

Lessons of life, conquering the mountains.

By Mike Durand

I've been a downhill skier most of my life. The first pair of skis I owned were a pair of wooden skis with leather straps that I received from my parents for a Christmas present when I was about ten years old. I especially loved to ski in the early spring mornings on crusted snow frozen from yesterday's thaw. I could zing down the hills like a bat out of hell. Being outside in the early morning sun and clear blue sky brings back many fond memories. Trees glittered like diamonds from the heavy white frost that they were dressed in. While some kids sat in the house, I'd be outside; my nostrils frosted from the early morning subzero temperatures of northwest Wisconsin where I grew up. When I was in high school, I bought a used pair of skis with cable bindings from a neighbor for ten dollars. My boots were now secured to the skis. Lots of folks broke legs and ankles in these devices as they were practically non-release bindings. Fortunately, I didn't. Years later, while stationed overseas in the Marines, I'd take my skiing to a new height. I was selected to attend Marine Embassy Guard Training School in Washington, D.C. in 1968. Numerous interviews were scheduled in this program whereby they'd select or de-select the Marine candidates. Only about sixty percent actually made it through the rigorous training. Those who passed were assigned to various American Embassies around the world. This assignment also required a Top Secret clearance. During one of my interviews a whole table of high ranking Marines, an FBI agent and State Department Security officials sat and grilled me on both sides. It was more like an interrogation and served as an anxiety producing experience for the young Marines. I didn't help matters much either, when I was asked by the Marine First Sergeant where I'd like to be assigned for embassy duty.

"I'd like to be assigned to Switzerland, Sir," I replied. "Why Switzerland?", the barrel chested and square chinned Marine First Sergeant barked as he looked at me with piercing dark eyes.

"Well, Sir, I've seen a lot of pictures of Switzerland and it's a very beautiful country and besides, I like to ski!", I answered.

"Sergeant Durand,you're not going on Embassy duty to go skiing," he sneered!

I squirmed in the hardwood chair, embarrassed and red faced. *I blew it, I am out of here, I am going to get cut*, I thought. Later, everyone else was assigned or cut except me. I was the last one in the whole class of over a hundred to not know my verdict. One day soon thereafter, I was called down to report to the Marine commanding officer. *Oh, shit, I thought, this is it! I am done!* I walked into the commanding officer's quarters and announced, "Sir, Sergeant Durand, reporting as ordered, Sir!" I saluted while standing at stiff military attention with eyes focused straight forward and fixed on the wall behind him.

"At ease," he ordered! "Sergeant Durand." Then there was a very long pause. I gulped, as my mouth went dry, and my heart was beating like a huge base drum. My chest was about to explode, when he broke the long silence with "you're being assigned to Vienna, Austria for two years".

"Vienna, where the hell is that?" I thought, as my mind raced. It sounded like Venice, did he mean Venice?

"Yes, Sir! Thank-you Sir!" I replied as I snapped to attention, did an about face in true military fashion, never once lying, eyes on him, and nervously left. Whew! The sweat was pouring from my brow from the unbearable East Coast August heat and humidity.

"Where the hell is Vienna?" I thought, as I ran to the huge world map mounted on the wall at Henderson Hall. A few Marines were standing close by as I inquired, "where the hell is Vienna?" And I anxiously searched the map.

"Right here!", someone replied as I skimmed my fingers to the spot on the huge world map. "Holy smokes! That's right next to Switzerland! PERFECT!"

I exclaimed, as I jumped up and down in glee. "Boy, you sure lucked out, Durand", one of my fellow Marines chimed in. Some of them were assigned places like, Saigon, or on the island of Guam, or Cairo. I had no interest in those places. I'd already been to Vietnam, and I didn't care to go back.

A few weeks later, I was off to Vienna, Austria after a temporary duty assignment to provide security for the 41st NATO conference at Reykjavik, Iceland guarding Secretary of State Dean Rusk and numerous large containers of highly classified documents.

I arrived in Vienna, Austria ten days later. It took me a while to get oriented and trained in. We lived in a huge villa in the nineteenth district and close to Vienna's vineyards and Grinsing, a wine district. I was in seventh heaven, as we had our own staff of maids, including a cook, gardener and a cleaning woman who attended to us thirteen Marines on our spit and polish duty. In November, some of us piled into cars and drove off westward to ski the Aus-



Up, up and away to the top of Kitzsteinhorn above the village of Kaprun, Austria. Photo shot during the summer. (Notice green valley and lake Zell am Zee below). You can go down and go for a swim!

trian Alps. We motored through Salzburg and wound our way through magnificent scenery to Kaprun. "This is just what I always dreamed about", I thought. An Austrian friend of the Marines, Robar, would be our guide. He was ranked as a "professional skier", he claimed. It was a foggy morning as we reached the summit a little after 8 a.m. and scurried off the last of three cable cars to take us up about 10,000 feet. The fog was so thick we couldn't see the valley, which was far, far below. We'd have to follow blue circles mounted on poles by the Austrian ski patrol to mark a safe route of decent. Robar took off down the mountain like he was shot out of a cannon, hollering, "Just follow the blue sign symbols". He disappeared almost instantly into a wall of thick fog. I wasn't too far along before I took my first spill on recently purchased and up to date Austrian skis, complete with release bindings, heavy boots and poles. I knew I was in dangerous territory when my stocking cap came off and kept rolling down the mountain



Mike catching a few sun rays during a noon rest period on the glacier, on Kitzsteinhorn.

as I gazed around and dug myself out of a heap. We were skiing high up on a glacier, reportedly with huge crevices nearby that have been known to devour people whole, never to be found again, if you strayed off the marked trail.

Thus, began my saga of two years of conquering the gigantic and steep Alps, unlike the molehills of Wisconsin. I'd go skiing every chance I'd get and motor

around in my one hundred and fifty dollar Volkswagen beetle. It made me especially mad on Wednesday afternoons when all the schools closed and took the afternoon off on a ski outing with their students. The little squirts, the age of 4th or 5th graders would bounce down the mountains, zig-zagging on and around the moguls in a squiggly line behind their coaches while I laid close by in a heap, pulling myself up from yet another wipe out. Scheisse, I muttered to myself, (a newly learned German cuss word).

How the hell do they do it? I wondered. Why can't I ski like them? I read *Ski Magazine* and see all the latest techniques and instructions. What the hell am I doing wrong? I muttered to myself.

Two years ago, I bought another new pair of skis, Atomics, new sculptured ones that replaced my old J Kelly pair that I bought just before Marilyn and I were married back in 1972. I must confess that I didn't ski a whole lot while we raised our four kids, as things like changing dirty diapers and working long hours seemed to take precedence. The kids are all gone now ...we're empty nesters, and I figure it's time to do the things I want to do now. I've hit the slopes big time again. But I did something else. I hired a coach to take a look at my technique and see what I might improve on. I've got a good one, Roger Wangen, a professional ski instructor who I've known for many years and occasionally play racket ball with. We've been good friends for years, and I trust him. We had our first session on the slopes on a nice sunny afternoon last winter.

"Okay, Roger," I said, "I just want you to take a look at my technique and see what I might need to improve on." I had also purchased a ski video that was entitled, *New Technology, New Technique*".

I made my first run down the hill while Roger observed from above. I



Marine Guards, American Embassy, Vienna, Nov. 1969. Sgt. Durand, (Mike) on left back row



On top of the world, (glacier) on mount Kitzsteinhorn, where you can ski all year long.

thought it was a good run, and I felt confident that I'd get a good remark from him. Just a few pointers, and I'd be able to tackle the most difficult black diamond runs out west, which I had explained to him was my ultimate goal. As I returned to the top of the ski hill, I got off the chairlift and skied down next to Roger like an old pro, and smiled.

"Well Roger," I asked "What do you think of my technique, and what might I

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*The best way to improve in anything in life is
to hire a good coach.*

improve on?"

"Well," he said, "It doesn't look like you trust your skis."

"Now, what the hell did he mean by that?"

I thought I trusted them and I told him so in a stern manner, "I've skied some of the tallest mountains in the world, the Austrian and Swiss Alps."

"No you don't," Roger said.

Why did I ever hire him to tell me something I didn't want to hear? No one wants to hear that! I felt deflated. Maybe I should fire him, I thought, but, then again, no.

"Okay," I said, and then the lessons began.

"Follow me," Roger said, much like I suppose the Austrian ski coach barked to his students in German almost forty



Roger Wangen

years ago. "Do exactly what I do." We started with some of the very basics. We worked and worked over quite a few hours during the next few weeks; first one technique, then another. He'd demonstrate and I'd follow. Soon, I realized that just about everything I learned before is now wrong.

New technology brings about

new techniques. No more planting the pole and hopping around the corners in a slip slide skidding fashion like before. Now, you shift your weight and let the skis do the work for you. At the office the next day, I informed my co-workers just as I had my wife and friends that I

was taking skiing lessons for the first time in my life, and that I had to unlearn so many bad habits and poor techniques. As time went by and I reflected and thought about my experience, I decided that it's similar to a lot of situations I witness every day. People, (including myself), trying to get through life with a lot of acquired bad habits and techniques and not knowing the difference it would make in their life if they'd just hire a coach. Not just a ski coach, but a physical fitness coach, or a financial fitness coach.

I know, because I've struggled with the mountains in my life, not knowing there was often a better way to conquer them. If I'd just hired a ski coach long ago instead of fighting the forces of gravity and slip sliding along through life, I'd have had a lot more enjoyable ride instead of picking myself up off the side of the mountain so many times.