Fifty-Seven Years to Closure

by Bob Rockwell

Mt. Whitney[1]

May 24, 1952

My first ascent of Mt. Whitney was on May 24, 1952. I had climbed a mountain only once before, a much smaller one near my home, a few weeks earlier. There were five of us who started up that day: high school buddies George, Ben, Charlie, Jim, and me.

I don't remember when or why we decided to do this, but it was undoubtedly a spur-of-the-moment thing. Perhaps a day or two earlier someone had said, "Mt. Whitney is up there by Lone Pine. I've heard it's the highest mountain in the country. Let's drive up and find someone in town who can point the way."

At home in Ridgecrest, it was summer-like, so we wore T-shirts, Levis, and street shoes. We probably each took a light jacket. But no gloves or warm hats. Or canteens, or food except for a few Hershey's bars, or packs, sunscreen, map, compass, or flashlights. Or bivouac gear. As I think back upon it now, I shudder.

We drove to Whitney Portal the night before, threw sleeping bags on the ground, and started hiking around 7 AM. The trail was obvious until we got close to Trail Camp[2], but it had been a big snow year and by the time we got there, we were somewhat stymied. The snow was well consolidated so the walking was fine; but it covered up the trail. Now it was early afternoon, and Charlie and Jim had long since decided to stay below and fish.

[1] Pictures here are from different Mt.Whitney climbs in later years, but all were taken in the month of May.
[2] Of course we didn't know the names of any of the features back then.

Seeing no sign of the trail, we looked north and thought, "That looks like the highest thing around. Must be Whitney." So we headed in the direction of what I now know is Pinnacle Ridge and the southeast face of Third Needle.

As we climbed higher, we found ourselves on increasingly steeper snow. It was firm enough and holding us, but at one point Ben punched through. He was stopped by his outstretched arms, and we helped him out of the hole. Peering down, we could only see darkness, and knew this was not a good place to be. Besides, above us the snow gave way to even steeper rock—near vertical, it appeared.

From our vantage point we looked toward the south and now saw semblances of switchbacks ascending the snow above Trail Camp. Aha!

Switchbacks above Trail Camp, with Trail Crest to the right of the last one.

At about 3 PM, we turned back and headed over to the switchbacks. Ben had been complaining of a severe headache and decided to head down. He was also badly sunburned. George and I told him we would be back at Whitney Portal before dark, and continued up.

As we climbed, the temperatures dropped because we were now in the shade, and we grew tired. But by 6 PM we had gone over Trail Crest pass and were on the west facing slopes, in the sun again. Soon we could see the summit in the distance, and a building on top. We kept going, but very slowly, stopping every few minutes to rest.

Then we realized we were in trouble. The sun would set in an hour or so, and there would be no moon. We were getting very cold, and knew we should have turned around long ago. But if we turned back now, there wasn't even a remote chance of getting down this

day. We had seen no other people, so had the entire mountain to ourselves. This also meant there was no one around to help us out.

On the west slopes, approaching the summit

Our only hope was to gain the shelter of the summit hut. We finally reached it around 9 PM, well after dark. We had hoped there would be a fireplace and wood inside, and water, and some food. Maybe even beds and blankets. But what we found instead was an open doorway leading to a single large, cold, empty, and dark room. The door had been blown off by winter storms and was lying outside on the ground.

Actually, the inside of the hut was not empty. It was full of snow.

Summit hut

We were very cold, and our fingers and toes were numb. And we were indeed in trouble!

But we developed a plan. We would use rocks to chisel out a flat area in the snow, big enough to get the door inside and lay it horizontal. It took a long time because of the darkness and because the snow was so consolidated, but we finally got the job done. It was well after 11 PM. We put the door inside and each sat on an end, facing each other. I remember that when we removed our wet shoes and socks to lay them out, the socks were frozen solid within a minute. We placed our bare feet in each other's armpits to try to warm them up.

We shivered almost continuously and got hardly any sleep. I probably dozed off now and then, but for no more than a few minutes each time.

A little before 5 AM, through the doorway we could see the sky in the east showing a tinge of lightness. We looked forward to soon feeling the sun's rays. Suddenly there was a bright flash of light—also in the east—and, about ten minutes later, a dull rumbling. We knew instantly what it was.

This was during the era of atmospheric A-bomb testing at Yucca Flat in Nevada. Tests were being conducted every few months under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission, directed by the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in New Mexico. The reflection of the flashes off clouds could usually be seen from quite a distance, and back home in Ridgecrest, school officials had sometimes let us out to view them when they were expected during class time.

But we were not in Ridgecrest. We were at 14,496 feet above sea level, well situated for a flash from what turned out to be about 125 miles away[3]!

We pounded our frozen socks and shoes into submission, put them on, and headed down. We got to Whitney Portal a little after noon, and our friends could relax. It's likely that our parents had driven up when we hadn't returned, but I'm not sure now. Anyway, what I am sure of now is that quite a few people had been worried about us!

I don't remember anything about George's injuries, but I had some frostbite on my fingers, toes, ears, and nose. I was sporting scabs and walking around in slippers for several weeks: kind of embarrassing for a young high school football jock. It was near the end of the school year, and my algebra teacher wrote in my yearbook: "Stay off of Whitney!"

Climbing Mt. Whitney was not a particularly popular thing back then, and the local weekly newspaper, *The Rocketeer*, printed a short article. The article concluded, "Although proud of their achievement, the group decided 'never again.'" Well, we did go again—or at least I did.

Our attempt at a day climb had consumed 14 hours up and 7 hours down: not very fast by current standards. Nevertheless, it was memorable for several reasons: my first climb of Mt. Whitney, my first time sleeping in the summit hut, my first encounter with frostbite, and the witnessing of that atomic blast.

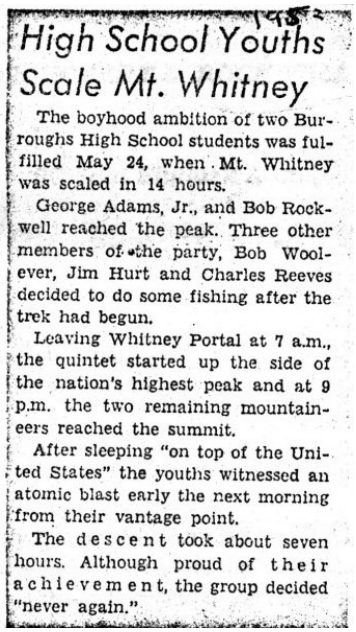
[3] This flash was actually seen as far away as Los Angeles, a distance of 300 miles from the test site.

Later

I've told the 1952 story many times over the years, but the details have dimmed. Early on, I began to wonder about the reality of that atomic blast. Perhaps I had it confused with others that had been reported in the newspapers around that time. Or perhaps I had dreamed it. After all, my mental faculties were not particularly keen that morning!

George and I went our separate ways a few years after the climb, and he died in 1974. By the time I became really intrigued about this question, it was too late to ask him what he remembered.

Later, when going through my mother's things after she died in 1998, I found a copy of the newspaper clipping. There was also a picture she had taken of George and me leaving for the climb, with her notation at the bottom. She had saved them for all those years. The clipping verified that we had reported seeing the atomic flash, but that still didn't answer the "dream" possibility. So I have always been unsure.



High School Youths Scale Mt. Whitney

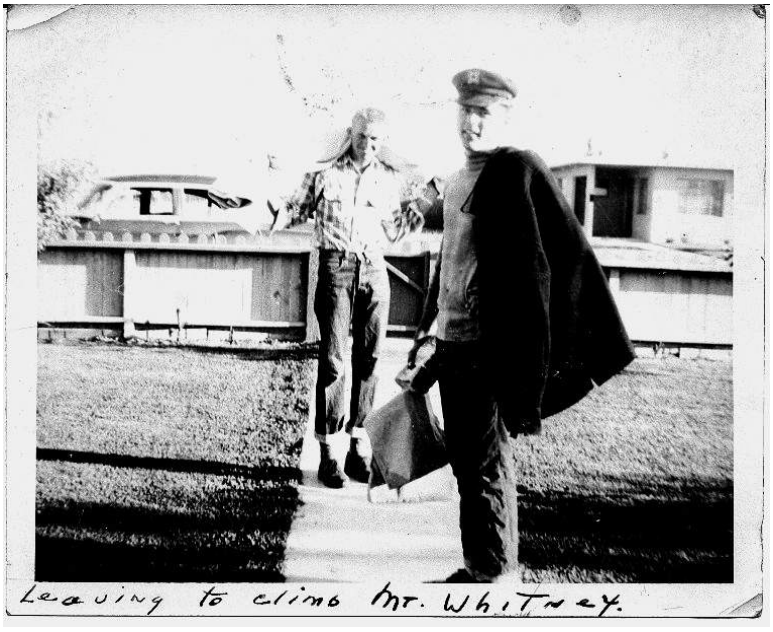
The boyhood ambition of two Burroughs High School students was fulfilled May 24, when Mt. Whitney was scaled in 14 hours.

George Adams, Jr., and Bob Rockwell reached the peak. Three other members of the party, Bob Wooleever, Jim Hurt and Charles Reeves decided to do some fishing after the trek had begun.

Leaving Whitney Portal at 7 a.m., the quintet started up the side of the nation's highest peak and at 9 p.m. the two remaining mountaineers reached the summit.

After sleeping "on top of the United States" the youths witnessed an atomic blast early the next morning from their vantage point.

The descent took about seven hours. Although proud of their achievement, the group decided "never again."



May 24, 2002

I've summited Mt. Whitney again and again, even managing a half dozen more times while it was still the nation's highest mountain[4]. Most of my ascents have been by the main trail, although about 25% were on the more difficult Mountaineer's Route, and 10% on technical routes (ropes and hardware required)—six different ways in all.

[4] Alaska, with Mt. McKinley, became a state in 1959.

A particularly memorable trail climb was on May 24, 2002—exactly fifty years after the first. Coincidentally, it was my hundredth ascent of it. Several of my friends had heard about my plans, and said they would go up the Mountaineer's Route and meet me on top. They did, and even brought along some wine, greeting cards, and gifts to help celebrate. Unfortunately, George had died almost 30 years earlier. It would have been nice to have him there.

I had purchased fifty $2 gift certificates for Baskin and Robbins ice cream and handed them out to everyone on the summit that day, writing on the back what the occasion was all about. I enjoy mountaineering for several reasons, but just having fun at it is on top of the list.

August 7, 2003

It was toward the end of a week's vacation in Santa Fe that my wife and I decided to drive the short distance to Los Alamos to visit the Bradbury Science Museum there. This museum features exhibits interpreting the accomplishments of the Los Alamos National Laboratory[5], including those during the Manhattan Project and the atomic tests in Nevada, and on up to the present time. The AAA Tourbook calls it a "Gem" attraction, and it certainly was! Rather than the hour or so we expected to spend there, it turned out instead to be most of the day.

The volunteers staffing the museum were very helpful and friendly, asking repeatedly if they could answer any questions. At one point a thought popped into my mind and I quickly responded, "Do you keep good records of the events that have occurred, even as long as fifty years ago?" The answer was affirmative. I had my doubts, but was at the same time hoping: "What can you tell me about the atomic detonation at Yucca Flat on May 24, 1952?" Unfazed, the docent said she would check on the computer, and disappeared into a nearby room.

A few minutes later, the answer: "There is nothing like that in the computer for that date." I was crestfallen.

But she said there was another possibility. She urged me to write to Dr. Roger A. Meade, the Laboratory's Archivist and Historian. "Pose your question to him. Under the Freedom of Information Act, he will have to tell you what is known about it."

We came home and I drafted a letter to Dr. Meade, but with little hope. I knew he would just go to the same computer records. Nevertheless, I wrote, asking first of all if there was indeed an atomic test on May 24, 1952. If so, could he please tell me about it: the code name, the yield, the purpose, height-above-ground, etc.? I am a physicist as well as a mountaineer, and explained why I was interested.

[5] Current name.

Then, just before I mailed it, I realized I had the date wrong. We had indeed climbed Mt. Whitney on May 24, 1952—but we had witnessed the blast *the following morning, on the 25th*! I retrieved the letter from my mailbox, corrected it, and sent it off.

August 22, 2003

The letter from Dr. Meade arrived. It consisted of a single paragraph:

> "At 1200 Zulu time (5:00 Pacific time) on May 25, 1952, TUMBLER-SNAPPER-Fox was detonated at the Nevada Test site with a yield of 11 kilotons. You are quite fortunate to have seen the shot, since it was originally set to be fired on May 20th. Fox failed to detonate on the 20th and was rescheduled for the 25th. I have enclosed a Colliers article from 1952 that describes the misfire. I hope this information is of use."

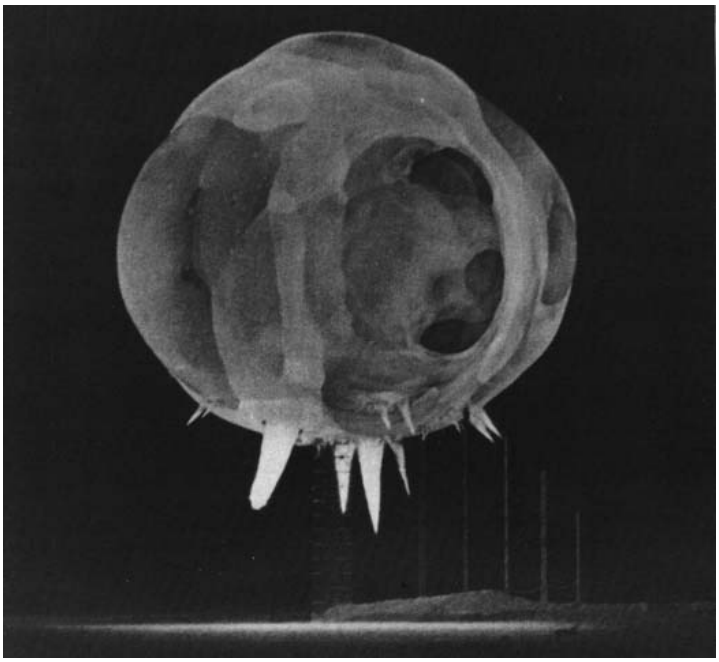
Well, the information certainly was of use! And the Collier's magazine article was absolutely fascinating. It was titled "When an A-Bomb Misfires" and describes the job that deputy test director Dr. John C. Clark faced on May 20.

So there is a story within this Mt. Whitney story:

> They had no way to know what went wrong, just that somewhere in the labyrinthine web of tens of thousands of miles of wires and connections which led from the control room to the bomb, 10 miles away and 300 feet in the air, something had happened.
>
> The bomb had to be disarmed, and Clark had to do it. While there was no reason why the bomb should explode now, there was also no certainty that it wouldn't.
>
> An hour and a half later, Clark (a bachelor with no living kin), accompanied by bomb circuitry specialists Barney O'Keefe (wife and three children) and John Wieneke (wife and two children), were in a Dodge sedan heading for the test site.
>
> At first they drove with the car's visors down, hoping to prevent blindness if the bomb decided to go off. A mile from the tower, they raised the visors. Being blinded was the least of their worries now.
>
> At the tower, they climbed hand over hand on the 300-foot vertical ladder. They rested often. An elevator had been in place during construction and the preparation of the bomb, but it had been removed before the test.
>
> The three men had their tools, including a hacksaw, attached to rope slings over their shoulders. The door to the bomb's enclosure had been wired shut to prevent access in the interim, and had to be sawed open.

Inside there was a telephone, and they used it to dial the control room. They left the phone off the hook and talked as they worked. If the bomb exploded now, at least there would be some information upon which to try to reconstruct events.

To bring this part of the story to a close, they were of course successful. Fox was finally detonated five days later—in time for two 16 year-old kids to see it from the top of Mt. Whitney.



The blast, less than 1 millisecond after detonation

An interesting sidelight is that this was not the first time for Dr. Clark. He had to similarly disarm an earlier atomic bomb, seven months previously. Collier's pointed out unnecessarily that no man should have to do this even once in a lifetime, let alone twice. He died at age 98 on July 20, 2002, in La Jolla, California. I learned from his obituary that he had received his PhD in physics from Stanford University in 1935. (Interestingly, I was born in 1935 and received my PhD from Stanford in 1970.)

Fox was the sixth test in the Tumbler-Snapper series, the others being Able, Baker, etc. The purpose of Tumbler-Snapper was to help develop tactical nuclear weapons for possible use during the Korean War.

The weight of Fox was 2,700 lb. Its yield was 11 kilotons, and the mushroom cloud reached 41,000 feet into the sky. In comparison, the first atomic bomb, Little Boy—dropped on Hiroshima seven years earlier—weighed 9,700 lb and had a yield of 20 kilotons. Its cloud reached 55,000 feet.

A friend of mine who has developed a "sighting program" wrote me that we could have easily seen ground zero from our 14,496-foot vantage point. It would have appeared through the saddle between Keynot Peak and New York Butte in the Inyo Mountains. Furthermore, from Mt. Whitney, the top of the mushroom cloud would have been two degrees above the horizon! So we were indeed able to see the flash itself, not its reflection from clouds in the area.

Fox was the 18th atmospheric nuclear test at the Nevada test site, and there would eventually be about 80 more. Using Google, I found a lot of other information about the nuclear testing programs of those days, and it was a fascinating look back into that aspect of our history. I was even able to purchase a recently declassified video of the Tumbler-Snapper series.

One last point. Without Dr. Meade's letter, this story wouldn't have been worth telling. But I came close to not receiving it at all. The envelope was addressed to a "Sam Rockwell," and the address was wrong. The Post Office's standard procedure with misaddressed letters is to return them to the sender. But this time they figured out for whom it was intended, and brought it to me.

What prompted them to deliver it? This is yet another twist in a long tale that already contains several unlikely coincidences. Ours is an interesting world.

October 3, 2004

Charlie was one of my friends who had headed up Mt. Whitney that day in 1952, but he moved away after graduation the next year. I never saw him again. In the 1970s, I learned that he had settled down in a small town in Oklahoma.

Through a fascinating and unlikely set of coincidences, also involving Mt. Whitney[6], Charlie chanced to come upon an earlier version of this story. He found my telephone number and called me—over 50 years since our last contact. After a few minutes of reminiscing, Charlie told me that we had learned about the upcoming test from the newspaper and decided to see it directly, from as high up as we could get.

But if that were truly the case, we would have carried gear and provisions to spend the night. The fact that we carried nothing to bivouac with indicates that our plan was to get back down to Whitney Portal the same day. We would have missed the blast the next morning.

March 28, 2009

Ben is another friend who went up that day, and I see him every few years. I'd always known that Ben has a superb memory, and it finally occurred to me to ask him about it. I don't know why I didn't think of this earlier. I telephoned him, and he had the answer.

[6] Worthy of its own telling.

Ben said that several of us had recently seen the movie, "The White Tower[7]," filmed in the Swiss Alps and starring Glenn Ford, Valli, Claude Rains, and Lloyd Bridges. A very interesting and intricate story with fantastic scenery and some exciting old-style climbing footage, Ben told me that we decided to climb Mt. Whitney because of it.

We had noticed that the actors had ice axes, so we fashioned our own imitations. Our "ice axes" would be pieces of 1" x 1" oak sticks from our high school woodshop class, 15" long and sharpened on one end. We would stab them into the slope if we happened to fall.

Finally. After almost 57 years, I am confident that all the pieces of this puzzle have fallen into place. Mountaineering has become a major part of my life, and it is interesting to know how it all started.

Links

The various documents are on the web:

This story:
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/AbombStory.pdf
Letter from Dr. Meade:
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/AbombMeadeLetter.jpg
Collier's article:
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/AbombCollier_p1.jpg
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/AbombCollier_p2.jpg
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/AbombCollier_p3.jpg
Picture of the blast, less than a millisecond after detonation:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:POTD_protected/2007-03-27
How Charlie and I finally connected:
http://www.ridgenet.net/~rockwell/Climbing/MakingContactWithCharlie

[7] Now available on VHS.