

Dave Covill, lead engineering technician in EOG's Denver Division, proudly displays the EOG banner when he reached the peak of Mt. Bona, Alaska, the 11<sup>th</sup> highest peak in North America at 16,500 feet.



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

**2** p.m.. Sunday, June 8. Mt. Bona. Wrangell – St. Elias National Park. Middle of nowhere, actually. Nothing but mountains and glaciers for a hundred miles in all directions. It's over two miles to the nearest actual rock I can see from here. Nothing but snow and ice around, hundreds of feet down to the mountain, miles to a cliff across a valley too steep to hold snow to its face. Valdez-Cordova Borough Alaska. The Great North. Land of the Midnight Sun.

We're on the shoulder of Mt. Bona, at around 15,500 feet. It has been seven days since we were flown by ski plane onto the lower glacier at 10,500 feet. That's higher than Leadville, Colo., the highest city in America. Mt. Bona tops out

*Dave Covill has spent his career exploring the depths of the earth, but his hobby has taken him to the top of the world. This is his personal account of his latest climbing expedition to Mt. Bona in Alaska.*

at 16,500 feet; it is the fourth highest U.S. peak, 11th highest in North America, and the highest volcano in America.

I'm with four other guys I know from my various hobbies, including mountain climbing and highpointing (going to the highest points in each state, county, country, etc.) Yes, I have been to the highpoint of every state in which EOG has an office, although not Trinidad or Calgary. Someday...

Jobe Wymore is a young stallion

from Salt Lake City who works for Qwest, the long distance phone company. He climbs big peaks in the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains several times a week. He's young (30) and in great shape. He has summited Denali (20,320', highest point of North America), and talks of going to the Himalayas someday soon. I have neither the time, money, ability, or inclination to do so, but I admire his zest for life. During the Olympics last February, Jobe let me stay at his Salt Lake City condo, which was just a block from the Mormon temple. I owe Jobe.

Dick Ellsworth is a school teacher and librarian from Kotzebue, Alaska. I didn't know where that was, either. Go to a map of Alaska, put your

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finger on Anchorage, run northwest toward Russia and the Bering Sea until you can't go any further, look for Nome, then go up a bit further. Kotz, as Dick calls it, is 3,600 Eskimos and a few whites who are mostly teachers. Yes, the state of Alaska pays the teachers very, very well to live there. Dick has spent most of his adult life in Alaska, bumming around from mountain to peak, adventure to quest, until he finally settled down a decade ago in his mid-40's and got married. He has many actual first ascents of big peaks to his credit in Alaska, and once walked from Ellesmere Island in Canada to the North Pole. (I know, I know; I asked him "why?" too.) Dick's wife and daughter have kept him on a tighter leash lately, and he was itching to visit Mt. Bona. He, like myself, is interested in getting to the highpoints of the 57 National Parks. Dick hasn't been climbing as much lately as the rest of us, and he had a severe respiratory ailment for the last two months, not a good combination for the mountain. He was hoping to push himself a bit and show himself that he was still in charge. Dick is a nice guy, one you could share dinner with for nine straight nights, and still find interesting things to talk about on the 10th night.

Gerry Roach is the leader of our little expedition. Gerry is 59, but acts like he's a decade or two younger. He became the second person, after Dick Bass, to do the Seven Summits (the highest points of every continent...the Holy Grail for mountaineers, perhaps along with the 8,000-meter peaks in Asia). He is the only person to have done the highest 10 peaks in North America. Remember when I said Bona was the 11th highest? Beginning to get the picture now? With a successful Bona summit, Gerry would only lack a couple more to round out the top 20. Impressive, no? If I successfully climb Bona, I will have, um, er, uh, one of the top 20.

While Gerry didn't exactly need me to get him up

Bona, he needed SOMEBODY to round out his team, and I can do the somebody thing as well as the next guy. Gerry lives up the road from me in Boulder, Colo. He has written many guidebooks, including the famous guide to Colorado's 14,000 foot peaks. Virtually everyone in the climbing community has heard of him. He quit his job as a software engineer to go on this trip, a stunt he has pulled about a dozen times in his life. He works to live, not the other way around, know what I mean? His wife and my wife are buddies, and actually finished doing the highpoints of the 64 counties in Colorado together.

Larry Chapman is five and a half feet tall in his climbing boots, but all muscle. What a strong hiker he is. He has pulled a massive sled to high camp along

with a full backpack, a big video camera, several other cameras, and a little stuffed Snoopy that one of his kids gave him prior to leaving Ft. Collins, Colo. That child has Downs Syndrome, and thought he might need Snoopy along to watch over him. Turns out the same child has given him a different stuffed toy on each expedition he has gone on. Cool. Larry works for Hewlett-Packard, and has access to lots of digital stuff. He has been to big

peaks in Alaska, but not Denali. He has been to big peaks in South America, but not Aconcagua. He has trekked above Everest Base Camp, but has no desire to do sexy old Everest. Clearly, Larry is not compelled by lists and peak bagging. Gerry dragged him into this, and Larry only said yes when he heard that Mt. Bona was likely to not have more than a dozen people on it all year, much less not have anyone else on it while we were there. If Kipling or Service were alive today, they might write about people like Larry, who want a little solitude along with the splendor; the whole "road less traveled" and "I alone chose" thing.

Larry provided the humor throughout the trip. Jobe



### Meet the crew

EOG's Dave Covill (left), along with Jobe Wymore, Dick Ellsworth, Gerry Roach and Larry Chapman, take time for a group photo before their climb begins.

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the passion. Gerry the wisdom and witty stories. Dick the balance and insight. I brought along a Tom Clancy novel, and a pad of paper and pen to chronicle what went down. I mean, up.

We had all flown to Anchorage, and stayed at the Earth B&B, a place known around the world as THE place to stay in Anchorage while waiting to be flown to big peaks, or waiting to be flown back home after surviving big peaks. Margriet van Laake runs it. She's a 60-ish Dutch woman who speaks seven languages and gets to practice each of them almost daily in climbing season. It's a large, older house in urban Anchorage, as it were. Anchorage isn't really a city to me, just a really big town that's very easy to get around in. It has an REI store, a harbor, and a good-sized airport, but there's still no traffic. We met climbers from Spain, Switzerland, Austria, France, Latvia, South America, England, Ireland, Italy, Russia, and America. The Swiss and Spanish were friendliest, the French the least.

Virtually every single person spoke at least a bit of English. I sometimes feel we Americans have a lot to learn to fully intermingle in the international community. How many of us speak a second language, let alone a third? The Swiss all speak German, Italian, French, and English. The French all speak English, but prefer not to let you know that tidbit. The Spanish loved being here in America, and sought you out to chat in English as best they could. The Latvians were young, tall, strong, and a very handsome people. The Irish, well, they were excited to share some of their whiskey with us, and this was before they went off to Denali. Almost all of the people at Earth B&B were going to Denali itself, or a sister peak, or a lower gorge or valley on it to ice climb. We were the other five percent, the Bona-heads.

From Anchorage, we took a van for five hours due east to Chitina, which is just a gravel airstrip on the Copper River. Did I tell you about Alaskan roads? Never mind, suffice it to say they are curvy, bumpy, frost heaved, and long. And that's what passes for the interstates! Our pilot, Paul Clauss, flew down in his '57 DeHavilland Otter, and landed using about 150 feet of the runway. Granted, he had no load, and it was into the wind, but come on! 150 feet? He took off with about 1,800 pounds of payload, including us and our gear, and we figured he used about 300 feet to get up. It has a new turbocharged engine. Must have been the



**Crew members load their gear onto a 1957 DeHavilland Otter, which will fly them from Anchorage to Base Camp at 10,500 feet. From there, they will be on their own.**

into-the-wind thing. We landed 45 minutes east of there at his resort, as it were, called Ultima Thule Lodge. That's Scandinavian for Land at the Edge of Nowhere, or something like that. His family homesteaded there many decades ago, and when they made Wrangell-St Elias National Park, they refused to sell out and were grandfathered in as a private in-holding. Paul, Donna, his folks, and their four kids have been there so long, the river has now encroached upon their buildings, and they were in the process of moving buildings uphill to safer ground. Don't ask, it looked like quite a process. They do most of their business with hunters, fishermen, sightseers, river rafters, and hikers. The W-SE is America's largest park. From Claus' lodge, you can walk almost 50 miles in every direction, and still be inside the W-SE. Talk about remote!

His oldest daughter, Ellie, is a junior Iditarod champ. That's right, she hushes muskies, I mean, mushes huskies. Actually, the dogs are very small, far smaller than a husky. Apparently, they can run forever, or at least from Anchorage to Nome. Each dog lives in a tiny doghouse, all lined up, all on wire runs. Ellie has them pull her in an ATV in the summer for training. She will turn 18 two days before next year's Iditarod and will become the youngest person to ever run it. Remember her name.

**June 2 (Day 1).** Paul flew us onto the glacier at 10,500 feet. We set up Base Camp, then carried small

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loads to Camp 1 at 12,000 feet and came back for the rest of our equipment and supplies. Climb high, sleep low, or so they say. I wondered who “they” were....All around was a sea of white. No gray, no brown or black, just white. Perhaps one tenth of one percent of the surrounding ground was a steep outcrop where snow didn’t stick. It was just snow and ice, as far as you could see, which was pretty far actually, maybe 75 miles south to Mt. St. Elias at the coast. We could see east well into the Yukon, maybe across it to the Yukon River itself I pondered.

**June 3 (Day 2).** We finished moving all our stuff to Camp 1. I carried about 75 pounds in my pack, nearly killed me, what with the snowshoes, all my gear on, harnesses and ropes, and trying to also place wands every rope-length or so. Wands are three-foot bamboo garden stakes with a little orange flagging tied on the top for visibility. If it snows, they are your ticket back to the tents. No wands, no snuggly sleeping bag...

**June 4 (Day 3).** We had not carried enough up the first day, leaving too much to carry this time. We made another carry to Camp 2 at 14,200 feet, this time taking up a lot of food and fuel and extra clothes and gear.

**June 5-6 (Days 4-5).** On Day 4, it snowed and blew hard. Same thing Day 5. I piled up snow along the windward wall, but it kept shaking the tent. I piled it along the edge of my tent, so it wouldn’t blow spindrift between the tent and the fly, only to melt down through the mesh vents.

**June 7 (Day 6).** When we got ready to move up to Camp 2, I had to carefully excavate the tent from all this, a one-hour process. At each camp, we had to dig out a platform about 35 feet wide, and maybe 15 feet out from the uphill slope. You can accomplish this by digging 7-8 feet into the slope, and tossing that snow out onto the downhill slope, thus cutting down and building up at the same time. A little stomping about by someone in snowshoes, and voila! You have a place for three tents. The bathroom, per se, was generally defined as “a little over, a little down.” At Base Camp, it was actually dug out, with small walls, in case we were to ever get a female visitor. At Camp 1, it was the remnants of the area where we had stashed food the first trip up. At Camp 2, it was, well, over there. We just ran out of energy to do it better.

The high camp was the highest I have ever slept.

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The crew sets up Base Camp at 10,500 feet, from where they will begin their climb to the peak at 16,500 feet.



Above: The crew digs out Camp 2 at 14,200 feet, with a scenic view of the peaks to the east. Below: The crew levels out the platform for Camp 2. This will be their final launching point for the final 2,000 feet of their climb.





The crew gets its first peek of their final destination as the peak of Mt. Bona rises above the horizon.

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We ended up spending a total of about 70 straight hours over 14,000 feet. The sun is always present, sometimes dipping below the horizon from NW to NE and from about 8 p.m. to 4 a.m., but it's always there, always light enough to read, even light enough to read your watch in the tent at 1 a.m., about the darkest hour.

**June 8 (Day 7).** Off we went, Dick and I roped up, Gerry, Larry, and Jobe roped up ahead of us. It was clear, albeit windy, but Gerry guessed right, luck and Mother Nature were on our side, and the wind died down to nil by noon. We left at 9 a.m. and made our way west and up to the plateau between Bona (16,500 feet) and Churchill (15,600 feet), its neighbor a few miles to the east. At 14,500 feet, this is a new altitude record for me. Everyone else in the group had been over 20,000 feet before. Mt. Whitney in California is 14,495 feet, as high as you can get in the continental U.S. without jumping out of a plane. We moved onward towards Mt. Bona, and by 1 p.m. we were at the shoulder, about 15,000 feet, where it turned from inclined plateau to real mountain. Here, we stashed our snowshoes and trekking poles, in favor of crampons and ice axes. Still beautiful weather, and we were able to see far east into Canada.

Remember the first paragraph of this story? I return

the reader to that very same spot now. High on the shoulder of Mt. Bona, turning from northwest to due west, at 15,500 feet. Nice day to be on a mountain.

**2:30 p.m. Day 7.** The wind has picked up a bit, and we see clouds below us to the west, in the direction the wind is coming from. We're at 15,750 feet. We are beyond the steep stuff, and slowly walking upward across sastrugi, which is wind swept snow, firmed and then carved by a winter of wind. Looks like we're at Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado. Except, of course, that it's snow, and it's maybe 15-20 degrees outside, and blowing 15-20 mph as well. No biggie.

**2:45 p.m. Day 7.** We're at 16,000 feet, and the end would be in sight, except that in about 15 minutes we've gone from broad daylight to light snow, darker, colder, windier, lonelier. No big deal, I think; we have wanded the upper mountain well, and we're almost there.

**3:15 p.m. Day 7.** We arrive on top. A bit anti-climatic, as it's the end of a ridge, and the snow appears to simply head increasingly steeply downhill from here to the west. We take photos, high five each other, and turn to go. I remember to whip out the EOG and Highpointers Club banners, and someone takes my picture with them. Cool.

**3:30 p.m. Day 7.** We head down. We should be

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Above: The crew members use ropes to get up and down the mountain and to prevent a fatal fall.

Right: One of the biggest dangers of climbing Mt. Bona are the dangerous crevasses. As illustrated in this photo, they are hard to see until you are right on top of them. The crew marked this small crevasse with a flag so they will remember it on the way back down.



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back to camp by 7 p.m., no sweat. We can just follow the wands the whole way. They are 150 feet apart on the upper mountain, and perhaps 500 feet apart on the plateau. And we have a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS), with Camp 2 set as a waypoint.

**5:30 p.m. Day 7.** Dick has fallen a couple of times, as the pace of the day has gotten to him a bit. We go slower, and arrive at the spot where we stashed the snowshoes. We swap out, and get ready to walk home. Jobe slips into a crevasse, about a foot wide, hidden in snow, for the second time. Only up to his knees, he wasn't even scared, or so he said. I begged him to wait while I got out my camera, but he crawled out. Only his launderer will know for sure...

**6:30 p.m. Day 7.** We have headed east across the plateau, but have not found the third wand out. We zig zag the leader Gerry left and right in search of it, but to no avail. We take a compass bearing, skewed by the fact that the declination so far north is about 25 degrees to the east, and attempt to walk a straight line eastward across the plateau. I am second, with my compass held out in front of me, my poles both in my right hand, both hands a bit cold. I keep yelling to Gerry "LEFT", as he keeps meandering to his right after maybe 50 feet. He keeps correcting, then wandering right, perhaps blown by the wind coming hard from our left side, or perhaps walking slightly downhill each step to the right, or perhaps just being pulled by some unknown force.

**8 p.m. Day 7.** We are now a couple of miles from Mt. Bona, over a mile from where we re-donned our snowshoes. The terrain is unfamiliar. It has been sloping increasingly down to the right for almost a mile. We haven't seen a wand. What few glimpses we get between clouds merely show the flat glacier valley thousands of feet below us, and the range across and above it. It is crested by 13,000-foot peaks, and we are far above them. The weather has wreaked havoc with the altimeters. The GPS says we are 1.02 miles from Camp 2, at a heading of N 30 degrees to get to it, and we are around 14,600

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feet. We know that we are off course, but cannot agree as to where on the map we are. We are all well aware of the dangerous crevasses and seracs out there for us to fall into if we stray too far from the right path, across the broad plateau, down the center of our gentle valley. It is a dangerous situation.

We wander further, albeit slowly. Gerry, out in front, naturally doesn't want to fall into something. With the weather, it would mean a tough operation to extract him, much tougher than in good weather. None of us can blame him for feeling that way. We all know we are close, but that danger lurks. We have already seen Jobe slip into tiny crevasses hidden by snow. It's impossible to see further than about 30-40 feet to a big open crevasse. We curse the fact that we failed to enter a GPS waypoint out in the middle of the plateau to guide us towards the head of our valley.

**9 p.m. Day 7.** Gerry thinks we should hunker down, and dig snow caves, and wait it out. None of us has ever had to bivouac overnight on a mountain, not even Gerry, King of the Mountains. We set about with alacrity. Surely this will blow clear soon, and the exercise will be spent merely to keep us warm. Larry, Dick and I dig a cave, down into the slope, then straight back, then up and widen it out. Everyone is reasonably warm, as we are moving about. Gerry and Jobe each dig their own cave, which actually turn out to be deep pits which go down 4-5 feet, then turn and tuck into the slope a bit. They actually breakthrough and can kick each other between their caves.

**Midnight Day 8.** Definitely PM. Still windy, snowing, cold, fairly dark. As dark as it's been the whole trip, it seems. We can see what we're doing, but it is eerily darker than normal. We all get into our shelters. I am last into ours. I sit down, lean back, put my arms up over my head, and Dick and Larry tug me in. Jobe and Gerry seal us in with packs and snowshoes. No one seems to be too claustrophobic. At head level it's at least 40 degrees, colder by our feet. We poke a hole up through 18 inches of roof with a trekking pole, then a couple more. Spindrift snow starts to fall onto me, then pile up. I brush it off before I get wet. I reseal the hole above my head with a candy bar wrapper. Larry has encouraged us to eat fatty foods, so we snarf Dick's beef log and cheese, my gorp, Larry's chocolate. Larry tries to light a tiny gas canister stove, but either the lighter is wet, the stove is bad, or there's no oxygen to accomplish this. We forego the warmth

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**- Dave Covill**

and water it would provide. Gerry and Jobe presume, incorrectly, we are living like kings inside our mansion, as they shiver outside. I turn off my headlamp, and we can see light come in through the snow, especially where the shovel has put a crack in the ceiling. Spooky. Dick is cold. I have wriggled into my bivy sack, a \$20 nylon sheet in the shape of a sleeping bag, weighs nothing, always sits in the bottom of my pack, wherever I go. I think I am warm enough, and Dick only has one of those cheap micro thin space blankets pulled around his legs, but it doesn't cover his feet. Larry is warm too, although we all stomp our feet to encourage Dick to do the same. I'm about to give Dick the bivy sack, when we hear voices. You know how they always say, if you're in an avalanche, you can hear your rescuers, but they can't hear you, so save your voice? Well, it's true. We can hear Gerry and Jobe outside just fine, but they can't hear us at all.

**2:30 a.m Day 8.** Jobe rips the snow shoes and packs off of our entrance. A rush of air comes in. Jobe says we were completely sealed in by drifting snow. Wonder how long before we all would have drifted off

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into sleepy time? We slither out. Gerry is shaking badly. Jobe said that Gerry's pit had been filling with snow, and by 2:30 a.m. it was starting to cover him up. Jobe had been kicking him for two hours to keep him awake. Did I mention that Gerry can fall asleep and start snoring, sitting up, in an airplane, minutes after takeoff? Jobe says it has cleared up pretty well, and sure enough, it has. Still blowing hard, but not any snow in the air, other than the snow that blows along the ground level, but we've learned by now to ignore that. We can see we're in a valley south of where we need to be, several hundred feet off of the plateau. We would have wandered into crevasses in another quarter mile or less. We had missed our heading by perhaps 10 degrees over the course of a mile, enough to slip us over the south side of an east trending ridge that we intended to stay on the north side of. The way home was clear, although a mile is still a mile, and we were tired and cold. Jobe rushed Gerry into his harness, onto the rope, and I yelled at him to go; Larry and I would get all our gear together and follow. Larry crawled back in and started throwing out all the rope, gear, and clothing we had sat on. We got ready, and by 3 a.m. we, too, left. We snowshoed slowly uphill, sliding backwards each step up. We finally made the top, several hundred feet up, and it was flat. The plateau! We could see the small knoll above our camp, a mile to the east. It was slow going, and Dick's cough had worsened his condition to barely existing. I carried most of the gear, simply because as Larry threw it out of the cave, I stuffed it all into my pack. I led the way back, with Larry in the middle, encouraging Dick to continue. Snoopy valiantly rode atop Larry's pack, keeping watch over us all.

**4:30 a.m. Day 8.** We made it to camp, an hour and a half to go a mile, phill at first, then gently downhill.

We all crawled into the tents and slept until the better part of noon. There would be no other constructive activity during this, our eighth day on the mountain. Thoughts of going back up for Mt. Churchill were doused like a match with a bucket of water. It will await us for another time, another group, another project.

**June 10 (Day 9).** We descended to base camp in one push. We all dragged nylon bags, filled with gear we had stashed at Camps 1 and 2; too much to put into our packs. I pulled a bag of trash. We poured out all the white gas we had at Camp 2, but brought the rest of the stuff down. We could take the unused gas canisters, a propane-butane blend, back to REI for credit.

**June 11 (Day 10).** Our pilot, Paul Claus, picked us up in the morning and flew us back to the real world. Before he did so, he flew us over Mt. Bona, so we could see where we had been. Turns out if we had walked any further past the summit, thinking it was a false one and the true one was higher but further, we would have tumbled down a steep cliff. Good thing we settled for the only thing that had appeared to be a summit, and the map didn't show any signs of a false either. When we got out of the Otter along the Chitina River at Ultima Thule Lodge, elevation 1,500 feet, the first thing to hit me was smell. Literally, we had not smelled anything for 10 days. Trees, dirt, river, people,

lots of smells. Then warmth, then noise. Dogs yelped at us, machinery moved about, people were talking, the river flowed on by as if we didn't even matter to it.

Out to Chitina that afternoon, then we drove ourselves in Paul's van back to Anchorage. Salmon, Halibut, King crab, beer, it was all good. Home on the next day's midnight flight to Denver, to get ready for Mt. Hood in Oregon a week later.

But that's another story, and I digress... ■



### **We made it!**

After a brief scare when they got lost on their way down, all five crew members returned safely to Base Camp and lived to tell the story.