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Deb Robak, Content Editor

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## Little Bear, April, 2011 by Uwe Sartori

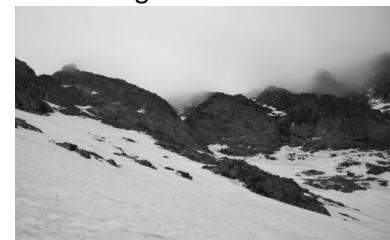


One of the challenges facing a trip leader is when to call it. A CMC Centennial Climb of Little Bear in 2011 is a good study of the consequences of missing that call. For scale, consider on that particular day, it took us 19.5 hours to summit Little Bear and return to camp. Folks have done it in six hours and the average is probably around 8.

Our team of five left Colorado Springs in good weather and high spirits. Everyone was known to the other. All had been with me on other challenging climbs before. Each team member had high confidence that their skills and experience were well matched to the challenges offered by Little Bear. We knew the weather forecast was not in our favor. They were calling for snow showers, dropping temperatures, and 25-35mph winds. Having studied the weather reports for weeks, I had high confidence that the ground and climbing conditions were good and the weather forecasted would be similar in outcome: little snow accumulation, and less wind than predicted. The avy forecasts were low to moderate. By the time we arrived at Lake Como,

the blue bird day had turned to grey. While the team comfortably settled into some winter camping, I did a reconnoiter of our route up to the couloir that would take us up to the NE ridge. Snow was in great shape. Visibility was good, the air cold and dry. It had a great winter feel. (I thought to myself, this was going to be an excellent Denali training event.)

Next morning under a gray sky, we climbed up the couloir and rounded the notch to begin our traverse. Because of the ice and snow scattered about, our pace traversing was slow. As we were crossing the snowfield that leads you to the hourglass, we all watched the cloud ceiling drop down the mountain, covering the upper part of the hourglass.



We stopped and talked about whether we should continue or return. It was about 11:00AM and we still had to get to the hourglass, negotiate it and climb on, in conditions from what we could see would be poor visibility. Two were inclined to call it, the rest were ambivalent and looked to me. I offered up the idea we would go to the bottom of the hourglass and assess conditions. (I thought to myself the weather would hold, this group can do it and it was going to be an excellent Denali training event.) Before scouting, we decided that if conditions were good enough to pass through the hourglass, an anchor would be built and the rope dropped for the others to prussik up. Sure enough, the conditions in the hourglass - hard ice and good snow at the top - led to a deadman anchor, and the rope tied off and dropped. As this was going on, the weather remained stable and things continued to look good.



Soon all were moving up and onto a place I had prepped. As the last person cleared the line, she disappeared in a whiteout! At that very moment, all hell had broken loose with biting snow and 25-35mph winds. It was ugly. Another huddle up. Ambivalence reigned. We were close to the summit, properly dressed and geared up and everyone was as committed as I was. I believed in the team and that we would make it fine. There were no more huddle ups to make decisions, only a slow methodical movement of crampons and ice axes across snow, rock, and ice. We worked hard, route finding in miserable conditions, and arriving at the summit a little after 2:00PM. While we were stoked to be on the summit, we were dreading the trip down.



For good reason, the snow and wind were unrelenting. Slow and steady progress got us back down through the hourglass and onto the snowfield about 5:30PM. The

skies parted. Some of us called home to say all was well. While we should have been back at camp several hours ago, it was ok. We had gotten through the worst. Hot food and warm sleeping bags were waiting. Things were looking up...for about an hour. By nightfall we were back in the thick of it. The snow, ice and wind were biting and painful. The verglas and hoarfrost made it slippery and dangerous. Visibility was five feet. Looking for the notch...*looking for the notch!* Mercifully, we found it around 11:30PM and were back in camp before 1:00AM. The next morning we awoke to grey skies and fresh snow. It was calm, beautiful.



We packed up, headed out and went home. All of us knew that it was going to take a little time to process this trip. Our good fortune was that we each had the mojo to finish and that we worked so well as a team. There is a happy ending to this story. Turns out, the Little Bear climb was the first CMC Centennial to be completed. The team, they still climb with me. I learned lessons that will make me a better trip leader. In the end, all good.

### **What the heck happened? Decision-making failed. Why?**

(1) Leader Personal Bias. I was 110% confident in my skill set and the team's. I knew the weather was going to be suspect, but actually welcomed it. I was training for Denali. For me, the worse the better. So the weather forecast had the exact opposite effect - it was encouraging rather than discouraging.

(2) Team Bias. Because we all knew each other and had taken measure of each other in other climbs, the trust among the group for each member's ability and skills was very high. She can, I trust her and I can, too. Add to that the team's high trust in me and you've got a motivated team willing to take higher risks.

(3) Decision Making Bias. Using a decision making funnel, (DMF), I put in the variables and out comes my decision. In this case, the inputs were selective and supportive of a go decision. My and the team's strength and experience, my personal desire to be training in adverse conditions, the creep of we are this far, let's

keep going. We can do this. These were the variables that were pumped into my DMF resulting in a series of decisions to move forward, onward.

### **What variables did I minimize or ignore in my DMF? The basic stuff:**

- (1) Risk assessment. We will most likely be in a storm. Think of the worst that could happen and put a higher weight on risk assessment as a decision variable.
- (2) The time requirement calculations. We were moving slow, going to move slower, what does that mean for our timeline back to camp?
- (3) Objective hazards like traveling in the dark with wind, snow, verglas, hoarfrost, low visibility, falling temps and route finding challenges.
- (4) I am completely responsible for the safety and well being of his team at all times in all circumstances. While I had 100% confidence in performance and outcome, what if something happened to me?

“If I had HONESTLY weighed these within the context of my CMC Trip Leader role and responsibilities, I would have pulled the plug as soon as I saw the cloud ceiling drop.”

### **Some things you can do to avoid the trap I set for myself.**

- (1) Leave your own personal objectives in a box at home - I should never have interjected my personal training objectives.
- (2) Decide ahead of trip execution what your and the team's weather tolerance will be.
- (3) Discuss with your team the conditions that keep you moving forward vs. calling it: environment, pace, individual assessments.
- (4) Make firm your personal commitment to the safety and well being of the team, not to the mountain or the summit.

*Thank you, Uwe, for providing us with such valuable lessons. We don't all climb 14ers but we can certainly relate to these types of situations.*



## *Announcements:*

### **NEW CRITERIA FOR DENVER GROUP BIKE LEADERS**

Effective August 1st Denver Safety & Leadership Committee (DS&L) has established criteria for those members desiring to become bike trip leaders. The criteria apply to either road bike or mountain bike trip leaders. All existing bike trip leaders are grandfathered and are not required to meet these criteria although most already do so. Members wishing to become bike trip leaders should complete the Trip Leader Application form and submit to DS&L.

- Successfully complete DG Trip Leader School
- Successfully complete Wilderness First Aid or have equivalent training or experience
- Demonstrate during a Leader in Training (LIT) Ride:
  - Rules of the road
  - Ability to manage cycling group dynamic situations, including regrouping at intersections or junctions for direction changes where members could become separated
  - Familiarity with the selected LIT route
  - Knowledge of general bike maintenance: tire repair, chain breakage, brake problems
  - Carry a first aid kit with cycling items

It is recommended bike leaders complete a bike maintenance class offered by a bike retailer, bike safety organization or a similar organization. Wearing a bike helmet is required for bike leaders and bike trip participants.

### **More Announcements:**

- **Leaders:** Don't assume that hikers know that you have a backup plan for your trip. In the case of inclement weather, sending a pre-trip email stating your Plan B may help avoid cancellations and reduce the anxiety level of your hikers.

- **Hessie TH:** It's been reported that the new shuttle system to the Hessie TH works very well. As part of a Boulder County effort to address traffic congestion and illegal parking, free shuttle bus service began the first weekend in June carrying passengers from Nederland High School to the U.S. Forest Service's Hessie Trailhead. The 15-passenger shuttle buses operate from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on summer Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, including July 4 and Labor Day. People can park their cars at Nederland High School, where a shuttle will depart for the trailhead every 15 minutes. People using the shuttles can take leashed dogs with them.
- **Guests:** Brenda Porter, Director of Operation for the CMC, suggests that leaders strongly consider allowing guests on your hikes by checking  **Guest OK** or  **Guest must call leader** when scheduling your trips.
- **14er Challenge:** Sherry Richardson is happy to report that we have leaders for all 14er climbs on September 8<sup>th</sup>, with the exception of Bross and Culebra due to inaccessibility. A big thank you to all involved in making this day a success.