it was to see him at Berlin because the route he chose to climb actually approached from the opposite side of the mountain. I learned later that the route I was going to take to the summit (normal route) and his route (Polish direct route) intersected at one point lower on the summit route. I assume now that he may have been practice hiking when he showed up in Berlin.

In late afternoon Eduardo asked permission to use the satellite phone to call a friend in Mendoza to ask him to go on the web and check the weather forecast. We had been enjoying some very clear, sunny weather for the past ten days. When Eduardo decided that today would be a rest day he was taking a little gamble that the weather would hold through tomorrow for our summit attempt.

When Eduardo called his friend back in the evening he learned that the weather would hold for possibly two days and then become more unpredictable as a front moved in. Eduardo told me that tomorrow would be a good summit day.

Eduardo decided that I should not use a pack during the summit attempt. He thought it would give me a better chance of reaching the summit if I had less weight to carry. I would have to carry three liters of water, two in a bladder, and a one liter container with hose attachment. These would have to be carried in the inside pockets of my large down parka to keep them from freezing.

We would also have to use crampons for the entire climb up and down but wouldn't put them on until we had gotten well up on the trail. We discussed what clothing I should wear and we decided on a number of layers, insulated base layer top, insulated layer over silk, (silk reduces friction on the knees – saving energy). It was decided that an upper layer wind/water resistant with a light down jacket over and a heavy down parka as an outer layer would be sufficient. Eduardo would carry his pack which had oxygen, dexamethasone, an emergency drug to be injected in the event of cerebral

or pulmonary edema. He also had an extra jacket and rope and food for the day plus his own water.

I had trouble sleeping on the night of the 28th. I had to get my rest but my mind was filled with thoughts of the coming challenge. Could I do this?

Will I have enough strength and stamina to summit and be able to descend successfully? These and other questions raced through my mind. Eduardo would wake me at 3:30. I don't know what time it was when I drifted off.

I awoke to the sound of the gas stove in Eduardo's tent heating water for morning drinks and oatmeal. It was 3:30 am. I began getting my gear ready. Eduardo would provide water to fill my water bladder and my liter bottle. After breakfast I had a little time to just relax and contemplate the events of the coming day. At about 5:15 Eduardo asked if I was ready to go and I replied – let's do it!

So we began our ascent of the Northwest Face of Aconcagua. Eduardo had chosen the time of our departure carefully. He wanted to catch the first rays of the sun as we neared Independence Refuge, (20,669ft / 6,300m). Here we put on our crampons. From Independence Refuge we climbed steadily upward to Protezuelo de Viento (Col of the Wind) from which we were able to see the route we will travel to the summit. The traverse that crosses the "Grand Acareo" will bring us to the base of the famous "Canaleta", a very steep and precise section covered with scree. Reaching the ridge of the Guanaco, the ridge that unites the North Summit with the South Summit we walked very close to the edge with a wonderful view of the South Face. At this point we were very near the summit and the almost vertical last impediment to the summit.

During our climb we were not alone. On the route with us were perhaps 60 other climbers, single or in groups. We passed some on the trail while they were climbing, and other groups passed us. There was little conversation on the climb. Most people, including myself, found it difficult to hold a conversation while climbing. At a rest stop conversation was possible but minimal. The air was just too thin to sustain conversation and provide oxygen to the muscles while climbing.

I encountered people from all over the world, young and old, one gentleman who was 18 days younger than me. We exchanged birthdates as we passed on the trail. I believe I was the oldest person on the mountain that day.

As we slowly climbed higher we encountered people suffering from fatigue, nausea, dizziness, and terrible headaches. Some had stopped their ascent and were resting and considering descending. All of this was happening on a very narrow trail which did not provide a lot of space to pass. In fact clothing, packs, and bodies rubbed together in passing. To complicate this situation, there was a very steep grade of snow falling away to the right of the trail. If one fell to the right it would be unlikely that they would be able to arrest their fall, and would slide for thousands of feet down the mountain only to strike one of the hundreds of rocks which protruded through the snow. Eduardo advised one passing climber to wear his sun glasses or he might damage his eyes.

We stopped to drink. I found it very difficult to drink while climbing. To drink and swallow meant you had to stop breathing for a 15 or 20 seconds. I discovered that if I tried to drink while hiking it disturbed my heart rate and upset the rhythm I had established between my heart rate and breathing while climbing. As I mentioned before, my heart rate was steady between 104 and 118 BPM even while climbing at over 22,000 feet. Eduardo was surprised at this low rate.

Nearing the Summit

Nearing 3:00 pm we entered onto the Canaleta, a long gully filled with scree and boulders of every size, with a 400 meter altitude gain to the summit. The rocks range in size from very small to massive and they are situated on a slope of 35 to 40 degrees. One had to be careful to shout out “rocka” while climbing because rocks were easily dislodged onto lower climbers. While we climbed the snow tended to prevent this but offered another problem of unstable footing. At this altitude, so near the summit it is very discouraging to take a step up only to find that the unstable soil and rock cause you to slip back down. This wastes your valuable energy and adds

frustration to the fatigue. Crampons were a great aid during this part of the ascent, and success without them would have been doubtful.

We encountered the tracks of other climbers and sometimes these were helpful and sometimes not. I found that all of the tracks that I encountered seem to have been made by persons with much longer legs than me and it was difficult to follow in their steps. This was especially true when I had to make a step, often the step was just a little too high for me. Eduardo was aware of this problem for me and though he was quite tall with long legs he shortened his stride to accommodate me. His thoughtfulness was another characteristic of an excellent guide.

Finally as we neared the summit, with one last struggle up the steep approach using hands to steady myself, I stepped up to the summit. I was elated and exhausted. It was 4:30pm, December 29, 2008. At 70 years, 7 months and 22 days old, I was standing on the summit of Aconcagua, 22,840ft, the tallest mountain in the western hemisphere. It had taken me eleven hours to climb the 3,484 feet from Camp Berlin to the summit.

With me on the summit were four or five other climbers. I gazed around to look at a wide, sloping, featureless plateau partially obscured by a cloud bank that moved in just as we reached the summit. About 20 yards from where I stepped onto the summit was a small pile of rocks with an aluminum cross standing in the center. The cross was decorated with flags and streamers and there was a bronze plaque with a Spanish inscription leaning against its base.

Eduardo asked a nearby climber to take our photo. I sat down on the rocks, and though it doesn't show because of my dark glasses, I was crying. We took a few photos and I asked Eduardo for the satellite phone he was carrying because I wanted to call Jan and tell her the news. However, Edward said he thought we should start our descent as soon as we could because the weather could change any minute. He said we are summiting late and this is the time of day, as the sun gets lower in the west, when the weather can change quickly. I argued with him a bit but finally decided he knew best. I also wanted to write in the book which is encased in a large aluminum cover and attached to the mountain near the cross. He said no – we must begin our

descent. He said the weather may be changing and it had gotten cloudy, while it had been sunny through most of our climb.

I had found a note from Jan in my back pack earlier in the trip and I took it from my pocket, read it, and slipped as far as I could beneath the stones at the base of the cross. Then I stood up to see the view but clouds obscured everything for all but a couple of hundred feet. I asked Eduardo what could I have seen if the sky was clear. He said, “turn and look west and you would have been able to see across the country of Chile to the Pacific Ocean. If you looked north or south you would have been able to look down on every other mountain in the Andes range. Look east and you would toward Buenos Aires and over the fertile wine country of Argentina.” We had been on the top for about 15 minutes.

I thanked God for my successful summit attempt - and followed my anxious guide to begin our descent.

The Descent

The most dangerous part of any summit attempt is the descent. This is not just my opinion but the opinion of many of the world's most experienced climbers. I believe it.

Ahead of us was a grueling 4 hour descent which would take all of the remaining strength I had, and then some. After we got down from the vertical part of the summit lip and back through the Canaleta, Eduardo decided that we should be roped together. He said he knew I was tired and that my reflexes were somewhat blunted by my fatigue. He said you may not be quick enough to catch yourself or regain your balance if you should fall or stumble. So he attached a rope under my arms at chest level and tied a special knot at the back which would not tighten if he had to pull on it.

Needless to say, the trail down was just as treacherous as it was on the way up but with one new dimension of danger – falling forward. The angle of the slope was so severe in some areas that there was a real danger of falling forward. I lengthened out my climbing poles so I could use them to stop my forward motion, and they were very helpful. However, for the most part my legs were the tool to hold me back and they grew tired after an hour and a half of descent. We stopped to rest often because I was exceeding my heart rate threshold and had to catch my breath occasionally. The going was slow and Eduardo was doing his best keep me moving.

As we descended we were very exposed to any severe weather that might occur at any time. There is no place to seek shelter along the very long ridge that had to be crossed on the way down. We were practically the last persons off the mountain. I can remember seeing only about 10 other climbers all the way down. Now I realize why Eduardo was so nervous about starting our descent.

As we lost altitude my breathing became a little easier under the exertion, and I finally developed a rhythm of sorts which helped greatly. The crampons were a great aid in maintaining my footing on the rocks under the snow. I don't recall the exact time it took to get back to Berlin but I'm estimating about four hours. I went to my tent exhausted and wanted to collapse into my sleeping bag, but Eduardo made sure I drank at least a half liter of water and had some food before I slept. He said it was important to prevent any altitude sickness. I asked for the satellite phone to call Erick. I managed to get the call through and told him I had summited and he was ecstatic. Unfortunately the phone battery died before we could finish our call. We couldn't charge it until morning when the sun was up. After my call I followed Eduardo's instructions, and crawled into my sleeping bag where I promptly fell into a deep and sound sleep.

Continuation of the Descent

Dec. 30th. When I awoke in the morning, refreshed, I began to think of summit day and the realization of what I had done at my age set in. More tears welled up in my eyes as I thought again about Erick and Bobbie missing out on this once in a life time experience.

The camp was waking up. I could hear stoves hissing and people talking. It had been quite cold during the night but now the sun was threatening to break the rim of nearby mountains to warm our camp. I plugged in my Ipod and listened to Rachmaninoff's 2nd piano concerto and just eased into the morning.

I knew Eduardo was sleeping in late this morning also. We had to break camp this morning and descend down to Plaza de Mulas.

Eduardo had set up the solar charger early in the morning and the Satellite phone was now ready for use. I called Jan to tell her that I summited and that I was fine and will be descending to Plaza de Mulas today and should be at the hotel with Erick and Bobbie tomorrow, New Years Eve. She was happy to hear of my success and safety and cried when I told her that I had left her note on the mountain.

Eduardo offered me scramble eggs for breakfast but I said I would like oat- meal. After breakfast while Eduardo was taking the tent down and preparing for our hike down, I began talking with a couple who were standing outside near their tent. They were Paul El-Meouchy and his mother Lina Sarraf. I invited them to join us in Mendoza for a New Years Eve celebration. They accepted.

At about 10:00 am Eduardo and I started our descent to Plaza de Mulas. While the climb up took three days, we intended to go down in just one.

As we descended we encountered other climbers ascending to high camps.

Somehow the word had gotten down to the lower camps that I had summited. They were saying the old man with the white beard summited.

The climbers we encountered recognized me and reached out to shake my hand and offer congratulations. A group of Japanese climbers wanted a photo of me with them. I met the doctor with whom Eduardo consulted with regard to my high blood pressure. I met a gentleman from the US who said he was 70 too and I asked him his birth date and found that I was 18 days older than he. One young man grabbed my hand and gave it a hardy squeeze and congratulated me. He had just returned from a successful attempt on Everest. I told him, "I honor you sir."

So it went as we descended over a four hour period. I felt like a celebrity. We arrived at Plaza de Mulas in the early afternoon. I was quite tired but recovered quickly. Eduardo arranged for me to have a shower at the hostel. It cost \$10 and was with cold water. I didn't get as clean as I would have liked. I took a nap after my shower.

In the evening about 6:30 I went to the dining area where I met some other climbers. They had heard of my successful summit attempt and knew who I was because I was known as the "old man with the white beard".

There was my friend Jeff, from England but the other folks were new to me. I met Sara and Luca, from Como, Italy, a husband and wife team who were going to the high camps in the morning. I met a young man from Peru whose name I can not find in my notes. He is a guide and was guiding the Italian couple. He is famous because he summited and descended Mt. Aconcagua in 5 hours and 25 minutes from Berlin. Unbelievable! There were also two gentlemen from Argentina, Oswaldo, and Jeraldo, both in their 50's. This group of people helped me celebrate my summit experience. I provided some wine and after a very delicious meal of Sheppard's pie we talked and got to know each other. Eduardo, the chef, provide two bottles of champagne and we celebrated some more. Finally my age, and the hiking I did all day caught up with me and I excused myself to retire.

Dec. 31st. I had breakfast with most of the group who helped me celebrate the last night. I asked Eduardo if I could have a very substantial breakfast to fortify me for the hike out to the park entrance. He asked the chef to make me a special omelet with ample portions of bacon or ham. She complied and fixed me the most wonderful omelet just to my liking. Now I was ready for the 16 mile hike to the park entrance. I

look upon it as another test of endurance for the old man. This climb was not complete until I finished the last 16 miles.

It was warm and sunny as we began our hike. I say hike rather than descent because the trail was a very gradual reduction in altitude down to about 2,500 meters.

I was wearing my Danner hiking boots and felt like I had wings on my feet after five days in plastic boots and crampons. I began the hike down full of energy and anxious to get to the hotel to see Erick and Bobbie. Eduardo and I hiked quite fast for the first four or five hours. I kept up with him quite easily. However, in mid afternoon I began to fade a little and slowed my pace over rough terrain. We had been hiking for five hours and still had about 3 and ½ hours to hiking to go. I resolved to maintain a certain pace and did so for the rest of the day. About 45 minutes from reaching the park entrance, Eduardo radioed to the ranger who was a friend at the entrance and asked if he could pick us up with the truck. He said OK. So, I was met by a small contingent of people, the ranger, his wife and child, and an assistant ranger and another young man. They were on the bridge I had to cross to complete my journey. They all congratulated me and offered me a seat in the truck. We waited for a few other hikers who were nearing the bridge and they got into the truck too, in the pick up box. In all we must have had six or eight hikers on board.

I was surprised to learn that Lina and Paul were two of the hikers. We all enjoyed a few miles ride to the park entrance which shortened our hike by about 45 minutes. I needed that – thanks Eduardo.

As we drove to Mendoza, a 156 kilometers away, Eduardo spent a considerable amount of time on the phone trying to get us reservations for dinner at a good restaurant. He succeeded after about one hour of effort.

We arrived at the hotel at 10:30 pm and a taxi would pick us up to take us to the restaurant. I showered and changed and was ready. We met Lina and Paul at the restaurant and we all celebrated the New Year in style. Erick selected the best wine they had on their wine list and everyone had a great time.

We spent the next few days in Mendoza and then returned home on January 3rd arriving in the US on January 4th.