

Scaling the World's Highest Peaks

by Elizabeth A. Davis, J.D.

The Sharks are on the move. But not in the water. In fact, far from it. Hank Skade '77 and three of his friends, who dubbed themselves "The Sharks," climb mountains—tall mountains. And unlike their namesakes, the group's style is far from aggressive. "We are taking the slow approach to climbing the highest peak on every continent," Skade says.

So far, Skade has scaled the tallest peaks on five of the seven continents, saving the "easiest," Kosciusko in Australia (7,310 feet), and "most difficult," Everest in Asia (29,028 feet) for last. He and his three friends, who met at the University of Oregon in the late 1960s, started scaling the "Seven Summits" in 1988, with Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (19,340 feet), Africa's tallest mountain. In 1990, they climbed Russia's Mount Elbrus (18,481 feet), the tallest mountain in Europe. Next, in 1995, was Denali (20,320 feet), which is also known as Mount McKinley, in Alaska, the tallest mountain in North America. In 1997, they climbed Argentina's Cerro Aconcagua (22,841 feet), South America's tallest mountain. And earlier this year they added the Vinson Massif (16,087 feet) in Antarctica (see below).

Skade was bitten by the climbing bug back in 1971 when his younger sister introduced him to climbing when he graduated from college. They climbed Mount Washington in Oregon (7,794 feet). Since then, in addition to climbing the highest peaks on the continents, Skade has also climbed 15 of the 18 main Cascade volcanoes in Oregon, Washington, and California, as well as mountains in many other parts of the world. He fondly remembers a 1977 climbing trip with Dean Jim Huffman. "We climbed Mount St. Helens in Washington three years

before it erupted. Wonderful climb and great company."

He climbs because "mountain climbing can be a metaphor for achieving any goal in life." Skade believes that putting challenges into life is very worthwhile and finds that the struggle upward feels good, bringing a great deal of joy. Climbing also gives him a sense of the sacred. "On a mountaintop you are a little closer to the stars," he says.

He also climbs because it is just plain fun. "When we climb these mountains internationally, we always try to take some time after the climb to do some exploring or adventuring in the area near the mountain. In the case of Kilimanjaro, we spent a week and a half on game-viewing safaris in Kenya and Tanzania. When we climbed Mount Elbrus in Russia, we spent a week touring Moscow and St. Petersburg after the climb. In Alaska, we stayed in Denali National Park. After Aconcagua, we visited the Chilean wine country."

Skade says, "On Kilimanjaro we effectively went through every climatic zone on earth; we started in a tropical rain forest at the base of the mountain and by the time we hit the summit, we were on a glacier in snow and ice. It was like walking from the equator to the North Pole, which made it really interesting."

While fun and interesting, climbing is also extremely dangerous. "The risk of death or severe injury is very real," says Skade. "In 1995, the year we climbed Denali, six climbers died trying to reach the summit. On our Aconcagua climb, we had to walk around the body of a climber near the summit who had died the night before, probably of hypothermia." The lack of oxygen at high altitudes, combined with the low temperatures, makes



Hank Skade '77 aboard the Hercules C-130 en route to Antarctica.

climbing all the more challenging. But the risk and danger seem to be part of the reason that Skade and his fellow Sharks keep looking for more mountains to climb.

The Most Recent Adventure

In January 2000, Skade's group tackled the extremely challenging Vinson Massif (16,087 feet), the tallest mountain in Antarctica. The accomplishment did not come without a significant amount of effort and frustration. The Sharks made their first attempt at Vinson in January 1999, only to be turned away after two weeks by the weather conditions. Never ones to give up, they scheduled a return trip through the only company in the world that takes adventurers to the Antarctic, Adventure Network International (ANI). They arrived in Punta Arenas, Chile, on the Strait of Magellan, on January 3 and began the monthlong adventure that would both test their patience and bring them great satisfaction.



To get to their ultimate destination, the Sharks would have to fly from Punta Arenas by Hercules C-130 (a rugged, hulking cargo plane used by the military), which would land on a solid blue ice “runway” close to Patriot Hills Camp. Patriot Hills is a tent city at 80° south latitude, 600 miles from its closest neighbor at the South Pole. The journey from Punta Arenas on the southern tip of South America to Patriot Hills is 1,800 miles—which meant the Sharks still had a long flight ahead of them. From Patriot Hills, they would head for Vinson Base Camp, where they would begin the climb up Vinson.

After two days in Punta Arenas, the group got the call on January 5 to be packed and ready to go within an hour. They were headed for Patriot Hills. At the airport, the climbers weighed their packs, which were found to be 8 pounds over the 90-pound limit per person. Because the fee for excess weight is \$30 per pound, Skade and his comrades “put on more clothes from our packs and then we persuaded ANI that we were under the limit.”

Along with Skade’s group, another group of climbers and a number of research groups (including astronauts and scientists from NASA) were headed to Patriot Hills. After a short weather delay, the passengers boarded the Hercules C-130. “The plane was so noisy that we were issued earplugs, and I think all 30-plus passengers and the crew members used them,” says Skade.

“Our flight over the Strait of Magellan, Tierra del Fuego, and the Southern Ocean was uneventful until we sighted the Antarctic Peninsula. Then everybody jockeyed for position at the four porthole windows to see the land. At about 6:30 p.m., we put on our warm clothing and laced up our boots with great excitement as the plane began to descend. A half-hour later the landing gear was lowered with a great thud. We circled around the Patriot Hills landing strip and came in for the final approach. When we were 300 feet off the ground, the pilot pulled up and aborted the landing. Apparently the cloud cover had been dropping over the past hour or two and the pilots had lost visibility.” It was back to Punta Arenas. By the



Top: Skade unloads his gear upon arrival at Patriot Hills Camp, 600 miles from the South Pole. ■ Bottom: Midway up the Vinson Massif, Skade takes a drink from a freeze-proof thermos. ■ Right: Skade climbs up the summit ridge on the Vinson, following the lead of a fellow Shark.

time they got there, they had been in the air for a total of 13 hours.

After several days of the “Punta Hang,” aka the boring wait, Skade and his companions finally made it to Patriot Hills on January 9. At 9:30 p.m., the climbers loaded their gear into a Twin Otter and “took a breathtaking flight out to Vinson Base Camp,” says Skade. “The flight was like nothing I had ever seen before, over virgin-smooth snowfields and unclimbed peaks. We landed on an



Below: The Sharks on the summit of the highest peak in Antarctica. ■ Right: Fellow explorer James Lovell, astronaut on Apollo 13 (left), and Skade enter the "dining room" at Patriot Hills Camp.



uphill runway on the Branscomb Glacier at about 11 p.m. in bright sunlight amidst floating crystalline snow flecks that hung in the air for an hour, making the whole scene surrealistic." They set up camp at 7,100 feet.

When they started their climb the next morning, the temperature was around 5° F. Betting that they could get up and down the mountain more quickly, they adopted an alpine style of climbing, carrying lighter loads, rather than the usual expedition style. This enabled them to avoid shuttling their equipment up the mountain with double carries. At the top, they took a variation on the standard route called the direct variation. Skade says, "Direct it was. Up we went, climbing a 45-degree slope of loose snow, rocks, and ice. At this latitude and altitude our bodies were receiving about 50 percent of their normal oxygen supply."

When they crested the summit at 5:45 p.m. on January 13, the ambient temperature was -29° F; with wind chill it was at least -70° F. Because of the temperature, they were able to bask in their glory for less than 15 minutes. During that time, they added their names to the summit register in a cylindrical metal canister left by Nick Clinch when he led the first ascent of Vinson in 1966. In doing so, they joined the short list of some 350 climbers who have reached the summit over the past 34 years.



While the Sharks were probably all ready for their own nice, warm beds back home, they spent another two weeks in Antarctica because poor weather conditions made it impossible to fly. After such an exhilarating high on the summit, the waiting seemed unbearable. "My whole world became cold, white, and quiet," says Skade. Relief came on January 27. "In the morning there was a narrow strip of blue sky along the horizon to the southeast. There was no wind and the cloud cover seemed thinner. The energy level in the camp ramped up immediately." At 8 p.m. that night, Skade and the other Sharks finally lifted off the blue ice runway at Patriot Hills and began the 44-hour journey "back home to the land of green."

The Adventure Continues

What's next for Skade's Sharks? They plan to climb Kosciuszko in Australia within a year and are aiming for Everest within the next two to three years. After that, Skade says he will continue to climb. He also wants to complete the three remaining climbs in the Cascade Range and says that climbing gives him strength and confidence for the other trials in life.

When he's not out climbing the highest peaks, Skade manages Tiburon Ventures, his real estate investment and development firm in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through the firm, he is the co-owner and manager of a

125-acre organic vineyard in Mendocino County, California, and has been involved in several major real estate developments in Oregon. Skade is also actively involved in a number of conservation and environmental organizations, including the San Francisco Bay Keeper, the Denali Foundation, the American Alpine Club, and the Explorers Club. His commitment to working with environmental organizations stems, he believes, from the work he did in law school with the Northwest Environmental Defense Center and the Natural Resources Law Institute. He has remained involved with the Law School as a member of the school's Board of Visitors. Skade and his wife, Mary, have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Kelsey, and a son, Tyler, who is a sophomore at the University of California at Davis.

Skade advises novice climbers to "remember that the summit is merely the secondary goal; getting home is the top priority. And you had better enjoy the journey, because the journey really is the reward. For example, on Denali we were on the summit for 45 minutes after 16 days of climbing on the mountain and several months of preparation." Seems like good advice, all around.

And, just in case you were wondering where the name "Sharks" came from, the four men adopted it in the early 1980s at the summit of a mountain. As they signed the log in the mountain's summit box, they noticed someone had written about his grandson, Paco. Skade recounts, "It was Paco's first mountain, and Paco had always wanted to eat sharks and climb mountains. So we took that as our motto—'Eat sharks and climb mountains.' Eventually, it just became the Sharks." The name stuck, and so has their determination to climb the highest mountains.

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