

Real Adventure on Red Taquitz

On March 21, 1985 three college friends set one foot each through a barbed wire fence across the California border into Mexico, took a photograph, then turned north and took a step towards Canada. Six months and 2600 miles later we arrived there.

Our achievement was unlikely. Even today, with superior equipment, a well established trail, and a documented network for re-supply points, barely 1 in 25 hikers attempting the full 2600-mile route actually make it. The odds against us then were exponentially higher.

However, we made it. Looking back I attribute our success to three things: a singular focus, perseverance, and, most of all, an inspired commitment to teamwork.

Mick, Ryan and I graduated college together two years earlier. Two years before that we started talking about the trip. We had four years of talking before taking a single step, but it was really planning without a purpose. It took a weekend, six months prior, in which we realized that if we didn't do the trip soon, we would never do it. That if we didn't do the trip we would always wish we had and wishing we had tried something was a fate far worse than trying and failing. This became the foundation that our perseverance and determination were later built upon, but more on that later.

Mick was from rural Maine and had been backpacking his whole life. Once, when he was twelve years old, his hiking companion, his uncle, suffered a heart attack three days into the Grand Canyon wilderness. Mick hiked 20 miles at night to a ranger station and then led a helicopter crew to where his uncle was waiting, saving his life. Mick was tall, 6'3", a fact that had bearing on our early conflict and ultimate success. For Mick, our Pacific Crest Trail adventure was the next logical step for him in his lifelong dedication to the wilderness and to long distance backpacking. As we neared the end he commented that he had never doubted that we would make it, a comment that plainly shocked Ryan and I, as we couldn't believe we had done it even after we finished.

Ryan was also from Maine, suburban Portland, and had used his job at the LL Bean catalog warehouse to secure a product testing role that outfitted our trip. Ry was short, 5'6" and was 30 lbs overweight. He was the fun-loving, outgoing member of our team, which contrasted with the quiet, introspective personalities of both Mick and me. Ryan also grew up in the outdoors, though more as a sportsman - fishing, canoeing, and hunting - than a backpacker. Ryan kept us laughing, a key ingredient when tensions ran high, or when the physical grind demanded its dues. For Ryan, the lure of the trail was the experience. Ryan loved the adrenalin, loved the fun, and frankly dreaded the idea of a 9-5 job.

I was the tenderfoot of the team and wore motorcycle boots, a leather jacket and brought a switch blade on our first practice hike. I grew up in the city and had only learned to like the wilderness while in college. During our six months of hard preparation, I secured most of our funding for the trip by writing articles for local magazines that speculated, inaccurately, what the trip would be like and how it would change me. Writing those articles was a key to understanding my own motivations for the adventure.

While Mick read the only guidebook that had then been published about the trail, and Jeff read Brad Angiers “How to Stay Alive in the Woods,” I read Kerouac’s “The Dharma Bums” to prepare. For me the lure was romantic adventure. I barely knew how to lace my boots.

There were also three key members of our support team. Malone from the product development division of LL Bean helped us with equipment issues throughout the trip. My Aunt Helen sent bits of cash for our layovers in the small mountain towns where we stopped to rest and resupply. And my close friend Mike mailed us supply boxes at pre-set intervals and long letters with news from civilization. Mike also received our “greetings from the trail” phone calls and return packages with our sacred journal installments.

We were an ill-fitted crew in terms of equipment, psychological readiness, and physical conditioning. When we left the border that late afternoon we each had a six-pack strapped to our packs. We all smoked cigarettes and we carried no crampons, no snowshoes, and only a small, two-man tent with us, figuring we would sleep under the stars in all but the worst weather.

Conflict arose between us on our first full day.

In order to backpack 2600 miles in six months you have to hike 15 miles per day, every day. The day we left the border we hiked a mile and half, which was fine, because we had woken up late in our fleabag San Diego hotel – our last night indoors for many months – had trouble finding the bus station, and missed the first bus that brought us 60 miles east to the sleepy border town where our trail would begin. After walking that mile and a half through a glorious Southwestern dusk, we spent the night in a \$3 campground squeezed around a muddy pond they called a lake in the foothills of the San Gorgonio wilderness. We drank our beer, bought cheeseburgers from the snack bar, and smoked cigarettes around a rusty firepit. In our excitement to be officially on the trail, we laughed and joked the night away. We went to sleep after midnight and woke up early, eager for our first full day.

Of the three of us, I was the most uptight and schedule-driven. I was also the most map-focused and the most map-challenged. Unlike Mick and Ry, who were very much at home in the woods, I fundamentally distrusted the wilderness. I feared it a bit, was keenly aware of its power, and viewed it, initially anyway, as the powerful force I needed to overcome.

I insisted on carrying the maps and on keeping us to our 15-mile quota. I didn’t tell either of them that I didn’t know how to use a compass.

The trail we were on, known then and today as the Pacific Crest Trail, was not a completed, through trail at the time of our trip. The trail today, in fact, starts from an entirely different town than it did then. The trail at that time was a patchwork of short, intersecting trails, some road walking, and no shortage of bushwhacking, particularly in Southern California. To compound matters, the entire west coast had just come through one of the wettest, most severe winters in history. This meant that in lower elevations the trails were often washed out or damaged or missing signage. At higher elevations it meant snow, and snow meant that there was no trail to follow, that footing was treacherous, and that

conditions were cold and wet. We would, in fact, be slogging through snow until July. Later we joked that, aside from the desert, we never saw the ground in California.

But on that first trail morning, full of excitement and ourselves, we ascended a modest ridge into a pine forest, skirting patches of snow along a muddy trail. We rested frequently, drank large amounts of water to replace the previous night's alcohol, and thoroughly enjoyed the mountain air and the south-facing panoramas of the Mexican plain. We climbed two miles in three hours, had a long lunch, and then walked the ridge for another mile and a half to a flat spot by a spring that wasn't on our map. We stopped to rest, congratulated each other on our first climb, and then Mick and Ryan decided that we had done enough for one day and would camp where we sat.

I was horrified. We had missed our first day's quota by 11.5 miles! Worse still, I was far more tired than they were, and deep down really appreciated calling it quits for the day. That evening the temperature dipped below 40 degrees. We slept under the stars, of course, and I was freezing. I stayed awake most of the night and began what turned out to be a three-month flirtation with rationalizing failure. Through long days of walking and long nights of acclimating to sleep on the cold, hard ground, the wolf at the door of my psyche was the fear that there was no possible way we would ever see Canada. That fear of failure is certainly part of what kept me going, but my perseverance was also fueled by the heavy upfront commitment I made to the trip. I was essentially broke, jobless and homeless in a down economy. In a very real sense, I had nowhere else to go. And so on that first night I was cold and scared and feeling as though there was no way out – with 2595 miles still to go.

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Over the next few weeks we made steady, but very slow progress. We averaged less than ten miles a day. Further, as we inched deeper and higher into the San Geronio Wilderness, the trail disappeared under blankets of snow. Our teamwork and morale began to unravel. Looking back, there were several very basic reasons:

- When the trail disappeared under all that snow, I couldn't read the maps and I couldn't really use the compass. I seldom knew where we were. The others didn't seem to mind and weren't interfering, but I found it terrifying.
- As the keeper of the maps, I needed to be the finder of the trail, and so I needed to be hiking first in our group. This was not ideal for I had exactly zero experience in cutting a hillside trail through hip-deep snow. The others offered tips, but quickly grew frustrated at having to re-work my sloppy trailblazing.
- Mick was a lot taller, with longer legs, and our pace on the rare flat, snow-less ground we encountered was too slow for him. Hiking last, he had us always bunched up together, which threw all of us off from establishing any kind of rhythm in our efforts.
- Meals quickly became an issue. I was in charge of breakfast, for part of my trip preparation was making and packaging six months worth of home-made granola for the three of us. Ryan was in

charge of dinner, as he had been in charge of drying most of the fruits and vegetables that would help us keep away scurvy, and Mick was in charge of lunch. We had packed for heavier breakfasts and dinners, with lunch being essentially a snack. When we began making slower than expected progress, I began handing out smaller rations for breakfast. This had us hungry and irritable for lunch, where, at best, we were merely snacking. Jeff, already a ravenous eater, compensated by preparing huge dinners, a practice that really did have us running out of food before we reached our next re-supply point.

Things came to a head in the San Jacinto wilderness, just west of Palm Springs. We were on a mountain called Red Taquitz and according to our maps, the trail traversed the west side of the slope, about 700 feet below the knife-edged ridgeline. As usual, the snow was waist deep and we had no trail. To make matters worse, the slope was nearly vertical. For the first and only time on the trip we roped ourselves together and began the seven-mile traverse to the next saddle (flat spot) where we would camp.

The warm spring air left the snow soft and wet with a layer of ice beneath it. We slogged along a step at a time. As the lead, my job was to step down through the snow and assure that the foothold of each step would support two more coming after me. If it wasn't, which it usually wasn't, my job was to cut a step into the ice beneath the snow. We trudged for three hours and went one mile. Exhausted, we ate our lunch snack clinging to the vertical slope. With six miles to go before there would be anyplace to set up a camp, we knew we were in trouble. We began to argue.

I advocated descending the hill to the tree line, and then using the more relaxed slope to make better progress. Mick argued against that, pointing out that descending the slope would cause us to miss the saddle we were aiming for, and we needed to cross over that saddle to the west side of the slope to stay on the trail. I argued that we could descend, traverse across to below the saddle and then ascend and cross over in the morning. Mick argued that it was a lot closer to the ridgeline than the tree line, so a better approach was to climb to the ridge, hope it wasn't too windy, knife-edged or exposed, and follow that across and down to the saddle. Ryan argued that we should stay the course and make the best decision about an hour before sunset.

We all reluctantly agreed to the compromise, which really pleased no one but put off the decision for a little while longer. As we got set to begin hiking, Mick suddenly suggested that the going would be much faster if he took the lead, because he was much better at cutting steps into fresh slope. I took this as a criticism. We argued some more until we agreed that it really was the best course of action. We then re-roped so that Mick was in the lead, Ryan, who was the least athletic of the three of us, would be in the middle and I would go last. It was mid-afternoon when we set off, nervous and angry.

The afternoon sun had softened the snow even more, and so the going, despite Mick's surer feet, remained slow. Because we were all mad, we worked mostly in silence.

Finally, the sun and temperature began to sink, and we needed to make a decision about where to spend the night. Mick suddenly began moving up the slope without any conversation. At first I thought he was merely ascending to find a more favorable traverse line, but it soon became clear that we were headed straight up.

I yelled my objection but we all knew it was too late. We were committed to going to the ridgeline, whatever we found up there. Within a few feet we found that Mick, with his long limbs and surer step, could easily outdistance Ryan, and Ryan, with his lumbering, sloppy climb, was sweeping away all the packed snow in his path and crumbling the quarter-inch ice steps that Mick was cutting. I was left with smooth ice or rock to climb. With the rope pushing and pulling and tugging at every step, we knew that it would be faster and safer to un-rope. And so we did.

The distance between us rapidly increased. Un-tethered, Mick snaked quickly towards the crest. Ryan scrambled behind him. I fell far behind, needing to re-cut each step on slicker surfaces. I knew we didn't have much choice and so I said nothing and strained my way upward. Mick was determined to reach the top and knew he was cutting a usable path, and so stayed focused on his task, cresting the hill in under an hour. Ryan, scared and tired, scrambled after him, losing ground, but too absorbed to look backwards, as I fell further and further behind.

Soon it was dark. I saw Ryan scramble over the ridgeline to whatever was on top, while I still had another 300 feet of the steepest slope to go. They shouted down once to see if I was ok, but I was too angry, tired and scared now to reply with anything more than a grunt.

I was so tired and it grew so dark that I actually slowed my pace, taking extra care to make sure that I always maintained three points of contact on the ice and rock, and testing each step before taking it. My anger at both of them rose with each step upwards and the last thing I remember thinking, almost in a blind rage, was that they better have dinner made for me. I raised my right foot without properly planting my ice axe, and the foothold suddenly gave way. In an instant I was tumbling downward. I remember trying to keep my toes pointed into the rock to try to catch onto something, while my hands, one holding the axe, clawed and grasped at anything. I fell 500 feet before slamming into a small pine tree and grabbing hold.

The first thing I did was take stock. My pants, my only long pants for the trip, were torn through the left side, from thigh to ankle. My left knee and shin were scratched and bleeding, but otherwise ok. I lost my right glove, and my ice axe, tied around my left wrist, stabbed me in the left upper arm, opening a painful gash.

All in all I was fine, but it was still dark and I was now more than 500 feet from the ridge crest, worn out, with a fifty pound pack on my back, all alone.

I yelled for help. We exchanged shouts but it was pretty clear that there was no help to be safely offered. I drank some water, ate the next morning's breakfast ration, and re-started my long slow march to the top.

Along the way my attitude shifted from anger and fear, to physical determination, to an appreciation for the pure adventure of the moment. As I approached the top, the snow more firm in the cold and moonlight showing the way, I felt an actual budding confidence, a sense that we might actually be able to do this, or that, at least, everything was going to be alright. In the coming weeks, it was this small kernel of confidence that I would nurture and protect from those wolves of self-doubt. And it was that

tiny sense of confidence that would eventually grow into the determination to reach our goal that would drive us onward through even more difficult situations. I made it to the crest around midnight, exhausted, soaked, and bleeding, and went immediately to sleep, not eating a thing. We slept in our tiny tent that night for the first time, huddled together on a flat spot no larger than the tent's footprint.

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The sun broke warm and brilliant the next morning and we looked out to panoramic views to the east and west from our narrow perch just a few hundred feet from the peak of Red Taquitz. I rationed out our cup of granola with reconstituted milk and we ate in silence, knowing that our union – the fate of our team and the fate of our trip - hung in the balance of how we handled what had happened the day before.

Who would speak first and what would we say? Even Ryan was silent, keenly aware that something more than me had fallen the previous day, something about trust had fallen, and getting back up was going to be harder than any midnight climb.

I replaced my torn pants with shorts and gaiters – a combination that worked better than long pants– and tended to the gash in my arm. Grossly or humorously, the wound looked a lot like an eye, and as I cleaned it out and tried my best to arrange a bandage that would hold, it occurred to me that our problem as a team was also one of vision. We were all looking at this trip through our own eyes – through our own perceptions, fears, and motivations – and to succeed we were going to have to see our adventure with at least one shared eye, with at least one shared and focused vision. The wound, it seemed, could be an emblem of that focus just as easily as it could be a reminder of our failure.

After bandaging up, and after Mick and Ry had packed and put away the tent, I said to Mick, “If yesterday taught us anything it taught us that you should be in the lead. You should be blazing trail in tough terrain and you should be loping on ahead in smooth terrain.”

We stared at each other for a long moment and Mick said, “And I shouldn't make directional decisions on my own. We should make our group decisions as a group. My stubbornness almost got you killed last night.”

Ryan said that, for his part, the only real danger we were in was from starving to death because he was in charge of dinners and so then and there, before we left our scenic perch, we emptied our packs and re-organized our meal distribution. Mick took breakfasts, Ryan took lunches and I got dinners.

The whole approach worked well for a long time and got us through or helped us avoid a number of tight spots, including running out of water in the desert, a broken backpack in Oregon, and more than one crossroads where going onward or going home was a real decision.

Before we left Red Taquitz that morning we agreed on two other things: we agreed on using this new approach (hiking order and food responsibilities) only until it didn't work any longer – at which time we would and did re-organize again. Lastly, we agreed that we were going to Canada, come Hell or high

water, both of which we eventually encountered, along with many more good and wonderful things, and many, many steps.

In the end, it was the three things we learned that day on Red Taquitiz – a shared, wide-eyed vision of Canada, a commitment to work together to resolve each situation along the way, and the determination to succeed – that got us to Canada as the first flakes of an early winter began to fall more than six months later.