

Chillin' with Ellen on San Jacinto

Sat Feb 16, 2008

Well, I broke the first rule of hiking – never end up on the 5 PM news.

I was looking forward to trying out my snowshoes (Atlas, moveable toe-cord, aluminum cleats) for the second time. I had used them for the first time to summit San Jacinto from the tram with my friend Lance three weeks earlier. I was debating whether to take crampons or snowshoes on this hike as I didn't want to carry both. The reconnaissance from the San Jacinto Board was in favor of snowshoes which made sense due to the new snow from the storm the previous weekend.

I checked the San Jacinto weather forecast on the NOAA website (33.81N -116.68W, elevation 10539 ft) for both Saturday and Sunday on Friday evening and again Saturday morning before I left Riverside. The predicted weather for Saturday looked great for a day hike: clear, cold and breezy at the summit. A big storm was expected to come in on Sunday and I wanted no part of it. I wore Northface trekking pants, a lightweight Patagonia long sleeve shirt, Northface zip-up fleece jacket, REI Peruvian skull cap, waterproof Grandoe gloves with liners, Merrell leather boots and carried a lightweight REI gortex jacket.

The Climb

I took the first tram up on Saturday morning February 2. While in the boarding area, I met a group of hikers with snowshoes from the Orange County hiking club who were extremely nice. I chatted with two trip leaders from this group on our way down the icy walkway. I carried my snowshoes and planned to use them when I started post-holing. We obtained permits from the Ranger Station at about 8:20 AM.

When we reached the creek, I opted to follow the tracks on the right hand side. I suspected these were Hal's tracks from his hike to Miller Peak. At least one other person had followed this route. It was a comfortable climb with no exposure and didn't require snowshoes or crampons. I was pleasantly surprised when I popped out in Tamarack Valley. I had a great view of Cornell Peak off to my right and saw footprints headed in that direction.

I continued across the valley floor, approaching San Jacinto from the east. Once I started to climb again, the snow softened and I sank up to my knees. I put on the snowshoes and followed another set of snowshoes tracks uphill. As I climbed, the route became steeper, more exposed, and icy. I took my time, making sure that I had good contact with each step. I finally came out on a ridge, turned north (right) and reached the summit at 11:15 AM. It was chilly, so I put on my gortex jacket and hunkered down behind the rocks for shelter while I ate my turkey and cheese sandwich.

I waited for about 15 minutes for other individuals to summit but no one came. The wind was getting too glacial for my taste so I decided to head down. I later learned that the Orange County hiking club trip leaders took their group through Tamarack valley, up the south face of Miller peak, through the saddle and up to San Jacinto peak. I had reached the summit before them because they took a longer route.

The Fall

My plan was to head down to the Miller switchback and then gradually work my way back to Tamarack valley as I did with Lance three weeks earlier. I didn't want to retrace my steps on the descent due to the

exposure, steepness and iciness of the snow. I started to follow footprints that I thought were heading in the right direction. The route seemed a little steep, but my pace was slow and deliberate.

I suddenly found myself sliding feet first down hill towards a pine tree. I heard a “thunk” (visualize the sound a melon makes when dropped) and felt moderate pain in my left ankle. The impact swung me sideways so that my chest made contact with the tree trunk. I took a moment to catch my breath and found my ankle wedged between a limb on the right side of the tree and the snow. It was about 12 PM.

It took a while to extricate myself and determine the location of my hiking poles. When I tried to stand, the pain was excruciating and I fell to my knees. I also had the sickening sensation that my left foot was not communicating with my lower leg – the ankle was completely unstable. I took off my snowshoe and tried to stand again with the same awful result. X-rays later indicated that I had a displaced fracture of the fibula with comminution (fragments), resulting in complete disruption of the ankle joint.

Series of Unfortunate Events

I knew that I couldn't make it down the mountain (even to Tamarack valley) and needed help. I did not have a cell phone and I was alone. I thought that I could intercept other hikers coming up, so I carefully crawled down hill for about 15 minutes. The descent became steeper. This was concerning as I had no real way of stopping myself if I started to slide. I halted, looked around carefully, and realized with dismay that I was not headed towards the Miller switchback. I learned later (after talking with Perry) that I was probably heading down the north face of San Jacinto. It was about 1 PM.

I decided my best option was to crawl back uphill to the summit. If I didn't run into any other hikers, I could find shelter in the stone hut. Due to the steepness of the terrain, I made certain that I always had three points of contact. My left ankle and foot were useless but I was able to slam my left knee into the snow to gain purchase. After what seemed like a lifetime, I made it back to the summit. It was 2 PM and no one was there. From the multiple footprints heading downhill, I surmised that the Orange County hiking club and others had summited while I was crawling around with a broken ankle.

I followed the footprints down in the hope that I could still meet someone going up. The footsteps headed towards the Miller switchback – the route I had intended to go down. I yelled periodically but heard nothing in response save the wind. After about a half-hour of crawling downhill, I realized that it was too late in the day for any sane hiker to be attempting the summit. My objective shifted to finding the stone hut.

I looked around and realized that I was not in the right area for the hut. I crawled back uphill and evaluated my position relative to the summit. I knew I was too far east (to the right) so I maintained the same elevation and started crawling westward (to the left). It was 4 PM. At that moment I realized that I might die. I put that thought away and concentrated on moving as it was getting colder. I stopped periodically to look at my position relative to the summit and the surrounding terrain. I finally reached a spot where the surroundings looked familiar. I took a chance and glanced downhill. I saw the roof of the hut. I closed my eyes, said a prayer and looked again to be sure. I crawled down to the hut and said aloud “I'm going to live.” It was 4:30 PM.

The door to the hut was covered about half-way by snow. I pushed against it and nothing happened. I then hit it with my right shoulder (a mistake, ouch!) – nothing. I thought it would be ironic if my frozen body were found outside the door, which showed that I still had a sense of humor. I decided to dig out

the door and used my hands and poles to this end. Once I reached the bottom of the door, I tried pushing it again. Nothing. I took off my snowshoes and sat in the “snow bench” that I had created in front of the door. I put my right foot on the door near the opening, leaned back into the snow and started doing leg presses. I finally heard a reassuring creak as the door began to open. I continued pushing until I created an opening big enough to squeeze myself and my equipment through. It was 5 PM and the sun was setting.

The San Jacinto Bunk Bed and Breakfast

I crawled in, shut the door, and surveyed my abode. Snow covered the entire floor and most of the other flat surfaces. Thankfully there was a sleeping bag on the bottom right bunk bed. The light was fading so I had little time to determine the hut’s provisions. And, of course, I had accidentally left my head lamp in my car. Although I was able to stand on my right leg by holding on to the rocky mantle, I had to abandon my search when I started shaking violently from cold and exhaustion.

I crawled back to the bunk bed, shook the snow off the sleeping bag, and pulled the bag around me. I was able to get better protection (more insulation) from the cold by using the bag as a cover rather than by getting inside. An extremely worn egg crate mattress covered the wooden slats of the bed. It helped block breezes coming up from the floor but offered little protective cushion.

Once cocooned in the sleeping bag, I did not feel cold. I was looking forward to resting quietly after moving for so long, but this was not to be. I started to shiver in a manner I’ve never experienced before. I shook violently the entire length of my body. I could hear the bunk bed creak rhythmically in response. This creaking evoked memories of a far more pleasurable physical activity, which at least provided some temporary humor.

Shivering thermogenesis is a very inefficient way to increase body core temperature – the body expends numerous calories to gain a small (three to four-fold) elevation in metabolic rate. I was very grateful that I had my percentage of body fat and not Perry’s or Cy’s.

Between the pain from my broken ankle, the intense shivering, and the uncomfortable bunk bed, I could not remain in any one position for very long. I would lay on my right side, then roll onto my back and then on my left side. Trying to move around without sustaining further injury reminded me of trying to log roll in bed after having back surgery. To make the experience even more interesting, my left calf would periodically cramp badly enough that I screamed. (At least I didn’t have to worry about disturbing anyone). I discovered later from my family that my backside was black and blue.

While in the hospital, Cynthia asked what it felt like to be alone and in the dark. While contemplating a suitable reply, Walt said “Those are the scary hours.” His statement is as perfect as it is concise.

The Scary Hours, Saturday Night

I felt both ecstatic to be alive and embarrassed. My first thoughts were for my family and friends. I knew they would be worried sick and I felt incredibly guilty. I wished that telepathy existed and sent good thoughts everyone’s way just in case. I hoped that someone would notify search and rescue that I was missing. I prayed that I would have the fortitude to carry on until rescued. I meditated to achieve some peace and relief of pain. I missed my Sheltie and five cats. At some point in the wee hours of the morning, I stopped shivering and found a modicum of tranquility. I did not sleep at all that first night.

Sunday in the San J BBB

As daylight dawned, I crawled off the bunk bed and over to the rock mantle and opened up the wood box containing the emergency food and medical supplies. Most of the food was freeze dried and useless as I didn't have a stove or matches. I found a can of sardines, a bag of club crackers, a can of condensed cream of chicken soup, and a bag of trail mix. I really wanted an anti-inflammatory such as ibuprofen or naproxen but the medical kits had been stripped.

I hoped to find bottled water as I had consumed the last of my Gatorade early that morning. I found an empty 2 liter bottle of water and noticed another 2 liter bottle with liquid in the corner of the hut. Unfortunately, the liquid was yellow and I don't mean Gatorade-yellow. I opened the top and sniffed to be sure. Yup, urine. Yuck! I would definitely be eating snow to stay hydrated.

My feet felt colder than I was comfortable with so I took off my boots and examined my toes. The tips were blue but I could move them. I left the boots off to facilitate warming and movement and kept on my Thurlo 100% wool trekking socks. I had a difficult time getting the left boot off due to the swollen broken ankle. Next I evaluated my fingers. The finger tips were blue to black but the nail beds were still pink. I knew that I had sustained some degree of cold injury because I had lousy dexterity. Even putting the gloves back on was hard.

I heard the wind picking up mid-morning. I remembered the dire NOAA weather report for Sunday. Although I listened hopefully for a helicopter and/or human voices, the rational part of my brain warned the chance of being rescued that day were slim due to the high winds and snow. I also did not want anyone to get hurt coming to my aid – I could never forgive myself if this happened. I had no idea how bad the conditions really were until Cynthia and Walt visited me Monday evening in the hospital.

I knew that I needed to increase my metabolic rate to maintain a normal core temperature. Maintaining my core temperature would prevent a return of that awful shivering as well as help minimize the cold injury to my digits. Exercise was out, which left eating. The body's energy expenditure increases after eating due to the metabolic work of digestion and absorption – this is called dietary induced thermogenesis or DIT. I ate the last of my baked Doritos for breakfast and decided to have a go at the sardines and crackers about 11 AM. I loathe sardines but knew that I needed the calories, protein, and fat they provided.

I slowly worked my way through the can, alternating bites of sardines with crackers and snow. I had to cut the sardines out of the can with my Swiss army knife due to the cold temperature in the hut. I kept as much of my body as possible covered by the sleeping bag while I ate due to the cold. About an hour later, my gastrointestinal track rebelled in a way that resembled the eruption of the volcano Krakatoa. I was barely able to get off the bunk bed and somehow miraculously didn't defile myself. After a second, smaller eruption, I took some Imodium from my first aid kit and this quieted the volcano.

About 2 PM, I decided to tackle the can of condensed cream of chicken soup in another attempt to generate DIT. The can did not have a pull top lid, which meant I had to use my Swiss army knife. Due to the numb fingertips, it took at least 15 minutes to find and open the correct tool on the knife. Probably took another 15 minutes to break into the can. I was lying on my left side – propped up with my left elbow while using my right hand on the can. My arms ached and I actually had to rest periodically.

The soup was even more difficult to extricate from the can with my knife than the sardines. Once again I alternated between chunks of cold soup, crackers, and snow. The “soup” had the consistency of canned chicken and tasted only slightly less disgusting than the sardines. I managed to consume about one-third of the can before hitting the gastronomical wall. Thirty minutes later I started to have abdominal cramps and pain which were only relieved by expelling gas. The odor was so heinous that I thought I’d discovered a new weapon.

Late-afternoon I started to develop a headache. This was not helped by the noise of the seemingly gale force winds that were blowing outside the hut. I suspected this was caused by dehydration (I had hardly produced any urine) rather than the altitude. It’s hard to consume an adequate amount of water by eating snow due to the volume of snow one must consume. I estimated that a handful of snow provided about 1-2 ounces of water at most. I ate a handful of snow every five minutes for an hour. I also consumed the club crackers to provide calories (heat) and hopefully counteract the detrimental effect of eating snow on my core temperature. By sunset, the headache was gone.

The Scary Hours, Sunday Night

As the hut became dark, I prayed that the Monday’s weather would clear and permit a rescue attempt. I briefly fantasized that I would hear a helicopter around 8 AM Monday morning. I did not dwell on this because I didn’t want to get my hopes up and then have them crushed if a Monday rescue was not possible.

I mentally reviewed the contents of the emergency supplies box to determine what else I could use for nourishment. I had specifically saved the trail mix for Monday as I knew it would taste good and help get me through another day and night if necessary. I was running out of options – there were several cans of tomato sauce and a brick pack of sweetened, condensed milk.

About 8 PM, I started to shiver uncontrollably again. I couldn’t believe it – this just wasn’t fair! I repeated the Saturday night ritual of rolling from side to side on the bunk bed. I wondered if I had splinters in my butt and thighs and just couldn’t feel them due to the cold.

The wind began to dissipate as the night wore on. Finally, it was blessedly quiet. At midnight, I heard a wonderful sound – birds singing. If the weather was calm enough for birds to sing, it should be calm enough for a helicopter. It rained briefly around 1 AM. Around 2 AM I heard the birds singing again. I stopped shivering, fell asleep, and dosed on and off from 4 AM to 7 AM.

I had some really bizarre dreams. Scenes from classic romantic films such as “Casablanca” and “Now, Voyager!” played in my head. (My younger sister has told me I watch too many old movies). At one point I awakened and thought I was home in bed. The illusion was broken when I opened my eyes and saw the snow on the hut’s floor.

The Rescue

By 8 AM on Monday, bright light was streaming in through the hut’s windows. I was munching on yummy trail mix when I heard the unmistakable sound of a helicopter. I threw myself out of the bunk bed onto my hands and knees and crawled over to door. Tried to yank it open and couldn’t due to snow that had blown in from the storm on Sunday. I nearly screamed with frustration and hoped the helicopter would circle for a while. I scraped as much snow away as I could with my hiking pole and

pulled again – success. I jammed my body through the tiny opening and was astonished to see at least a foot of new snow outside.

I scrambled up the snow bank on my hands and knees (probably established a Guinness record for crawling speed) out to an area where I knew I could be seen. I got on my knees and started enthusiastically waving my arms back and forth over my head. I will never forget the sight of that beautiful helicopter circling directly above me. They acknowledged seeing me by calling out over the loud speaker: “Ellen Coleman, stay where you are, we are coming to get you.” I almost started laughing hysterically – as if I could go anywhere under my own power.

I laid on my back, said a prayer of thanks, and savored the moment. The sky was an amazing blue and sunlight reflected off the Salton Sea. The light was so bright reflecting off the snow that it was painful to my unprotected eyes. I crawled back into the hut to stay warm until the rescuers arrived.

A face soon appeared in the crack of the door. I expressed my gratitude and used his ice-axe to scrape more snow away from my side of the door. Dana Potts and Robert May pushed open the door and walked in. During their assessment of my status, I told them about the broken ankle and cold injuries to my digits. They said the temperature in the hut was 17 degrees.

A funny moment occurred during a test where I was supposed to follow a pen-light with my eyes. I have nystagmus (uncontrolled movement of the eyes from side-to side) which goes along with my fair skin and blue eyes. However, nystagmus can also be a sign of head trauma. When I told the examiner that I had nystagmus, he said “Thank God!”

Rob and Dana splinted my ankle with tent-poles (Rob donated his Thermalight mattress and rope) and chair-carried me outside. I was placed on a large, unzipped torso suit with holes for the arms and legs called the Bauman Screamer Suit. Once my legs and arms were in the proper holes, I was zipped up. I was instructed to cover my eyes to guard against blowing snow while the helicopter descended and dropped a cable. This was attached to a big carabineer on front of the suit and bam! I was hoisted into the air.

Once airborne, I opened my eyes and looked around. I was spinning slowly in a 360 degree circle while being lifted into the helicopter. The view was spectacular and breathtaking. Definitely more fun than Disney ride I’ve ever experienced. I looked up and saw a foot on the helicopter skid and an outstretched hand. I grabbed the hand and was carefully raised up and into the helicopter. I was handed a head-set by the flight officer (Andy Rasmussen?) so I could communicate with him and the pilot Tony Bowen.

I thanked both men profusely (there is a reason that angels fly) and asked how they knew where to look. The flight officer told me that RMRU was communicating with my friends on the San Jacinto hiking board on my possible location. I had no idea of the extent of the board’s involvement until I talked with everyone (Karin, Cynthia, Walt, Perry, Scott, and Z-dude) who visited me at the hospital. Had I known at that time, I probably would have starting crying.

This was my first flight in a helicopter and the ride and scenery were exquisite, I told my rescuers that this really wasn’t the proper or subtle way to get a helicopter ride. Being gentlemen, they both laughed. We touched down on the helipad on Desert Regional Hospital and I was transferred to a gurney and into the emergency room for evaluation of trauma.

The Hospital

On admission, my temperature was stable at 97.4. I had lost a significant amount of blood (about two to three units or pints) due to the ankle fracture and tissue damage from the stress of crawling and cold exposure. My hemoglobin was below 10 (normally around 14). I also had evidence of significant muscle break-down as measured by creatine phosphokinase (CPK) and myoglobin (an iron carrying compound in muscles similar to hemoglobin in red blood cells). With a very high level of muscle breakdown (rhabdomyolysis), the kidneys can't filter the myoglobin and the person may develop kidney failure and require dialysis. Fortunately, I wasn't that bad.

My family came in shortly after I arrived and enveloped me in hugs. I apologized profusely for putting them through this. They were happy I was alive and indicated they wouldn't read me the riot act until I was healthy.

Robert May came into the ER to check on me as well as return my equipment. I was astonished that any thought was given to my equipment (especially those damn snowshoes). For heaven's sake, the folks at RMRU had just saved my life! Rob even found my Swiss army knife under the bunk bed. I briefly explained what happened, how I survived, and thanked him again. How can you adequately thank people who have saved your life? Robert May and Danna Potts are perfect people for search and rescue.

The ER physician, Dr. Davies, called in Dr. Paz, a trauma surgeon and Dr. Stabile, an orthopedic surgeon. Dr. Paz felt that I had 2nd stage cold trauma, but not true frost bite, and would likely make a full recovery. I had also sustained second stage cold injury to both knees -- hiking pants are not made to crawl in for 4 hours.

Dr. Stabile reduced the fracture under conscious sedation in the ER. The following morning, he put in a plate and screws to achieve better stability. My left thigh, calf, and ankle were about 30% bigger than my right thigh and calf due to swelling from the fracture. I also had subcutaneous bruising on both legs all the way to my groin, which made an interesting contrast to my undamaged skin. The medical care at Desert Regional was exceptional and I give the hospital my highest recommendation.

I owe my life and thanks to many people – RMRU, this board, and my family. Bless you all.

— *Ellen Coleman*