

NORTH CASCADES

BY HELICOPTER

Stephen Fry

When Okanogan National Forest decided to allow helicopter skiing to occur within its boundaries in the fall of 1982, I instantly recognized that the helicopter could also be used as a shuttle for other types of winter recreation. And I commenced to plan a winter camping trip—by helicopter—into the North Cascades.

After much preparation, and when the forecast was for four days of clear weather, I elected to go for it.

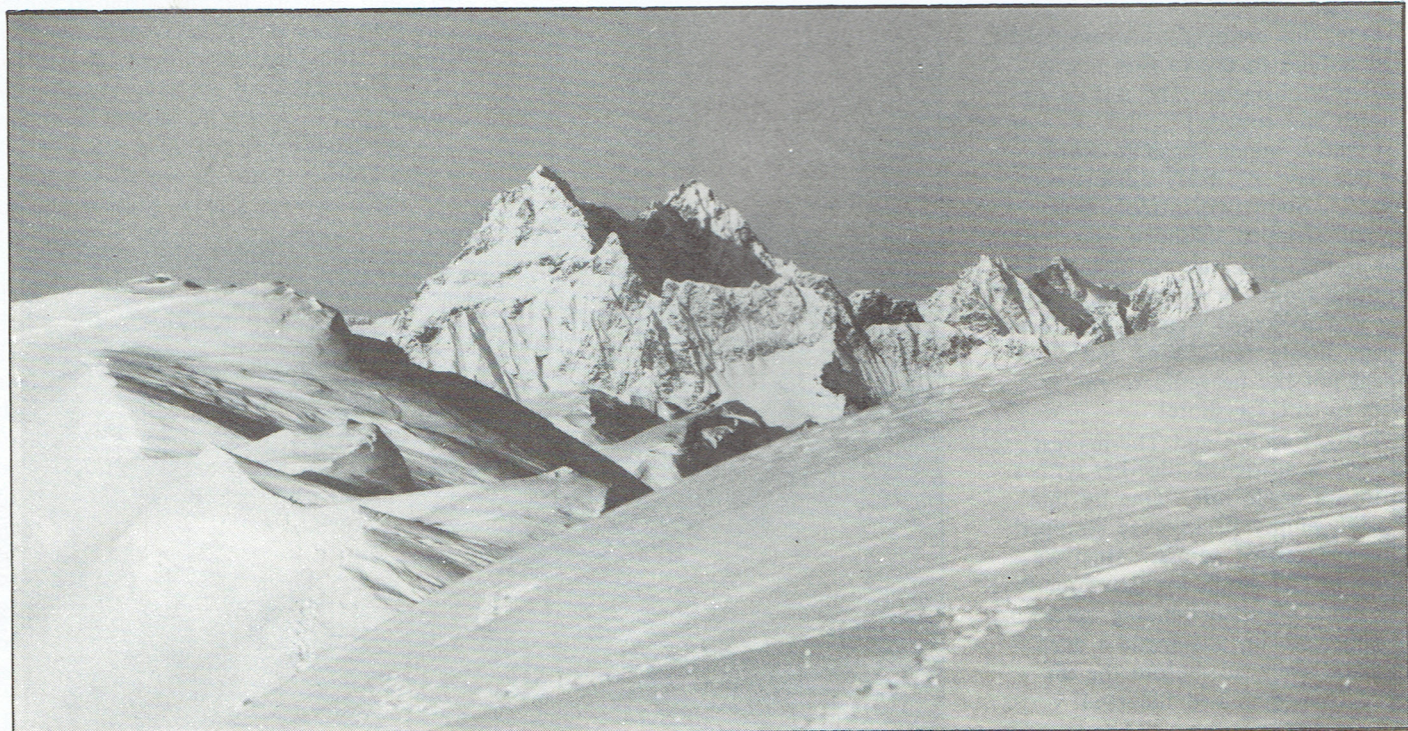
On the day of the flight, David Gonzales and I left Seattle in the midmorning, driving over Stevens Pass to Wenatchee, then north to Pateros, through Winthrop and finally to Mazama, for a total distance of about 270 miles.

After we filled out and signed some forms, we visited with the owner of Liberty Bell Alpine Tours Eric Sanford, his assistant Don Portman, and

pilot Bob Jorgenson, as we anxiously awaited to depart.

We brought a massive amount of gear, including a large assortment of camera equipment, in addition to snowshoes and all the other gear needed for winter camping and travel. Knowing we would be walking in deep snow at our landing site, we dressed accordingly before entering the helicopter.

Since David was new to helicopters, the pilot and I instructed him on the proper ways to exit the craft. Also,



Black Peak stands in stark contrast to the sparkling, snowbound west spur of The Needles.

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David Gonzales takes in a dramatic view of Tower Mountain's imposing east face from the west spur of The Needles.

since at that time the helicopter was to cost me \$7.50 a minute (once airborne), I informed him of the need for expediency as soon as we landed!

At last the moment arrived: the powerful engine wound up, faster and faster, with an increasingly higher pitch. We rose and advanced effortlessly into the sky as though we were inside a helium balloon.

My excitement rose as I sighted mountains which I have studied for fifteen years. The helicopter provided new perspectives and unveiled vast panoramas of mountain slopes heavily blanketed by snow.

When we approached The Needles, clouds nearly engulfed us as we flew into a snow squall. Undaunted, we circled the west spur once, to check the condition of the cornices. Then the pilot carefully set the helicopter skids onto the snowy ridge.

Relieved to be safely down, David and I opened our doors, and were greeted by screaming jet noise and its accompanying blizzard of blowing snow. We forged through the tumult

until a safe distance away from the copter.

From there we watched Eric and Don quickly detach our gear from the carrying racks. When the helicopter took off, it dropped out of sight in just two seconds.

With my ears ringing loudly, I looked all around me and was overcome by the immense beauty of the setting. I was surrounded by towering summits, deep snowy valleys, gigantic bodies of dark black cumulous clouds, and swiftly-moving bands of snowy-white clouds.

Just as enthralling was the solitude. There was not a sound to be heard. David and I looked at each other and just smiled. The silence was awesome. No wind. No creeks and streams. No animal stirred. Gone were cars, trucks—and even the helicopter.

As light snowflakes sailed gently to the ground, the piercing cold made us aware of the need to put on extra clothing. Having done so, we set out to explore our enchanting ridge, staying far away from the crest until we knew

that the cornices had been bypassed.

I used every photographic technique I knew to capture the dramatic scenery, but photographs could not do justice to the majesty of this mountain kingdom.

Another snow squall was heading our way. Reluctantly we returned to set up camp after exploring only a short segment of the ridge.

Formation of a foundation for the tent went slowly, because the snow was dry and non-compactable. As our hands and feet grew colder, though, we worked with more determination, racing to finish the camp before total darkness fell, and the falling snow covered us even more.

The next morning the sky was crystal clear. The sun's early rays gave the snow a rosy sparkle. We were in paradise. We feasted on slopes and ridges, rock faces, mountains, valleys, and snow formations.

Our day was filled with lots of exploration, photography and frolicking in the snow. Sometimes we just sat and enjoyed the expansive views:



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Avalanche tracks stream down Silver Star Mountain's slopes into the Early Winters Creek valley.

southeast to Silver Star, south to Liberty Bell, southwest to Glacier and Dome Peaks, west to Black Peak and menacing Tower, and finally to the northwest, north and east were Golden Horn, Azurite Peak, and The Needles. It was especially enjoyable to relax in the sun and watch small avalanches plunge off the steep cliffs of Tower and The Needles.

Late that afternoon I began thinking about leaving a day early. We both would have chosen to stay there a month if we could have, but I had developed a terrible sunburn on my face (not enough sunscreen!). And walking out would also save \$200 on the helicopter pickup. I had already satisfied my photographic objectives of the trip, and I was somewhat concerned the weather was changing. High clouds were already obscuring the sun, and I had no desire to be caught in a storm on this high ridge, no matter how well we were prepared.

It wouldn't be easy to walk out. It was 15 miles from our camp to the Mazama landing pad where my

car was. And I would be carrying an 80-pound pack; David a 65-pound pack.

We woke the next morning to clear skies, which gave way to clouds and then snow showers. We spent a considerable amount of time trying to figure out how we were going to carry all of the gear. But finally, with the help of extra cord, our packs were ready. We put on our Sherpa Light-foot snowshoes and began our journey down a southern rib of the west spur.

It quickly became obvious that our heavy packs and the soft snow would make progress slow even with snowshoes. Continually, we sank to our knees, which sometimes would cause us to fall.

Taking an educated gamble, we chose to travel down the less-often-avalanched lower portion of a gully, where the snow was hard enough for sitting glissades, so we made good time there. Near the bottom of the gully, though, at the edge of the Pine Creek Valley, the snow got very soft.

While leading, I buried my left leg

up to my thigh. The wet snow set up like cement and I was caught. Immediately my pulse quickened as I fretted over being trapped at the outlet of the gully. My fear didn't subside until five minutes later, when David was able to dig my leg and snowshoe out of the icy prison.

After that incident, we didn't waste any time leaving the avalanche track. Using hindsight, I realized that we should never have entered the gully in the first place.

By contrast, snowshoeing down the Pine Creek valley was very pleasant and relatively trouble-free. Before we knew it we reached the North Cascades Highway. Here we removed our snowshoes and walked down the newly-plowed road to the highway closure gate.

At the locked gate we met a driver who was heading back to Mazama. Luckily he had room for our heavy packs and tired bodies, so the remaining miles were negotiated by car.

Reflecting on the trip, I have fond memories of the helicopter flight, superb scenery, and exhilarating explor-

ations. Our expedition likely wouldn't have occurred had the helicopter service not been available.

After our trip, others also saw the unique possibilities provided by helicop-

ter shuttling. Two groups were flown out to the Harts Pass region, and another group was flown into the Sawtooth Ridge area.

Hopefully, those of you who also

decide to embark on a winter helicopter camping trip will find it as enjoyable, safe, and rewarding as David and I did.



Before you employ a helicopter to take you into the winter backcountry, it's wise to consider a few things.

1. Have a good reason to go. My strong desire to publish a book about Washington's highest mountains, familiarity with helicopters, and a favorable decision by Okanogan National Forest all acted as catalysts for my memorable trip. My reason was clear: to photograph scenes and moods of these mountains—some of Washington's highest—never before captured.

2. In choosing a base camp, consider whether it will be safe from avalanches, accessible to the helicopter, protected from storms (or near an alternate site that is protected), and whether it will

have a safe escape route back to civilization in case of emergency, weather, or failure of the helicopter to return as scheduled.

3. Check with Liberty Bell Alpine Tours to make sure the location is within the area designated for helicopter use. They will also tell you that the Astar 350D helicopter costs \$500 per hour, with a minimum charge of \$250. The helicopter will carry the pilot, a guide, and either four people with light gear, or three people with heavy gear.

4. Choose members of your group with care. Besides being experienced in winter camping and travel, they should also be enthusiastic about the

trip. The potential gravity of the situation, the time involved and money spent dictates choosing partners who are dedicated to the spirit of the journey.

5. Food and equipment should also be cautiously chosen. Through most of the winter, you should expect temperatures as low as -30 degrees, and even in spring, high-country nights can drop to zero. Prepare for violent snow or rainstorms.

With a little common sense and some solid backpacking experience, most dangers can be avoided.

Contact Liberty Bell Alpine Tours at 509/996-2250.



The granitic spires of The Needles.

Stephen Fry