



**The odor of the forest was delicious. The views were magnificent and the mountain streams were almost dry so crossing them was not a problem ... then, I started to feel the altitude.**

The sun was setting behind the mountain peaks. We were at 12,000 feet. Mark was down amongst the boulder-strewn rock face of Mt. Whitney a few hundred feet below. Belle, Mark and I had run low on water as we were preparing to camp for the night at this lofty altitude. Earlier, we all looked over the cliff and spied an alpine lake. I was near exhaustion and could not breathe very well -- altitude sickness. The tarn (pool) that was to provide us with water was dry due to a yearlong drought that gripped all of California in this year of 1987.

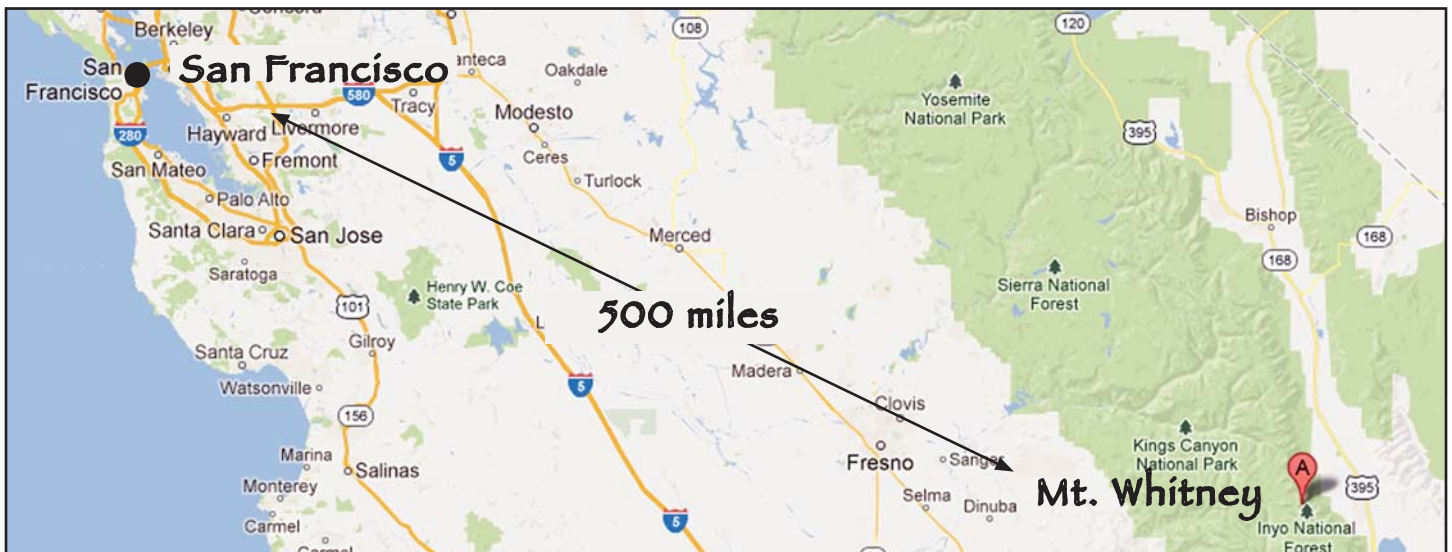
Mark decided to climb down and refill the two empty canteens of the four that we carried. Little did we know the distortion of distance in the pristine mountain air. The shadows of night gripped the lower altitudes much earlier than where Belle and I were. Darkness fell suddenly. The stars twinkled in the night sky. The granite pinnacles cast eerie shadows over the landscape in the moonlight. I leaned out over the edge of the mountain on my belly and shined my flashlight on the rocks below calling "Mark, Mark." This way he would have a guiding light and sound as he slowly made his way back up the mountain side climbing from one boulder to the next.



The temperature plunged precipitously. It was near freezing and we were hiking the mountain in June. Forty minutes later, a hand reached and gripped the edge. I grabbed his arm and pulled. Mark, panting from the thin air, climbed over. "I guess the lake was a bit lower than we thought. The farther I climbed down, the farther the lake appeared." he exclaimed. "Thanks for the light. It was pitch-black down there. I was totally disoriented." Our campsite was perched on flat terrain off the main trail at Trail Camp. We all had some trail mix, sandwiches, and a little of our water for dinner. I could not get the white gas stove to ignite. The temperature kept creeping lower. We piled into the tent with all our layers of clothes on,

huddled together to ward off the cold, and wrapped the sleeping bags around us. It was a cold, cold night.

The previous night found us barreling down the highway from Alameda towards the town of Lone Pine on US 395. The car was loaded with our backpacks full of camping gear and food for the hike up Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the contiguous United States. Six hours later, we made the turn and trundled uphill the last thirteen miles to the parking lot at Mt. Whitney Portal at 8000 ft. We slept in the car for a few hours and just before dawn, had coffee from the thermos that we brought and a sandwich, slipped on our packs, and started the 11 mile climb to the top at 14,500 feet.



Right away, the hike was steep with switchbacks that climbed through the tall fir and pine trees. The odor of the forest was delicious. The views were magnificent. The mountain streams were almost dry so crossing them was not a problem. I started to feel the altitude. Headache and shortness of breath became the norm. Water and ibuprofen were my companions. Still, we trudged on and up. The trees became less dense and shorter. Finally at 10,000 feet, we were above tree line.

We kept peeling off layers of clothes due to the strenuous climb. Behind us, the sun lit up the Owens Valley below. In the far, far distance were the Inyo Mountains and we could see Death Valley 85 miles away. In front of us were the granite spires of the mountain. The area took on a moonlike quality at times. My head was pounding from the altitude. I was definitely slowing down but stubbornly kept putting one foot in front of the other. Dehydration was a factor at higher elevation. There were a few lakes that had water and we refilled the canteens regularly and added purification tablets. I had all our hiking permits in my pack although at this time and day of the year there were not that many hikers on the trail. Finally we reached Trail Camp where we planned to overnight. No water available. That is when we noticed the alpine lake below.



Morning finally arrived. We were all shivering as the temperature dropped to the high 'teens, low 20's. Frost was everywhere. The sun gave us enough light to have a light meal of trail mix and a limited amount of water. Looks like we will have to ration it for the rest of the way up as there was no water above. I tried to ignite the stove again but failed. We broke camp and started onward. I was feeling dizzy, having trouble breathing, and my head

was exploding with the pounding headache. Still, we moved slowly upward. Then we reached the infamous 99 Switchbacks that ascended 1700 feet. It is a 2.3 mile serpentine hike that winds its way up the mountain. On the north face we hit a narrow, iced portion with a steel cable separating us from the sheer drop of thousands of feet below. All of us moved very slowly over the treacherous slippery floor. This was a little disconcerting to say the least. It would have been nice to have crampons strapped onto our shoes to dig into the ice. But we made it and kept hiking and reached the Trail Crest Pass at 13600 feet.

It was midday. I was totally exhausted and knew I was holding everyone back but the altitude had me in its grips and was not going to let go. We still had 2.5 miles and 900 ft higher to climb. The view was amazing. We could look west now and see mountain peaks below us. I told Mark and Belle to take the water and continue. I would rest and wait for them here at this spot. We had a "pow wow" and decided for safety and preservation of life, we would turn back and began the long descent before the coming of darkness. It was an incredible climb ... **the summit would have to wait.** -- *Drake Regent*

