

A Baptism by Fire

By Tom Peacock

I'm about as backcountry as a pair of chiffon pants, but when my old friend Greg Hill asked me to come out west to ski Rogers Pass, I didn't really have much choice, did I?

It's the last day of the trip, and we're skiing another area between Rogers Pass and Revelstoke. It's a ghostly slope, lying silent and forgotten beneath a hollow, grey sky and a rocky, foreboding peak. The tall remnants of a forest destroyed by fire stand guard over the infinite possible descents.

It looks like a good place to die. I don't want to die here, I think to myself on the way up. I don't even want to *be* here. I'm ready to go home.

The wind tears across the mountain and over the ridge, straight into my face. Greg's gone—up over the ridge and out of sight. I have to stop again, for about the thousandth time that day. Just for a second, I promise. I'm so tired I can hardly push my poles into the windblown crust. I feel like I'm going to slip off the mountain. Greg and his buddies talked about going all the way to the top. I'm praying they didn't. It's my sixth day of ski mountaineering in a week, and I'm ready to quit.

"Sorry," I mutter, when Greg's friend Ian skis back down to check my progress. "I'll be ready to go again in a minute."

We find Greg and the others huddled behind some rocks, just over the other side of the ridge. I plunk myself down in the snow beside them, too tired to undo my boots. Moments later, I feel the faint sound of talking through the fog of approaching sleep.

"Let's get going," someone says. Just leave me in peace, I feel like saying, but there's no time for drama up here.

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My old pal Greg Hill. The only guy I ever punched in the face. The Quebec native bounced back from that tenth-grade incident, though, becoming one of the craziest bastards (pardon my French) in North American ski mountaineering by the age of 28.

He has won all three editions of the Whistler Randonnée Rally since its inception in 2003. Last season, he toured 30,000 vertical feet in one day. This season, he completed a grand total of a cool million vertical feet, averaging nearly 7,000 feet per day for 150 days. In his adopted home of Revelstoke, British Columbia, everyone who skis knows Greg Hill, the bionic man of the mountains!

I kept in touch with Greg off and on after high school. I even visited him once in Canmore in 1998. At that point, he'd already ditched university, and he was working on the trail crew at Sunshine Village Ski Resort. But after that trip I neither saw nor heard from him for several years.

Nobody did. He just disappeared, no phone calls, no emails, no nothing. All we knew was that Greg was somewhere in the mountains, skiing.

Finally, one day, he called me. We talked about the races he had won, about his plans to make a name for himself in skiing, his plans for a future career as a guide, and his summer employment as a tree-planting foreman. We talked about his girlfriend, Tracy, and the baby they're having together. We talked for a damn long time, considering

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Jon Howard skiing in the Hurrungane Range, Norway.
Photo: Chuck Waskuch

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Finally, at the end of it, he asked me to come out and ski Rogers Pass with him.

"Yeah, sure," I said, sounding about as sure of myself as a 50° spring slope in the heat of the afternoon sun. I am scared shitless of the backcountry, having grown up in the East with a profound respect for chairlifts and ski area boundaries. Still, my skiing buddy Jeremy Stafford convinced me that I had to go—and coaxed me into taking him with me.

A few weeks later, Jeremy and I found ourselves standing bleary-eyed beside an idling Greyhound in the Denny's parking lot in Revelstoke. Greg showed up a few minutes later, driving a well-used Pathfinder and wearing nothing but a large pair of Sorels and his nightgown.

Night passed quickly with barely a nap back at the modest bungalow shared by Greg and Tracy. In the early morning, Greg took us to the nearby cross-country ski area for a quick training session, familiarizing us with the gear that would help save our lives in the event of an avalanche. We buried and retrieved beacons for each other for an hour or so, and I began to feel a little less worried about the prospect of heading into the mountains.

Feeling strong, we attacked an adjacent slope, getting used to climbing with the skins and making kick-turns. My enthusiasm soon faltered, as the soft, loose snow gave way to the well-worn trail of the uptrack we chose for our first climb. I stalled on an icy stretch, my splitboard and skins trying futilely to gain an edge. The edges wouldn't bite on the sidehill, and I could barely plant my poles.

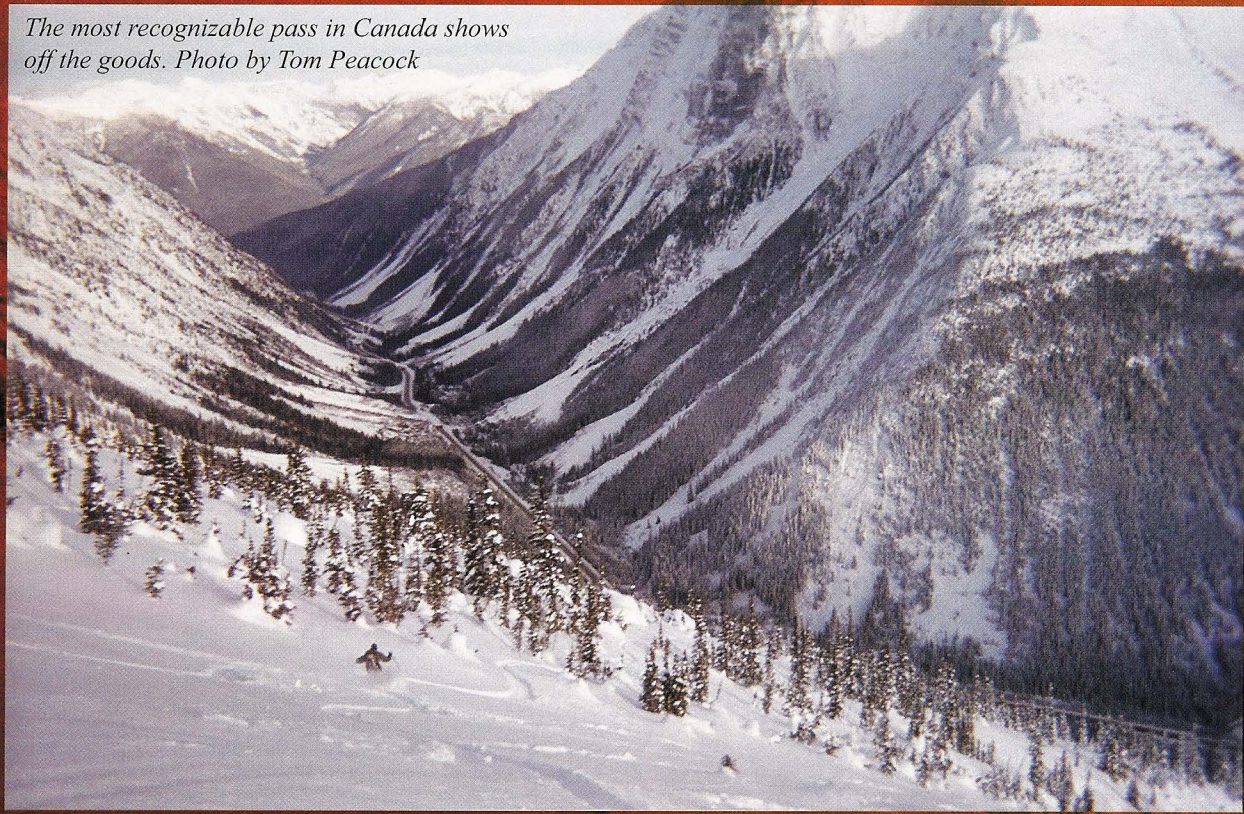
"Try not to use your edges too much," Greg said. "Use the skins. And weight more on your downhill ski."

Everything Greg told me to do was counterintuitive. I slipped onto my knees, fell forward onto my hands, and couldn't gain any elevation.

"I've never seen anyone make it look so awkward," Greg said with a broad smile. Once again, my skis slipped backwards down the trail, and I ended up on my hands.

After several more minutes of swearing loudly and getting nowhere, I tore off the bindings and climbed in my boots up to the next switchback. Moments later, I got stuck again. I shed the skis once more, but this time, I couldn't even get a foothold in the ice with my snowboard boots. I threw kick after kick at the ice, but it was futile. Greg finally rescued me by kicking footholds straight up to the next switchback with his ski boots. Now I was worried. Had I really signed on for a whole

The most recognizable pass in Canada shows off the goods. Photo by Tom Peacock



week of this?

Rogers Pass, a 45-minute drive from Revelstoke, is a purist's dream come true. Hundreds of runs sit within a day hike of the road, and there's not a chairlift, helicopter, nor snowmobile in sight. On the drive up, we marvelled at the hundreds of snowy peaks catching the early morning light. Over a foot of fresh snow had fallen in the last few days. Things were beginning to look up.

Several punishing hours of climbing up through the trees though, and I was destroyed. Standing atop our first run, water never tasted so sweet, and sitting never felt so right. I didn't want to go down—worried it would mean I'd have to come back up. There was no getting out of it, though—after all, I had to admit, that's why we had come here.

The pitch was steep, but not too steep; the trees were spaced just enough. The snow was deep and fluffy, and soon I was halfway through the best run of my whole, long, icy, east coast life.

The week continued in the same vein. The hikes to the top were pure torture—steep trails whose switchbacks climbed through dark, icy forests of ice and crud—but the riding was sublime.

One day, I hauled myself out of the woods at the bottom of the alpine terrain half an hour after the rest of our group, finding them dug in deep in a snow pit to check for instabilities in the snowpack. Taking the opportunity for a rest, I plunked down in the snow beside them, only to hear a cry emanate from a far-off peak.

"There's Greg," someone said, pointing up—way up—to my friend who stood proudly on top of a far-away ridge waving his poles in the air.

"How the hell'd he get up there?" Jeremy asked, but nobody answered. We just watched as Greg shot off the lip, a loud whoop emphasizing every perfect turn we'd never take down that pristine slope. It reminded me of our high school days on the soccer team, me sitting on the bench, Greg out on the field scoring goals. Still our eventual run down—off a ridge called Avalanche Crest—was no less pristine, and the day ended with a mixture of happiness and dread for the punishing course that always seemed to come with the next morning's dawn.

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Standing atop the last run of the week,

the group calls for the descent. Only a blur of a minute has passed, but the others are already gone. Then I'm gone, too, off the edge, down into a steep chute—thrown into the abyss. The snow's deep. It slows me down a bit, but I'm still going fast. I cut hard sideways and put one hand on the slope behind me. The snow I've let loose up above surges down the slope, and I ride with it, out of the chute and into the open snowfield below.

So this is it, I think to myself for the sixth time that week, the reason for all that hellish climbing, the justification for calluses the size of silver dollars, a basement full of rotting mittens, and a life almost devoid of culture in a town long past its hay-day. This is the reason why someone quite sane, someone like my friend Greg, would choose to spend all summer sticking trees into some godforsaken clear-cut somewhere north of nowhere, so the rent is paid and the bags of trail mix are in the cupboard when the snow flies.

The sun makes a ghostly appearance through the thick cloud above, the extra light drawing out the eerie burnt tree trunks poking out of the snow all around us as we tear down the slope. I have to admit, it makes sense.

