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Tim Sullivan

Summits Bring His Life to a Higher Plane

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Dangling from an unfamiliar rope anchored among sharp rocks, buffeted by high winds, sleet and hail, contemplating a 2,000-foot drop and his own mortality, Bo Parfet hung suspended near the highest point in New Guinea and decided it was time to go home.

“I miss my mommy,” Parfet remembers saying. “When you're stripped down that much, you're kind of at ground zero. I remember thinking I didn't want to climb again, that I wanted to go back to America, go eat a Chicago-style hot dog.”

The moment would pass. The danger was dodged. The climber pressed on. The quest continued.

The Carstensz Pyramid was the sixth stop on Parfet's tour of the Seven Summits — the highest points on each of earth's continents — and for sheer difficulty it ranks right up there with Mount Everest. Though its elevation is just 16,024 feet (Everest's is 29,029), simply getting close enough to climb the Pyramid requires peak performance.

For Parfet, that trek involved a staring contest with a presumed cannibal, hiring a guide/bribe-handler to negotiate passage, hiding in the back of a truck for a six-hour ride through a series of military checkpoints and dining on local delicacies such as deep-fried bat and sauteed rat.

Some of Parfet's mountain-climbing memoir, “Die Trying,” should appear under the heading of Too Much Information, particularly those parts that pertain to the author's bowels. Yet this unflinching account of high-altitude adventure and personal growth is worth a look, maybe even a lecture.

The 31-year-old explorer and entrepreneur is scheduled to speak at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the San Diego Natural History Museum. The \$25 admission fee includes a copy of his book and, Parfet promises, something more than a slide show. His subject, in essence, is fear itself.

“I stood on that cliff of change and I jumped,” Parfet said yesterday in a telephone interview. “What I realized, retrospectively, is it's more painful to stand on that cliff than it is to jump. . . .”

“I don't have a death wish. I climb for myself. I climb to be a better person. I climb to climb another day. But I actually feel safer on the side of a mountain than I do stuck in the concrete jungle of Manhattan working for J.P. Morgan.”

Descended from the founder of the Upjohn Co., the Michigan pharmaceutical giant famous for creating pills that could be easily digested, Parfet was an apprentice Wall Street wizard who sought to bite off at least as much as he could chew. Though he is fond of saying that the way to eat an elephant is one piece at a time, Parfet's methodology has more often indicated inadequate preparation and inordinate confidence.

Heeding the advice of his Everest Sherpa, Top-Jin, Parfet's ultimate destination has been humility. To get there, he had to throttle back on his ego and embrace a team concept, no small challenge.

Though Parfet's personal story includes the conquest of dyslexia, there are places in his book where the author portrays himself as selfish and irritable, personal flaws exacerbated by slower colleagues and subzero conditions. But after prolonged exposure to death and danger, to corruption and privation, and after scaling summits totaling 149,425 vertical feet, Bo Parfet emerges as a more complete, more compelling character.

On his first attempt at Everest, in 2005, Parfet experienced the death of a team member, whose body remains on the mountain. He returned to the mountain mindful of his limitations.

“I'm probably not the smartest guy out there,” he said yesterday, a few hours before addressing the Explorers Club in New York. “I can't dunk a basketball. I'm not in shape at all. I'm not Lance Armstrong. I'm a normal guy. I'm not blessed with anything that not everyone else has. If I can do it, I know that a lot of other people can do it.”

The Seven Summits quest was first conceived by Dick Bass, owner of Utah's Snowbird Ski Resort, and was first achieved by him in 1985. Italian climber Reinhold Messner later proposed an amended list, replacing Mount Koscuizsko on the Australian mainland with the loftier Carstensz Pyramid as the truer test of Australasian altitude.

According to amateur mountaineer Alan Arnette (climbing@alanarnette.com) at least 230 people had completed at least one of the two Seven Summits lists as of 2008. Bo Parfet has covered the tracks of both Bass and Messner, completing their challenges by mounting Everest on May 17, 2007, his second attempt at the “Roof of the World.”

“I started this Seven Summits journey because I wanted to change,” he said. “Internally, I was unhappy and I knew I needed to change and make radical change in my life. The only way I knew how to do it was to go and do a project like this.”

Parfet's next target is an as-yet unclimbed mountain in Nepal. He holds two consuming jobs now, but the climber in him plans to press on. The quest continues.

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