

Hidden Lake: A Solo Hike in the North Cascades

by Jim Bethea

“Lord, it was you who brought me here,” I gasped for breath in the rarified atmosphere, “...You who kept those two men alive... and the dog. Now, please give me the strength to get this wood up to the cabin! Other lives may depend on it!”

Despite the intense sub-zero cold, I could feel sweat soaking the clothes beneath my hooded down jacket, snow-pants and insulated boots. That could be deadly if for any reason I could not keep moving. It would freeze in minutes in the storm that was about to hit. Even a minor accident, such as a slip and fall - which seemed imminent as I climbed the huge blocks of frozen granite – could be fatal.

Somewhere beyond a billowing veil of white, Mt. Baker, Shuksan and other peaks to the north and west were already being swept by the storm. It would be here soon – too soon for me to make it to the cabin with the load of firewood and get back down off this pinnacle in time.

The other two guys were now fleeing down the mountain with their gear and dog. I was alone, struggling to haul a heavy load of emergency firewood up to the cabin to replace that which they had foolishly burned during their drunken spree.

My boots stamped a foothold through the icy crust where I could brace for the next lift. For a moment, I leaned back against vertical rock to gaze out across the void. The view was glorious.

Below this pinnacle, the ridge on which it stood connected to the glaciers of Sahale and Boston peak. Magic Mountain lay to the south, joined to this one by Cascade Pass. Snow King, Glacier and even Mt. Rainier stood white against a pearly sky. But soon, all would be obliterated from view by the oncoming storm.

“Thank you, Lord,” I breathed and started hauling on the rope with its heavy load of wood dangling at the end.

So how did I come to be in such a fix? Surely after decades of hiking and climbing among these mountains, I knew better than to be caught like this. But then, perhaps it was meant to be. Why else should I have left home with barely enough daylight to reach the cabin, knowing that a major storm was about to hit in the morning? But somehow I knew that I had to go....

Tuesday, October 25 – It was a bit late in the season for solo hikes in the high Cascades. It was also a bit late in the day when I had the sudden urge to go hiking. “Where Lord? Where do you want me to go?” I prayed. “Hidden Peaks! Highest lookout cabin in the Cascades? Not sure I can even get up there before dark....”

I checked out what information I could find. It’s a 4.2 mile hike from trailhead to cabin - which happens to be perched atop a 300 foot pinnacle at just less than 7000 feet in the sky. Elevation gain is 3900 feet with most of the trail being on very steep slopes. That’s a bit daunting but still okay. Then there’s a snow-chute about half-way that sometimes cuts off the upper section with avalanches... and a snow-field near the top that would have to be traversed. That might not be okay if for any reason I was caught in the storm. I didn’t have an ice-axe and crampons available. “Lord, do you really want this or is it just my imagination?”

The urgency persisted. My backpack was already loaded, as usual. All I had to do was throw in some bottles of water and food – maybe some dates, almonds, an avocado or baked potato and my unique home-made high-energy seabiscuits. The Escort station wagon had a full tank of fuel. Throughout these brief preparations, the feeling grew that somebody was in mortal danger – or about to be. Suddenly, I was on my way.

I remembered having a feeling like this the time I met a middle-aged man on Mt. Baker's Park Butte trail a few years ago. He was wearing a light jacket and cap without any other protection from an oncoming storm that was even then spilling swirls of cloud over the cliffs around us. He just wanted to walk a bit further up, he insisted, despite my warnings. I offered him my poncho and even the entire backpack that I was carrying. He eyed the bulky pack and shook his head. I reluctantly let him go, still feeling like something was very wrong. Search and Rescue found his body the next day at Morowitz Meadows below Easton Glacier. I determined to never ignore a feeling like that again.

Another time I felt a strange urgency like this had been to pack a tent, sleeping bags, pillows and food for two people and take it to the Concrete airstrip where my old biplane was kept. Sure enough, a couple was stranded on the lonely field by violent late-afternoon mountain winds. They were about to take off anyway rather than being stranded there overnight when I showed up and offered to drive them home. The pilot refused to leave his airplane but admitted that his wife had been strangely upset about the impending flight. I knew that they would not have survived it.

They were amazed when I started handing them the stuff I had brought, saying that the Lord had sent it just for them. There was a nice supper packed and breakfast – even reading lights and books. The husband and wife stared at each other with a dawning realization of something that only they knew.

“There is a God who knows what you need,” I grinned. The woman burst into tears. “That’s... that’s what we were ... just...” She couldn’t finish.

The pilot slowly lifted his eyes to the turbulent sky, “Then... it’s true! He... God did hear your prayer, dear! He knew! There really is a God up there!”

They left the sleeping bags and tent in the cockpit of my biplane when they flew out into sunny skies early the next morning. They also left a very meaningful note of thanks. Again, I determined to try to always listen when the Lord calls.

I thought about these memories as I drove east on Washington State Highway 20 through the beautiful Skagit Valley. It was sunny and warm at the moment but what about tomorrow? The storm that I knew to be approaching across the Gulf of Alaska would be here about nine or ten in the morning. I’d have to be back down to the car by then or risk getting snowed-in up there – perhaps for days or even weeks. Whatever was going to happen would have to happen before that storm hit!

At least there is a woodstove in the cabin for emergency use. Hidden Lakes Lookout is the only one of the old 1930’s fire-watch stations that still has a stove. Most of the others burned down decades ago. Local volunteers keep the surviving cabins stocked with emergency supplies, tools and bedding. Thanks to them, the National Parks Service allows anyone to use the cabins on a first-come first-served basis. There are no reservations.

The fact that locals have taken responsibility to maintain the various cabins puts the onus on all of us to help take care of them. They are a public ‘trust’ for to all to enjoy. Nowhere else has such unique, historical buildings open to all to use for free, set among some of the most magnificent alpine scenery in the world. It was that ‘onus’ of responsibility that got me into trouble.

Surprisingly, there were four other cars still in the small parking area when I arrived. Glimpses of the surrounding mountains revealed why the Hidden Lakes trail is one of the most popular hikes in the Cascades. I hurried up the forested trail while still buckling my backpack. The urgency was strong.

It wasn't long before I met two young ladies on their way down, followed shortly by a middle-aged couple. The older couple said two guys were at the cabin getting drunk. They were probably up there just because they could drink a lot more alcohol at high altitude than at sea-level. "So that's it," I thought wryly as I pushed on up the trail. "A couple of drunks this time! Might be an interesting night!"

Cold air sweeping down the shadowed valley was already below freezing as I emerged from the forest and crossed Sibley Creek. The switchbacks up the avalanche scree provided great views. Finally, topping out within sight of the pinnacle where the cabin perches in icy isolation, the trail became easier. The sun was already low, but I had time to relax my pace and admire the scenery.

Climbing the soft snow-field was relatively easy in the sunny conditions. But by the time I had circled up the steep precipice above the Hidden Lakes, ice was beginning to make the rocky trail treacherous.

It was a great relief when I stood before the cabin door, wind snapping my hooded jacket, as the last gold glow faded on the western horizon. Stars flickered in the darkening sky above. I turned slowly, gazing in awe at the unearthly blue-white glory of the mountains.

To the north and south lay serried snow-capped ridges. East and west, more peaks reared majestically against emerging stars. Baker, Boston, Forbidden, Eldorado, Glacier... even Mt. Rainier – the king of them all - stood clear far to the south. A few yellow pin-pricks of light glowed far, far below in the dark valleys to the southwest. Everywhere else was raw, lonely wilderness. This is the land that I love... why I came... or was it?

There was no good place on that peak to set up my small tent. The cabin itself is balanced on stilts anchored against the violent winds by a spider-web of steel cables. On all sides there are vertical drops of hundreds of feet. Climbing back down to the nearest pygmy evergreen trees at the base of the pinnacle would be foolish in the rapidly worsening conditions. Even the cabin itself was covered in sharp spikes of ice. I had no choice except to go in. "Okay, Lord! If this is what you want..." I banged on the door.

Raucous music blared, barely audible in the roar of wind but too loud inside for them to hear me. Finally, I shoved the door open. Loud drunken laughter froze in a blast of frigid air.

Two men stared from a table littered with empty whiskey bottles. A big, black Labrador dog rose with rising hackles and bared fangs. Tropical heat hit me as I stepped in and slammed the door, shutting off the howling arctic world outside.

"Hi, guys! Have room for one more?"

They still stared open-mouthed. The quivering dog stalked slowly forward, growling deep in its chest.

"Hey! I'm not a ranger! It's okay!" I yelled over the racket.

The two men deflated in sudden relief. One called for the dog to shut-up. The Lab looked back and gave a few apologetic sweeps of its tail. I unbuckled the bulky backpack and swung it down against the wall. Off came gloves, coat and snow-pants. The guys muttered something between themselves.

It was stifling in the heat roaring from the open door of the iron woodstove. A glance up through the panoramic windows showed sparks and smoke streaming horizontally in the wind over the cedar-shake roof. A sign on the wall warned that the stove was just for emergency use and even then, small fires only. The old cabin would burn like a blow-torch in that wind if it caught on fire – which seemed rather likely at any moment.

I introduced myself and asked their names. The one who had yelled at the dog eyed my brown sweater with its black shoulder patches suspiciously. Finally, he slurred, "Sure you... you're not... a ranger?"

I assured them I was not and apologized for barging in on their party. "Jus' havin' lill' drink," the less sober of the two hiccupped. "You gotta bru... bring yur own." He flopped a hand protectively around the last bottle that still held an inch or so of amber liquid. They glared at me belligerently.

"I don't drink," I shouted over the grating noise pouring from a music source hidden among all their stuff strewn everywhere. "Close the door on that fireplace before you burn the place down!"

The tall dog-owner got up, crammed a few more pieces of volatile kindling inside then slammed the little iron door. I sat down in the corner furthest from them and opened my backpack. The dog fawned over to beg when he saw a sea-biscuit in my hand.

"Bear! Siddown!" the Tall Guy yelled.

"It's okay," I called back. "Mind if I give him a bit of this whole-wheat biscuit... no preservatives, all natural ingredients?"

"Yeah, sure! Go 'head!"

Bear and I were soon friends.

After a while, I found the cabin's guest registry. One entry dated years ago recorded the grateful thanks of a group that was caught in a sudden storm on the mountain. They accredited the cabin and its ready supply of firewood with having saved their lives. Elsewhere I found the account of an experienced guide and his three lady clients who were surprised by a bad ice storm while fishing at the Hidden Lakes. The guide was the only one strong enough to reach the cabin and build a fire. He recovered sufficiently to go back and drag the nearly frozen women up to the cabin one by one. All survived and walked down the mountain the next day in bright warm sunshine, happily ending what otherwise would have been a certain tragedy. I eyed the rapidly dwindling pile of firewood stacked beside the stove.

Finally, the man that I'd mentally dubbed 'Shorty' - just because he was a few inches shorter than the other - staggered to the door and relieved himself on the step. Frigid wind snuffed out many of the remaining candle stubs that had become puddles of wax on window sills and table. A lantern swung overhead in the center of the square room. Then he turned, stumbled to the bed and fell unconscious across the two sleeping bags unrolled there. I got up and closed the door.

Bear's owner leaned his chair back against the far wall and proceeded to roll himself a marijuana cigarette. "Don't mind, do you?" he half-asked with a bleary glance in my direction as he lit the weed. Reeking wisps curled upward toward a big sign above his head lettered in red: 'NO SMOKING!' He was soon oblivious to the world, sprawled by his companion on top of their sleeping bags.

Warily, I unrolled my own sleeping bag beneath the table where I was less likely to get stepped on if one of the zombies happened to come back to life. The dog whimpered and looked at me piteously. I made him a bed by the fire where he gratefully curled up to sleep. After lying in my own bed for a while listening to the awful music, I got up to search for the source. At the click of a button, blessed silence... well, relative silence anyway, vibrated in the room as the tumult outside shook the cabin.

At midnight, Tall Guy grated the iron door of the stove open and shoved in the last of the firewood. He dropped back heavily onto the springy bed, causing Shorty to mumble a curse. "I

was cold,” he grunted defensively. Both were instantly snoring again, still on top of their sleeping bags.

In moments, a fifteen-foot long streamer of flame roared downwind just above the cabin shakes! In alarm, I leaped to the stove and found that all the dampers had been left wide open. The iron sides were already glowing cherry red. In a few minutes the joints of the thin tin stovepipe would have collapsed and the cabin become a blazing death-trap! After that, even if I somehow managed to drag the two drunks out, it would have been a choice to fry or freeze in the sub-zero cold of the narrow peak.

“So, is this why you brought me all the way up here, Lord? Just to close the dampers on a stove?” I grinned wryly, pushing in the slides and listening as the roar subsided. The clear, sobering answer was an emphatic “Yes!”

Hours later, the dog nuzzled me awake and whimpered. The last of the firewood had finally burned out. My flashlight beam sparkled across white frost that coated the inside of the windows and walls. Bear was freezing.

Insulated boots, snow-pants and down jacket felt like ice as I put them on. Bear dove into my vacated sleeping bag. “Oh no you don’t,” I laughed as I hauled him out by the thick scruff of his neck. “You sleep in your own bed!”

Under the cabin, the only wood I could find was a big knot that had been too large to fit into the woodstove. By the time I had whittled it down to size there were enough chips to make one more fire. Back inside, I scrapped up some of the wax puddles from the window sills to help light the icy wood. When it was finally burning brightly, I carefully dampened the flames so that the fire might keep us all from freezing, at least until daylight.

Bear anxiously woke Tall Guy at dawn. He sat up red-eyed and slack-jawed, staring incomprehendingly at the mess in the cabin. Then he saw me. “Who... what’re you doing here?”

“Guess I was sent up here to keep you guys alive,” I quipped. “Better get up! There’s a storm coming!”

His head swiveled toward the windows. In sudden alarm, he punched at the inert form of Shorty. “Hey! We gotta get out of here! Look at that sky out there!”

Ice was only half-way up the windows now. The last embers were cooling among the ashes in the stove. Wind was still trying to rip the old cabin off its peak and send it flying into the abyss.

“We have to get more firewood up here before leaving the cabin,” I said. “Other people’s lives may depend on it!”

Tall Guy stared at the empty wood box dumbly. Shorty thrashed around on the bed grumbling curses before abruptly jumping up to run to the door. “Cold in here! Where’s the fire?” he grouched.

“You guys burned up all the firewood. Everything except the cabin itself and almost that too with us in it! We have to get more wood,” I repeated.

More curses from Shorty as he turned from the open door, working at his zipper. “You enjoyed the heat same as us. Figger we done enough jes’ haulin’ our stuff up here. Git it y’self!”

At least the empty bottles wouldn’t be too heavy to carry back down the mountain. “Okay! You guys be sure to clean up this mess before you leave. I’ll go get the wood.”

I found a handsaw and rope among the tools cached in the cabin. Before going out, I glanced back one last time. Tall Guy was looking at me strangely while rubbing Bear's ears. He opened his mouth to say something but just then Shorty collapsed across the bed, distracting him. Tall Guy averted his eyes sheepishly.

"Don't wait too long," I warned as I pulled the door closed behind me.

Leaving my backpack at the cabin, I climbed carefully down to the stunted trees at the base of the pinnacle. It didn't take long to drag enough silvery dead wood across the snow to make a sizeable pile. Now for the hard part!

The pile got smaller as I discovered that things seem a lot heavier at high altitude than where I live down near sea level. There's not much oxygen at nearly 7000 feet in the sky. Having to climb jumbled, frozen boulders larger than automobiles didn't help either. I scrambled up one after the other, braced, and hauled my load up at the end of the rope.

It was hard enough just to keep myself from sliding off the frozen rocks. But dark snow-clouds boiling down out of the northwest threatened. Whole mountains were being erased in veils of white as I watched. I had to hurry – or maybe die here.

Shorty charged down the path high above without waiting for his partner. He ignored my calls and was soon out of sight. Sometime later when I was much closer but wondering where the trail was, Bear and Tall Guy came down it. I shouted that I could use some help.

"Storm's coming! Can't wait!" echoed the faint reply. He shifted guiltily from one foot to the other, looking down at me. "Hey! I, uh, we.... Aw, shucks!" Suddenly, he straightened up and raised a gloved hand in salute. Bear barked. They were gone.

"Lord, it was you who brought me here," I gasped in the rarefied atmosphere. "...give me the strength, I pray, to get this wood up to the cabin!"

The obvious thing to do was abandon the firewood. Without it, I could be at the cabin in a few minutes, grab my pack and leave. But I also knew that I would not let go of that rope. Heave!

The precious load of wood snagged on something out of sight below. I jerked it loose and watched in dismay as a six-foot long stick of my wood went bouncing and splintering into the void. At this rate, half of the pile would be lost! On the other hand, it would be a miracle if any of it reached the cabin, including me. Heave!

And so it went. I'd drag the bundle over some edge, secure it in place then climb up to another level with the rope... get set and pull... gasp for air when it slid onto the next ledge. Then do it all over again.

Kicking a place in the hard snow to secure the bundle gave me a moment to study the route above. Bear's man had stood over there to the right of where I was headed, so that must be where the trail lay. A few more scrambles and lifts got me there. Finally, I could swing the bundle onto my back and carry it. I staggered on.

Somehow, I eventually made it to the cabin. I dumped my wood into the empty storage area underneath, regretting that I didn't have time to cut and split it all. Suddenly, inch-wide snow-pellets slanted down in a nearly solid sheet as the storm hit.

Inside, I discovered that somebody actually had cleaned up very nicely. Even the dripped wax was gone from the walls and table. Maybe there was some hope for those guys after all! Perhaps one or both of them were even supposed to be my brothers in the Lord? "Ah! In that case then thank you, Lord, for letting me be here!"

All I had to do was to replace the rope and saw, secure the storm shutters over the windows and pick up my backpack. Even so, I regretted leaving. I was sorely tempted to stay

and watch the storm bury the mountains. But by then there might not be a way out of here for many, many days. I stepped out into the storm.

Wind fought the heavy door shutter as I lifted it into place and secured the latches. All of the windows and door were now boarded over against the coming winter. With this storm, I may be the last person up here for many months. Glancing down through the flurries, I glimpsed the black dot of Tall guy and a bounding dog racing across the glacier hundreds of feet below. Shorty was already out of sight. I was left behind, caught in a deadly storm despite my best intentions to be off the mountain by now.

So that's how it came to pass that I was slipping and sliding along the trail more than half-blinded by whistling snow. Yesterday's sun had melted the surface only to freeze solid now. Several inches of new, loose powder quickly built up – just enough to be slippery but not enough to dig my boots into. Reality became a slow, shuffling race to get down off that pinnacle. Eight hundred feet below, the still grey waters of Hidden Lake waited if I fell.

Once safely down to the snow-field, I realized that I was still in trouble. An ice axe and crampons are essential in such conditions. Lacking them, I fell hard six different times and slid dangerously before I could stop. Twice, I simply sat and tobogganed down slopes that were too steep to walk on, yelling like a kid on a sled. My booted feet acted as springs when I smashed to a stop against jagged rock. Each time I got up and struggled on.

At long last, I was far enough below the ridges to be sheltered from the wind. Looking back during a lull, I could just make out the tiny white cube of the cabin perched on its lonely peak. I raised a hand in farewell as swirling mists blotted it all away. Again, the silence of falling snow hissed against my jacket.

It had been a strangely wonderful experience being with those two men up there. Tall Guy, at least, may have realized something important. Would I ever see either of them again? Maybe in eternity, I hoped. I turned to hike the last few miles down the mountain to my car. "Lord, let them know you," I prayed....

Postscript – Shabbat, January 26, 2013: It is curious that divine guidance is considered to be something unusual. The tragedy is that we do not always hear Him. As a result, opportunities are lost, others suffer and the Lord's heart is grieved. When we all learn to stay focused on Him through praise and prayer, then this world's troubles will end. That will fully happen only when Messiah comes... but He wants you to start now.