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Mount Signal, seen from Blue Angel Peak. 2002. (from about 6 miles east of Jacumba in the Jacumba Wilderness some 50 meters north of the border fence). Photo by Brian McNeece

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Climbing El Centinela: No Gusts Over 70 mph

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Fourteen hours after leaving my house this morning to climb Mt. Signal (El Centinela in Mexico) from the south side, I'm back to a safe, protected environment. This one was the most grueling ascent yet (my tenth). Dave Zielinski had hypothesized during last Saturday's climb with the folks from IVC that the southern route must be easier. After climbing the north route, he decided that nobody could have carried all the materials for the many summit monuments along that route. The knife-edge traverse, the steep slope whose footing crumbled underfoot, the several mid-route descents followed by one last precipitous assault on the top—none of that could be negotiated while carrying a slab of marble, iron pipe, and the other items we discovered at the top. Of course, he mused, the southern route must be easier.

After a little confusion Monday morning, Randy and Chris Miles, Rick Barsan, my son Colin, and I arrived at the sand quarry at the southern foot of the mountain and asked a couple of workers where a trail might be found. They directed us across some very minimal quarry roads. We parked next to an arroyo where we spotted a trail leading north. We left about 7:35 following a water course for a ways then crossed over to a low saddle point and where the trail descended northwest into a wash and away from El Centinela.

There began our first of several debates on which way to proceed. Rick Barsan thought the trail branched back northeast across the alluvial fan of the mountain, providing entrance to a side canyon up to the summit. But that side canyon was out of sight. Rick posted himself a little distance ahead in the direction he wanted to go.

Meanwhile, Randy suggested making a sharp right turn straight east up a steep slope to catch a ridge trail heading north. We could see no sign of his trail from our vantage point. So Randy scouted a ways, with son Chris hanging midway between him and us. I sent Colin to verify whether or not Rick's trail really headed into the mountain or not. As I was the man in the middle-at the fulcrum point of our hiking party, I thought this might be an opportune time to sit a spell and eat my hearty roast beef sandwich.

Randy relayed messages back via Chris that he thought his was the way to go. Colin came back from his 1/4 mile scouting trip to report that no, the trail did not veer in the direction Rick hoped it might. Finishing my sandwich, I voted for Randy's direction, and we re-grouped at the base of a very steep slot canyon that leaped straight up the mountain. We girded our loins and headed up. Chris and Colin quickly outdistanced us. Where the canyon joined the ridge, the footing became very steep and very crumbly. I led the three of us, laying myself out nearly prone on the surface and concentrating on not slipping or dislodging the nearly white, exfoliated soft rock. I wish I knew more geology. The rock was almost chalk like. As I was very carefully picking my handholds on the sturdier granite outcroppings alongside my path, I prayed that Randy and Rick behind me would not slide back into the steep walled canyon. In another twenty feet of scrambling, we all safely made it to where Chris and Colin sat patiently waiting. They pointed behind us, where an obvious trail led back up a hillock. We thought to explore that as an alternate route when it was time for the return descent, as it wasn't clear we could securely re-enter the steep canyon we had narrowly escaped. Randy later told me, "You dislodged a one-pound rock that passed between my legs and a hundred pound rock that luckily headed down about twenty feet from me."

At the ridgeline we did find a trail as Randy had predicted. Just as on the northern route up El Centinela, we stayed right on a ridge. Sometimes it opened up wide, and other times, it narrowed to a knife edge with steep dropoffs-hundreds of feet of exposure-on both sides. Sometimes the best route lay directly on this spine; sometimes it dipped to one craggy side or another. A blustery wind started to pick up as we stopped to rest on an open table area. A small metal stool surrounded by five or six rockpiles with remnants of guy wires told the story of the ruins of some sort of antenna or tower. Rick's GPS showed that we had already reached 1900 feet, and it was 10:00 a.m. We were happy with our vertical progress because the top of the mountain was about 2400 feet. Wow. We're almost there.

Not so fast. Once again we approached a very narrow ridgeline. It was every man for himself. No time to bother with what the other guy was doing. It was simply find the best footing and keep your eyes on the rock where you will next put your foot. Like the "stegosaurus" spine area of the northern

route, the footing here was solid granite, dark with desert pavement. Thick, sharply-cleaved granite boulders made for good stepping, but the terrain was very scary if your eyes should wander to the vertigo-inducing dropoffs on both sides. Again, we hit a wider shoulder and ascended steeply through loose, sinuous routes to another flat area.

Now we spied a radio tower. Ah, I thought, it's the radio tower that we usually see when climbing from the north-with the cross of the summit there to its right in the distance. But my mind was playing tricks on me. For as we approached it, we realized that it was a different tower, and it was far, far below and distant from the cross, whereas the other tower lay on the other side, to the north of the cross.

Our route did, in fact, take us to that tower. We approached it straight up a slope marked by clumps of barrel cactus in early bloom. Their burst of yellow flowers were just beginning. Halfway up the slope toward the antenna tower, I came across a plastic trash can lid. Playfully I sent it downhill toward Rick. I was surprised that the wind caught it and raised it up twenty or thirty feet and kept it aloft for many seconds. When it seemed to be flying off toward the side of the hill where Randy was making a traverse, he started in surprise. The breeze that lifted the trashcan lid so dramatically should have given us some inkling of what was to come.

We reached the antenna. Along with its usual chaotically placed solar panels and clump of batteries, we were discouraged to see that our route seemed to drop into a canyon between us and our goal. We groaned at the prospect of a tough descent before reaching the top. The northern route had two such descents, and we had hoped that the southern route would be easier. Happily, when we skirted the top of another hill we found just a shallow saddle point instead of a barranca or cliff face. We strolled easily across it through brittle yellow bushes. Then once again, we came to a very narrow, rocky ridgeline. The wind had picked up and we were struggling to keep our hats on. Randy had put his ballcap on his walking stick; the wind pulled the band off its snap fastener and sent it across the ground. Chris' hat jumped off his head twice in that saddle area.

We all took the last 300 feet up and 600-800 feet across the narrow, rocky ridgeline at our own pace. Chris and Colin went on ahead. I followed with Rick, then Randy behind. Rick called to me his worry about Randy's whereabouts, but I saw him perhaps 200 feet behind, carefully making his way over the broken up ridgeline. When we debriefed about our hike later, Randy told me, "I didn't think I was going to make it. I was frozen for about five minutes."

At the top we took refuge from the wind. Once we move away from the western edge of the top, we found calm and silence. The wind just seemed to expand and leap as it slammed into the western facing slope of the mountain, but if we just moved 10-20 feet to the east, we were out of its main force. With a little outcropping for shelter, we could enjoy peace at the summit. We stayed at the top for almost an hour, eating our snacks and taking numerous posed photos next to the pole with an embossed metal plate erected in honor of the Virgin Mary.

We checked Rick's GPS. We had arrived at 11:45, more than four hours from our starting time and much longer than we had expected. The distance traveled was a little more than 3 miles, about 1/2 mile farther than the northern route. Our elevation was 2550 feet. This was about 150 feet higher than the maps showed.

Finally, it was time to go. Randy said that he simply could not go back down the way we came. Those very narrow ridgelines were too tough. We thought it might be a good idea to call Alicia and have her meet us on the north side so that we could all go back down that friendlier side. Unfortunately, I hadn't found my cell phone when it was time to head out in the early morning. Randy had forgotten to bring his, and Rick's phone didn't want to work. Finally, Randy got connected with Alicia on Rick's phone. She wasn't too happy about being asked to come to pick us up, and before Randy could arrange a time, the connection went dead.

Our solution to this problem was for Rick, Colin, and I to head back south the way we had come up, and Randy and Chris to go north. We would then drive around the mountain and pick them up. Just in case Alicia was in fact coming, Rick gave Randy the cell phone. About 12:45 we parted in opposite directions down the long, north-south slopes of the mountain.

At the first saddle point, Colin stated his case for descending via a canyon that clearly opened directly down into the alluvial fan. From our vantage point, we could see the trail we had originally left. He had me convinced, but then I took one step and fell on my ass. Not a good omen. Colin had already dropped about 50 feet when I called him back. "We have a commitment to Randy and Chris; this is no time to explore an unknown route." He scowled, but dutifully headed back along the ridgeline.

In a few minutes, Colin was far ahead of Rick and me. Things were going fine; we made good progress and negotiated the tough ridges without much problem. When we approached the hill of the antenna tower, Colin argued that we should traverse the side of the hill instead of going over the top. It looked rugged and I wasn't quite sure of the route, so I told him to go ahead but opted to keep going up to the tower itself. Rick followed me. At the antenna I found the "trail" and continued down. Sure enough, Colin was about 100 yards ahead already, waiting for us. I was surprised to find a nice pickax standing up inside an ocotillo tree. I pulled it out and took a few swings and put it back in its place. Colin did some business behind a rock and learned how hard it is to defecate in a strong wind on a steep slope.

We kept on. The view was spectacular. The big U.S.-owned power plants and the Pemex tank farm seemed stage lit where the sun shone through the heavy thunderheads rolling overhead. The view was also rather disheartening, as we were getting tired and we were still far above our 1900 foot stopping point from earlier in the day. We kept on. Now we entered the scary part. As we approached the next set of narrow ridgelines, we realized that the wind, a minor annoyance on the ascent, had risen to frightening velocities. I had opened my nylon jacket when I became warm. Now, when the wind filled it like a sail, I was yanked sideways. Even zipped up, the rushing air had it flapping at high frequency. The wind was driving so hard that I couldn't plant my walking stick without great effort to keep it from raising up. I removed my hat because even with the chin strap cinched down tightly, it blew off or into my face, the leather straps cutting into my ears and jaw. On several stretches of ridgeline the wind forced me to sit and scoot along on my rear. Otherwise, I hunched down like a monkey for fear of being blown off into the abyss. At one point, my sunglasses blew off my face, but it was just when I was getting ready to remove them, so I caught them before they could fly off into space. Finally, at one sheltered point, I gathered myself together, put my glasses and my hat into my jacket, put my jacket into my pack, collapsed my walking stick, drank some water, and battened down everything on my back as best I could.

Then I continued scrambling as low as I possibly could. Only when I reached a wide saddle point did I dare stand up straight, for the width of the terrain negated the compressing and expanding and accelerating power of the wind. The only time I can remember being in wind that strong was on the Sunrise Highway past the Laguna Summit. There, you can park your car near the desert overlook where the land drops with dizzying steepness from 4500 feet to the desert floor. There, I have experienced 50-60 mph winds. On the backside of Centinela, negotiating narrow ridgelines, it was the same thing. Terrifying, actually. After I tidied up my physical package, I felt more secure. Dropping over a shoulder, I finally saw Colin again. He was lying in a fetal position behind a large boulder-just resting as it turned out.

“Do you want to go down the canyon or continue up the trail?” he asked. We had arrived at the top of the slot canyon that had been so hard to climb out of. I didn’t think that getting back into it would be that bad, but if Colin was unsure, that about clinched it.

“Let’s try the trail,” I said. We waited a bit for Rick, who wasn’t far behind. Colin and I dashed out from behind the rock at a crouching jog, like storm troopers under fire. But in this case, the enemy was the wind. Up and over another rise, we quickly ran out of trail at another saddle. To our right, toward the car, was another steep canyon. Straight ahead, the terrain rose up once again. I hesitated. We were still so high, maybe 900 feet, that I thought probably the straight-ahead route would turn out to be a very steep descent. At least here, we knew what we had. Colin said, “I’ll check it out,” and took off at his usual brisk athletic pace. Rick came up behind me and I told him what was up. We waited a few minutes, but Colin did not return. “I’ll follow this way a little to see where he went,” volunteered Rick. I crouched behind a small boulder to try to get out of the gale. Then I explored the eastern side to see if the trail might re-start its descent that way. No luck. I returned to my rock and rested my cheek on the desert pavement of the cold granite. Rick whistled and gestured for me to follow. Shouting wasn’t much good for communication unless we stood right next to each other, the din from the rushing air was so overpowering. “I saw him a couple hundred feet ahead dropping over a hill,” shouted Rick into my ear. “This seems to be the way to go.”

We took off. Basically, we continued to follow a nicely rounded, gently sloping shoulder of the mountain. In about 15 minutes we cleared an escarpment enough to see the truck down below, with Colin lying on the roof. That relieved quite a lot of anxiety on three counts: the truck was still there, Colin was safe, and we had found the best way down the mountain. In another 10-15 minutes I had hit the bottom of the arroyo that separated our route from the truck up above. One last 20 foot ascent and we were done. The truck wouldn’t start at first, but a slight twisting of the battery terminal fixed that and we were on our way. We had arrived at 3:40, about 8 hours after starting, and 3 hours from the top. Considering that we stopped to rest only once on the way down, it was a long haul.

We got back on the highway and headed back to keep our appointment with Randy and Chris on the north side. We were damn lucky not to have decided to attempt a walking circumnavigation of the mountain, for it was a good nine miles back around. After entering the service road for the aqueduct, I parked a little ways up so I could survey the route down to see if we could spot Randy and Chris. No luck. We scanned the line for a few minutes, then Rick suggested we head up toward the pressure tower. I put it in low 4-wheel drive and crawled up past some rough spots. That road makes me nervous because it’s not very wide and rocks and ruts abound. When we crested the final rise we were relieved to see Chris was there already. As I turned the truck around, we saw that Randy was inching his way down the final steep descent only 60 feet up the trail. We had arrived with nearly perfect timing. It was 4:17.

Unfortunately for Alicia, Randy had just called her to ask her to pick him up at 5:00 p.m. Since her presence was entirely unnecessary, and since she wasn't at all happy about having to come, we tried to call her back, but Rick's cell phone was totally dead.

We slowly made our way back to the highway where we parked to wait for her. The day's adventure wasn't quite over. Facing us across the highway, also parked, was a Mexicali cop car. In the twenty minutes that we sat by the side of the road, we noticed the policemen take off and return twice.

"Those guys are wondering what the hell we're doing here," I announced. "They'll be over here in a while, I imagine."

Sure enough, the cop car left again, but it didn't reappear across the street. This time it showed up in my side view mirror with its lights flashing. I rolled down my window as it came up alongside us.

"Qué están haciendo?" said the cop. Actually, I was reading his lips. "Oh, we're just waiting for a señora to come pick up her husband. We just climbed Centinela ... etc." I told him the whole story. I got out of my car and leaned on the passenger side door to talk past a taciturn, thick featured officer at the younger, apparently more senior driver. After I told him my story, he asked what I did for a living. "I teach at IVC," I said.

"I went to Southwestern for a couple of years," the cop replied in perfect English. "I didn't finish. But I got what I needed."

I gave him my card and invited him back to IVC to finish his degree. "Estamos allí para servirles." Meanwhile, as if on cue, Alicia had arrived and transferred Randy to her Explorer. Alicia scolded me for taking her husband on such a dangerous adventure, especially, I think, for forcing her to leave the comfort of her El Centro casa to rendezvous outside of Mexicali, where no decent woman should go alone. Stuff like that.

Today, a day later, the soreness in my quads was so severe that I bordered on nausea. All that lactic acid build up reached some sort of maximum, I do believe. After a couple of aspirin and an half hour nap, I am better.