

Rescue on Citlaltépetl, Mexico's Angry Volcano

by Matthew J. Nelson

At 18,405 feet, Citlaltépetl is the highest peak in México and the third highest in North America. The dormant volcano rises high above the villages and pine forests in the state of Veracruz, often towering above the clouds. It's also known as El Pico de Orizaba, and to many mountaineers it's known as a walk-up.

But like all big mountains, it's severely underestimated.

Just like the entire western United States, México has been suffering from a drought over the past four years. Snow usually falls heavily on the mountains and volcanoes during the summer months, but during drought years there is little precipitation to add to glacial accumulation. Instead of the powdery, low-angle walk-up that so many mountaineers are used to, Citlaltépetl's glaciers have become increasingly steep sheets of ice.

Climbing México's three tallest volcanoes has never been a very risky proposition until Popocatepetl began showing signs of activity not long ago. Hikers and amateur mountaineers with moderate experience have found adventure and easy summit opportunities on Iztaccíhuatl (17,126 ft.) and Citlaltépetl year after year. Anyone who's read *México's Volcanoes: A Climbing Guide*, by R.J. Secor, would think that if you can help your grandma fasten her crampons, then a little hike up a Mexican volcano would be a great way to spend the weekend.

It was this misconception that led Michael Rowe, Lirain Urreiztieta and me to believe that we could sail up and down Citlaltépetl unhindered. We were all experienced mountaineers with summits much loftier than 18,000 feet under our boots. This was supposed to be a quick and easy adventure in one of our favorite countries.

The dangerous reality of climbing Citlaltépetl became apparent when, on the day we flew from Arizona to México City, three climbers fell while climbing the normal route. A guide, his female friend and a German client were all roped together. Unable to self-arrest on the hard ice, all three tumbled down the Jamapa Glacier and slammed into the exposed rocks a few thousand feet below. The client was the only one to survive, and had to be carried out on the backs of volunteer rescuers. This happened only days after a father and son team had slipped near the summit, killing the elder of the two. So far, it was one of the deadliest seasons in Citlaltépetl's history.

We arrived at Piedra Grande, the 14,000-ft. base camp, on December 11. Outside the large stone and cement hut was a group of clients and guides from REI Adventures. Ian Elman, a veteran guide, was discussing plans for their summit attempt the very next morning. Rope teams were decided, the pre-dawn

departure time was confirmed, and everyone appeared excited to test their fortitude on the slopes of the massive volcano.

There were other groups wandering around the hut: three Spaniards, a group of five Italian and French climbers, and three Mexicans that arrived just before sunset. Michael fired up our stove for dinner, and we all watched the last colors of the day paint the Jamapa Glacier soft hues of pink and blue. During dinner we got to know our roommates, both guides and clients, and shared stories about previous mountain experiences. Most of the groups at Piedra Grande were independent climbers that were attempting flash ascents of Citlaltépetl. The only ones really taking their time to acclimatize were our trio and the REI Adventures group. Either way, it seemed an auspicious date to go for the summit – December 12, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Day. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the protector, the mother, and I couldn't think of a better day to climb Mexico's highest peak than on the day honoring her.

Everyone was concerned about the icy conditions, and from the sounds of it, everyone was going to take the safest route up the mountain – three wide traverses across the glacier. From the window of the hut, we would be able to watch each team snake across the glacier toward the crater rim, then on to the summit.

By 7:30 p.m. the hut had fallen silent, except for the rustling of sleeping bags and a raucous snore from one of the Frenchmen. Just five hours later the high-altitude dormitory was buzzing with the sound of zippers, hacking coughs and camp stoves boiling water for the long ascent ahead. Everyone was going for the top that morning. That is, everyone but our group. I tried to bury my head deep inside my sleeping bag, but the multilingual conversations and anxious energy permeated the thin goose down barrier.

Around 3 a.m. the last footsteps could be heard crunching the volcanic sand outside and the hut fell silent again. Just when I thought sleep was near, the wind started to blow, then howl. Wicked gusts blasted the windows with sand and rattled the corrugated tin roof of the refuge. It sounded like a freight train was raging right outside. The wind continued throughout the morning, and the first light of day seemed to fuel the blustery fire. We all took turns jumping out of our sleeping bags and slamming the door of the hut after the wind forced it open, sending a cloud of dust and frozen air inside. The cold concrete under my feet made me glad to be a few seconds away from a sleeping bag, and not climbing straight up the side of a volcano. If the conditions were this bad at 14,000 feet, I could only imagine what it was like up high.

By 8:30 a.m. all three of us conceded to leave the comfort of our insulated cocoons and face the day. Our plan was to eat a big breakfast and carry a load of food and equipment up to the base of the glacier, some 2,000 feet higher, then return to Piedra Grande to sleep. The thought of busting out 4,000 feet in a single

summit day was sure to bring on acute mountain sickness (AMS), sending our guts heaving and our heads pounding. The plan was to take it slow, acclimatize, set up a high camp on the glacier, and enjoy the experience.

All morning we kept an eye on the Jamapa Glacier, expecting to see team after team making wide traverses toward the top. We didn't see a thing, except for spindrift swirling around the mountain like angry spirits. "Anything?" asked Michael. "Nada," I replied.

We assumed that everyone was hunkering down and waiting for the wind to subside. It looked like it was blowing like hell up there. Then, finally, we could see something: three people were making their way down the mountain. It was the three Mexicans who arrived very late the night before. They made little progress on the glacier before turning around. It was too icy, too windy, they told us. Within minutes they were in a truck heading for Tlachichuca, a village at the base of the volcano.

The wind continued to scream. Just as Michael, Lirain and I prepared for our four-hour hike to the glacier, another person was picking their way down through the rocks. It was Roberto Flores (aka Oso "The Bear"), the most respected and experienced guide on Citlaltépetl, and his pace was faster than I thought he could move. He'd gone up that morning with two or three clients, and now he was descending alone.

Oso crashed through the door of the hut, threw down his pack and confirmed our worst fear. There had been an accident on the mountain. An entire rope team had fallen and everyone was injured, one might be dead. Oso sat down, put his head in his hands and repeated over and over again, "Es muy mal. Hay mucho sangre. Ay Dios mio!"

Aside from the raging wind outside, the only sound was Oso's heavy breath. We all stared at each other for a minute, shaking our heads. Oso removed a small green radio from the inside of his fleece jacket and ran down the dirt road in an attempt to contact someone back in Tlachichuca.

After many garbled transmissions we got the word that two helicopters were being sent, along with a rescue team from Tlachichuca. Suddenly, our plans had gone from a day hike to a full-blown volunteer rescue effort. My immediate feeling was that we should start uphill with sleeping bags, down jackets, water bottles and moral support. Oso and Michael agreed that it was best to wait for the rescue team, so everyone could pitch in and help carry rescue litters and supplies.

So we waited, anxiously, nervously, wondering what was happening on the glacier above us.

Oso retold the story over and over again. His clients were on one rope team, ahead of the two groups from REI Adventures. They all started up the glacier before the sun hit the ice. After ascending the first traverse, the guides became concerned with the condition of the glacier. The ice was as hard as anyone had ever seen, allowing crampons very minimal purchase. That, combined with the powerful wind gusts, made the Jamapa Glacier a dangerous place to be. The three lead guides, Oso, Ian Elman and Graham Hubner, all decided it was best to retreat before they approached the steeper and more dangerous sections of the ascent. The clients all agreed, snapped some photos of their high point, and turned around.

Graham's rope team was the first to start down the hill, just after 9 a.m. He took the lead, chopping steps into the ice for the three clients behind him: Jay Cohen, 51, from Long Island, New York; Dan Brandner, 42, from Marshfield, Wisconsin; and Phil Mayfield, 45, from Diamond Bar, California. Ian and Oso followed closely behind, with their clients on separate rope teams.

Without warning, the wind slammed into Graham. The gust pushed him over and sent him sliding down the ice. He self-arrested, but not before pulling Jay, Dan and Phil from their feet. All three tried to self-arrest, but their ice axes just skidded down the solid surface of the glacier. The force ripped Graham from his position and within second the whole team was rocketing down the steep icy slope. Oso and Ian watched in horror as their friends fell(slid) toward the rocks 1,000 feet below. The team of three Spanish climbers heard the screams of the falling climbers above them and side stepped along the glacier to avoid being swept away themselves. Nobody could believe what was happening.

At the tongue of the Jamapa Glacier is a protruding rock formation known as Sarcófago ("the sarcophagus"). This stone coffin is where climbers end up if they take a fall on the glacier. Most don't survive the impact. The rope team's horrific ride came to an end amidst a rock pile just above the abysmal gullies at the base of Sarcófago.

Immediately, Ian and Oso set anchors in the glacier and began belaying their clients toward the fallen climbers. It would take one long hour to reach their friends who lay sprawled out on the ice below.

Back at Piedra Grande we all sat closely, listening to Oso's retelling of the accident. From what he could tell, there were multiple broken legs, back and neck injuries, compound fractures, and blood. Lots of blood. His assessment of the injuries was interrupted when the door of the hut flew open. In stepped the group of Italian and French climbers. Oblivious to the accident and not fluent in Spanish or English, we attempted to tell them the severity of the situation on the mountain. Just when I thought our volunteer rescue team had nearly doubled in size, they wasted no time in packing their bags, saying goodbye and hiking downhill.

Michael boiled water, liter after liter, and we filled every vessel we could find. Both the injured and the non-injured climbers were certainly dehydrating with each passing hour, and we wanted to ensure there was drinking water for everyone on the mountain. Plus, it gave us something to do with our time while we waited for the rescue team.

On the main stone wall of the hut was a small, framed picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. I stared at it in disdain. "So much for protecting them," I said aloud.

Finally, around 1:30 p.m., the sound of a helicopter cut the thick silence inside the hut. We all rushed outside, waiting for it to touch down and deliver rescue litters and, hopefully, EMTs. The big metal bird circled the dusty patch of level ground near the hut once, then twice, getting closer each time, but the wind pitched it back and forth. The helicopter retreated, then made a third attempt at landing. The wind was too strong, and after tipping from side to side just 40 feet off the ground, it abandoned the effort and disappeared into the sky. As the chopper's hum faded into the valley below our hearts sank. We knew we'd have to carry out the injured climbers on our backs.

By 2 p.m., two old military vehicles bounced up the dirt track toward Piedra Grande. We all jumped to attention. The trucks from Tlachichuca brought two rescue litters, a few volunteers, and two rescue professionals. Among them was Chris Simms, an RMI guide who happened to be in Tlachichuca, and Dr. Gerardo Reyes, the man with the most experience climbing and rescuing fallen climbers on Citlaltépetl.

After the trucks were unloaded and the locals offered to carry the litters, we shouldered our backpacks and started up the volcano. Almost immediately, I felt the lack of oxygen at 14,000 feet. My pack was overstuffed with sleeping bags, rope, water, hot tea, food, headlamp and extra batteries, and everything else I could imagine I'd need for the long day and night ahead. It had been five hours since the accident and I knew the victims were likely freezing on the glacier. Blood loss, combined with not being able to move around, would welcome frostbite and eventually death. I tried not to think too much about it as I charged uphill, focusing instead on my own labored breathing.

The trail from Piedra Grande to the tongue of the Jamapa Glacier begins with a 100-yard walk up a cement aqueduct, then shoots straight up loose, rocky slope. I alternated from kicking my plastic boots into the silt and balancing on the larger rocks, hoping each step would hold long enough to allow me another foothold. My pace was hasty, methodical, and the urgency of getting to the glacier prevented me from ever resting.

How long would it take to reach them? What would I find when I got there? So many thoughts raced through my mind as I hiked along. The victims were

somewhere near the base of Sarcofago, and many layers of rock and ice still separated me from the scene. Most people take four hours to reach the glacier. That's too long, I thought. I'd have to do it quicker. I stepped up my speed through a flat section of black rocks, breathing deeply and focusing on the cairns and painted rocks that marked the trail. I went over Oso's details in my head, trying to prepare myself for the rescue: compound fractures, back injuries, lots of blood. My grim thoughts were suddenly halted when I noticed something moving above me.

It was two climbers from the REI Adventures group, John Guinn and Caroline Kusher had taken a crampon in the nose during the ascent. Two giant Band-Aids covered the laceration, but streaks of dried blood were still visible. "How are you two doing?" I asked.

"We're OK," John said, "But there's been a bad accident. They're in really bad shape and there's one guy who's probably not going to make it. They're really cold up there."

I told them about the rescue team and that a helicopter was unable to land because of high winds. {Caroline} told me that a rescue was futile without a helicopter. "There's no way you can move those guys down the mountain."

"We'll do whatever it takes," I told her.

"I sure hope we haven't ruined your guys' chance for the summit," said John.

"To hell with that," I said. "The mountain will always be here. Helping with the rescue is far more important than climbing to the top. How much further?"

John delivered the bad news. It was another 40 minutes, at least. And I thought I was almost there. "We won't keep you," he said. "Good luck."

The brief rest renewed my strength and I hiked onward. Somewhere near the next rock band the reality of what I was hiking toward hit me. A jolt of fear shot through my body and I stopped for a moment. Looking behind me, I could see nothing but a steep, volcanic slope – gigantic, black rocks, cliffs, gullies and ice chutes. Doubts, questions and thoughts raced through my head. "If a helicopter was out of the question, how the hell were we going to rescue four people from this mountain? It could take days. They wouldn't survive a few days. What had I gotten myself into?"

Suddenly I felt very alone. I considered waiting for Michael and Lirain to catch up. Then I considered going back down. "Gotta' get there," was my only thought.

I kept going, following various bamboo wands with white and orange flags marking the way. The wands led me over a black rock ridge and into a maze of

steep ice and rocks. I scrambled up an ice gully, getting purchase on the few exposed rocks I could find. My breathing was heavy from the effort and from the fear of falling down the steep chute. Once on top, the wands disappeared altogether but I could see crampon incisions slicing every which way up the mountain. Some went left, some right, and others went straight up the icy wall in front of me. I took the opportunity to put on my crampons and think hard about where I should go.

Just then I heard rocks shifting below me. A white helmet appeared, followed by the face of Dr. Gerardo Reyes. I yelled in Spanish if he knew the exact location of the accident. "Si," he responded, and pointed straight uphill. I was afraid of that.

I took a deep breath and plunged my ice axe into the hard surface in front of me. It went in deep enough to secure my confidence, as well as my balance. Then I kicked the front points of my crampons into the ice. Alternating between front pointing and sidestepping on the pre-cut steps, I ascended the steep ice chute in a matter of minutes. At the top I looked up to see three figures standing in front of me. It was two more REI clients, with Ian in the rear. The clients stood motionless and didn't say a word. "Matt, is that you?" Ian asked.

"Yeah! I'm on my way up with sleeping bags, and the rest of the rescue team is on the way," I said.

In a tired voice, Ian said, "Right on bro. They're really cold up there."

I hiked past the front two who stared at me blankly and stopped briefly at Ian. I could only imagine what he must have gone through over the past eight hours – watching his friends and clients fall, getting everyone else down safely, administering first aid, setting bones, mopping up blood, keeping everything under control. I tried to smile as I walked past him.

"Hey," Ian said. "Thank you." He removed his hand from his ice axe leash and gave me a high five.

Up ahead and to the right I could see Dr. Reyes kicking steps into the ice and ascending higher. He disappeared behind a rock pile and I followed right behind. Climbing out of the rocks and onto the glacier I was hit by the cold gale that had been whipping across the mountain all day. I'd been protected from the wind over the last few hours, but now I was getting a feel for what these guys had been enduring all morning, and afternoon. Through the dark rocks I could see six or seven brightly-colored parkas on the surface of the glacier. Finally, after two hours and 45 heart-pounding minutes, I'd arrived. I took a deep breath, or as deep a breath as one can take at 16,300 feet, and walked toward the bodies lying on the ice.

The first people I encountered were Dan and Jay. Both were sitting upright against a rock, working their arms in a running motion in order to stay warm. "Who wants a sleeping bag?" I asked, pulling a down bag from my backpack. "That sounds good," said Jay. "My ass is freezing."

Both of them were propped up by their own backpacks and wearing thick down jackets. I stretched one bag over the two of them, tucking the corners under their knees and between their neck and shoulders. That's when I got a good look at Jay's face. It was slashed wide open from his lip to his cheekbone. Dried, frozen blood covered his face and his lips flapped awkwardly when he talked. It appeared as though while self-arresting his adze ejected from the ice and cut into his face. Jay's glasses were fogged and splattered with blood. "Where's the helicopter?" he asked.

I looked directly into his eyes and told him it was on the way. At that point I was unsure whether or not there would be a helicopter rescue, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

From beneath a mound of down jackets I heard a voice say, "Hey Matt, thanks for coming up." It was Graham, and he was lying next to Jay on his back. He offered me his hand and I gave it a firm squeeze. "No problem," I said. "We've been worried about you guys."

I pulled the other sleeping bag from my pack and started to tuck it around Graham. "Watch my legs!" he cautioned. "They're both broken."

His tibia and fibula of both legs had been snapped, and were splinted with ice axes. As I stepped carefully around Graham to pull the sleeping bag around his body I noticed a pair of glacier goggles lying in the ice. One lens was missing and they were affixed to the glacier with frozen blood. I stepped over them and planted my foot next to Graham, careful not to disturb his legs. His gaze is something I'll never forget. They were wide open and alert, but wrought with pain and fear. Had he not been wearing amber goggles I might have had a hard time maintaining eye contact. "You're going to be just fine," I said.

"Did you bring any morphine?" he asked.

"No, but Michael is on his way up with some Vicodin."

"Good. I'm in a lot of pain," he said, biting his lip.

I put my hand on Graham's head and secured the sleeping bag under his arms. That's when I noticed someone else lying on the glacier. It was Phil, and his body was a twisted, bloodied pile of broken bones, bruised flesh and Gore-Tex. His face was mangled with scrapes and scratches, and his right eye was swollen

shut. His lips were drawn tightly and I couldn't tell if he was conscious. Dr. Reyes and two other volunteers were tending to him.

Phil's left leg was bent awkwardly at the knee, angling sharply back up toward his thigh. His right arm was wrapped tightly against his chest, and his neck was craned at an odd angle. I got the sense that he was still alive, but I didn't have much hope.

One by one, more rescuers arrived: Chris Simms, then Michael, Lirain, Oso and a few others. Most everyone attended to Phil, clearly the most critical of the group. They unrolled an orange plastic litter from a cylindrical backpack and began placing Phil on top of it. As they moved him from his original contorted position I could see one of his eyes moving back and forth. Quiet moans emerged from the corners of his mouth. Phil's down jacket was thoroughly soaked with blood and his shallow breaths indicated that one of his lungs had collapsed. Ten of his ribs had been broken, along with his wrist and both ankles. The rescuers moved him gently, careful not to move his neck in such a way that, if he did survive, wouldn't cause paralysis.

I stepped back over Graham as they slid Phil away from the spot he'd been lying for the past few hours. The ice was pink with blood, and tiny goose feathers blew in the breeze. We secured Phil into the plastic litter with a series of nylon cross straps, then used pieces of climbing rope to secure Phil's harness to the litter. This was finished up with a knot that someone would attach to the helicopter rescue line.

A call went out over a small, handheld radio and we learned that a helicopter was on its way. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least we had the help of a helicopter. I explained to Graham, Jay and Dan what was happening, and that they would go in order of severity. First, Phil, then Graham, followed by Jay and Dan.

"Have any of you done a helicopter rescue before?" yelled Chris. Most of us looked around and shook our heads in the negative. "We've got to get everything off this ice – sleeping bags, backpacks, clothing, bits of rope. If anything flies up into the rotor, the helicopter is fucked!"

I scrambled around the glacier, stuffing everything I could find in a small backpack. A down jacket, a severed harness, a plastic bag, bloodied bandages, and anything else that could bring this rescue to a screeching halt. Two minutes later, the chopper hovered above us, sending a powerful gust of wind and ice particles across the glacier. I laid down on top of the sleeping bag that covered Jay and Dan and hugged them tightly.

A rope hung from the helicopter and someone grabbed it, then attached it to a carabiner in the center of Phil's rescue litter. Seconds later, he was flying through

the air. We watched as the intense wind subsided and the bright orange litter disappeared into the massive valley below us.

“Can I get a seat on that helicopter?” asked Jay.

“One at a time.” I said. “You’re almost home.”

Dan was the only one still wearing crampons, so I removed them carefully. I asked about their injuries and what was hurting them. Jay informed me that he thought his hip was dislocated, and that he wanted to get home to an American hospital as soon as possible. He also said his back was really hurting. Dan said that he was unable to stand up, but could crawl just fine. He thought his ankles were broken.

Graham attempted to sit up and drink some hot tea I’d brought along, but the pain put him on his back after a few sips. Michael began serving up the Vicodin, a much needed pain killer. Knowing that it would be at least 20 minutes, probably longer, until the helicopter returned, I tried to make conversation with Dan and Jay while the others moved Graham into position for the airlift.

Small talk has never been my strong point, so I just asked if there was anything they wanted to talk about. “I want to talk about getting on that helicopter,” Jay said. Dan told me about the accident, recalling watching Graham slip, then Jay, then driving his ice axe into the glacier. “I swear I tried to arrest the whole time we were coming down the hill. The whole time I was picking into the ice,” he said.

I looked up the glacier. Deep grooves were carved into the glacier from ice axes, and crampon marks pocked the entire surface. They seemed to skid across the ice, over rocks, and end right where we were sitting. I looked downhill and was horrified at the deep canyons and rocky trenches far below. “You’re lucky you stopped here,” I said, pointing down into the sarcophagus.

Jay looked at me blankly and said, “The guide fell.”

“OK, Graham is next,” Chris yelled. We prepared the other litter, an aluminum-framed stretcher with orange canvas backing that folded in half. Moving Graham was difficult. As we supported him from below and lifted him toward the litter he screamed out in pain. We tied his legs together and made a crude seat and chest harness out of climbing rope, then secured it all together and waited for the helicopter to return. It was getting dark and cold, and everyone began to wonder when the hell we’d get off this mountain.

Mountaineers know that sunrise and sunset on big mountains are a very special time. They are the only times of day when you can see the shadow of the peak silhouetted against the surrounding landscape. It’s an amazing sight, something you have to see to believe. Every time I’ve ever seen this phenomenon, I’ve felt

so blessed, so happy to be high up enough to witness such a thing. As the sun faded over Citlaltépetl and its ominous shadow filled the sky to the east, I felt cursed. The mountain looked big, really big, and pissed off.

The temperature dropped quickly and we all started to shiver until the sound of the helicopter's return lifted our spirits. The wind was blowing again, and as the line was brought close to Graham's litter, it flew back and forth. Oso ran across the ice, grabbed the line, then ran back and handed it off to Michael. He secured the line to Graham's central carabiner, locked it down, and we all motioned for the helicopter to take off. As it lifted Graham from the ice we all cringed to see the aluminum litter bending in half, bending Graham backwards. I could only hope the healthy dose of Vicodin made the ride a little less excruciating.

It was time to prepare Jay for take-off, and he warned us that he couldn't move his hip at all. With four people supporting him from all sides, we lifted him from his position against the rock and placed him flat against the orange plastic litter. He yelled so loud that I had to turn my head away from his face. He breathed erratically, trying to cope with the pain. Jay's lower back was on fire and lying flat on the litter was almost too much to handle. We strapped him in tightly and tried to reassure him that it was almost over. Darkness fell over the mountain just as the helicopter made its return for yet another rescue.

Everyone turned on their headlamps and aimed them at Jay and the rescuer standing directly over him who was waving his arms. The chopper slowly moved into position, and again, it was Oso who retrieved the line. Within a matter of seconds Jay was being pulled into the sky. His screams were drowned out by the roar of the helicopter's blades.

With the three most critically injured on their way to a hospital, the urgent feeling of the rescue began to wane. I even saw some people smiling. Dr. Reyes walked over to Dan and said, "We don't know if the helicopter is going to come back for you. It is getting dark. It is getting very dangerous."

Dan took the devastating news rather well. "That's fine. So what, are you going to carry me down the hill?" he asked. Dr. Reyes affirmed that we would carry him downhill, but there was a chance the helicopter might come back. "Either way," I told him, "you're getting off this mountain tonight." (I actually remembered asking if we'd bivouac overnight too. I felt I was up to it if I could be kept warm.)

Everyone began gathering their gear and piling the victims' backpacks, sleeping bags and ice axes onto the largest rock in the area. Lirain and I had discussed hauling all the extra gear down, but the prospect of carrying Dan down the hill made us think twice about adding any more weight to our load. We all watched the sky to the east, waiting to see a single light speeding toward us and bringing an end to this long and tiresome rescue. The light never came.

“OK, no helicopter,” Dr. Reyes announced. “We will lower him down.”

We helped Dan into a sleeping bag, zipped him up, and fastened the straps of the rescue as tightly as we could. It was going to be a long, perilous journey down the volcano. Michael administered a few Vicodin, which Dan accepted gratefully. Most of the climbing rope on the mountain had been cut into small pieces for the rescue, so we relied on a 50-meter rope for lowering Dan down a series of ice chutes, rock gullies and mixed terrain that was, in a word, sketchy. Dr. Reyes would set a belay with his ice axe, Chris would run ahead to rig the next belay, and the rest of us would guide Dan’s body down the mountain. It was grueling, chaotic work that seemed to go on forever.

Everyone was constantly shouting in a whirlwind of Spanish and English. “Despacio!” “Slow down!” “Freno!” “Brake!” Lirain and I, perhaps the only two bilingual people on the mountain at the time, tried to yell out translations between the crossfire of communications. To make matters worse, nightfall had brought in heavy cloud cover and we were immersed in a haze of thick fog. At times we couldn’t see Dan or the rescuers below us, but tried to make sense of everything that was happening. Quick, crude belays were set around rock horns and ice axes, with only an occasional backup from an ice screw or an additional person. It was an amazing process, really, and we seemed to be making quick progress. Everyone worked together intuitively, plunging ice axes here and there, stepping over each other in the dark, always keeping an eye on Dan and working to ensure he didn’t speed out of control.

Dan’s litter glided smoothly over the icy sections, and it wasn’t until we ran out of rope near the runout of one particular chute that I thought the system was without fail. Rescuers arrested the litter’s progress from the front and back until Chris set another belay around an icy rock mound. Dan began to slide down the hill smoothly again, but the rope popped free and within seconds the litter was racing out of control. Everyone yelled and headlamp beams shot wildly back and forth. Chris made an amazing leap from his rock perch with the rope still in hand, and jammed his ice axe into the snow. Michael, Lirain, Dr. Reyes and I simultaneously leapt onto the rope and tried to keep ourselves from sliding down the slope. Less than three seconds after Dan started the wild ride he’d come to a stop, but not before someone had taken a crampon directly in the thigh.

The rescue continued, and the never-ending series of anchors and belays, pushes and pulls, screams and yells went on through the night. By the time we were off the ice and into the rocks I’d had all I could take. I had not taken a drink of water in seven hours and was feeling AMS creep over my entire body. I was losing strength and I knew it wouldn’t be long before I became useless, perhaps even dangerous to the rescue operation. New volunteers were arriving to help carry Dan over the loose rocks, so I made a quick exit. Before leaving I patted Dan on the chest. “You’re doing great, man,” I said, then stumbled downhill with one of the medics and another volunteer who looked as tired as I felt.

My headlamp was fading, but luckily some moonlight helped illuminate the path down to Piedra Grande. As the three of us picked our way through the rocks I could see a solid line of little white lights coming up toward us. We encountered men from every surrounding village that had heard of the accident and were coming to help. Sometimes they hiked alone, and other times there were five or six waiting at a particular spot on the trail. Everyone asked how far, how long, and how he was doing. We were happy to share the news that he was OK, albeit heavy, and it wouldn't be long before he was on their back. Every late night interaction ended with "Gracias" and "Buena Suerte."

There must have been 25 people in all, perhaps more, that came to the rescue. Some didn't even have headlamps or hiking boots, but they were all determined to make sure this person who they didn't even know made it to the bottom of Citlaltépetl alive and well.

I finally stumbled into the hut at Piedra Grande around midnight, dropping my backpack onto the floor and laying down on the concrete completely and totally exhausted. I expected the refuge to be filled with American climbers and other volunteers wanting news, updates, information on Dan, and the progress of the rescue. To my surprise, only Oso and two others were whispering by the light of a candle. Everyone else had been transported to Tlachichuca. I basked in the quiet for a few minutes, then enjoyed a lukewarm cup of Ramen noodles that easily ranks among the best tasting meals of my life.

One by one, burned out rescue volunteers trickled into the hut and collapsed onto their backpacks and sleeping pads. Nobody talked much. There really wasn't much to say. Around 1 a.m. on Friday morning, I watched a large group of headlamps approach. Their beams illuminated the path in front of them, as well as a bright orange litter held tightly in their hands. Minutes later, Dan was lifted into the back of an ambulance, the doors were shut, and it drove off down the rugged jeep trail toward Tlachichuca. As the dust and darkness enveloped the glowing taillights, the weary volunteers cheered out loud. Sixteen hours after the accident occurred, it was finally over.

Michael and Lirain came dragging in around that same time, and I'd prepared a huge pot of couscous and lentils for the three of us. We all sat around the steaming pot, devouring some much-needed calories and silently trying to make sense of everything that had happened over the last two days.

Before we knew it, everyone was gone. Every last volunteer piled into the military trucks bound for Tlachichuca and by 1:30 a.m. we were alone. None of us would be able to sleep for another hour. Instead, we talked about Phil, Graham, Jay and Dan. In a very short time we'd grown quite close to these complete strangers, and their well being consumed our thoughts.

Michael and Lirain settled into their sleeping bags, and fell asleep almost immediately. I wandered around the hut for a few minutes and stared up at the huge volcano outside the window. The moonlight radiated brightly off the Jamapa Glacier, juxtaposing the surrounding ink black rocks. Inside the hut, the candle's flickering light illuminated a single object – the framed picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

I said a prayer, blew out the candle, and within seconds was fast asleep.

- end -

Epilogue

Phil Mayfield suffered the most extensive injuries, including: broken right wrist, broken right ankle, broken left ankle, broken right knee, broken left knee, eight broken ribs, five broken vertebrae, broken left scapula and frostbite. Doctors estimate he lost 40% of his blood.

Graham Hubner's injuries include two broken legs. It will be at least six months before he is able to put weight on both legs.

Jay Cohen suffered from a broken pelvis, two broken ribs, a broken nose and facial lacerations.

Dan Brandner was the luckiest of the group, suffering two broken ankles and a severe back/buttock bruise.

All four survived the accident and are enduring the recovery process.