

A Call From Above

by Dale Christie

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I was standing on the summit of Camel's Hump, completely in awe of what laid before me. I had reached my destination, and much to my disbelief, I found myself completely alone on top of the iconic mountain. I had hiked the inspiring mountain countless times before, but never had I encountered the summit completely unoccupied and so welcoming. I found myself in a moment that rarely is duplicated and I was completely happy.

But that is not how the story began, nor is it how it ended. I spent most of the work week looking forward to the Friday hike. Originally it was planned for Monday, but because of less than ideal weather, coupled with some work tasks that really needed to be done, the much desired day off was then tentatively planned for Friday. I prefer to make the best of my allotted vacation time and I wanted to wait until a good forecast was in my favor. As the days approached Friday, the weather outlook remained favorable, if not really good, and my work load seemed to dissipate like a good New England snow storm. So the hike was a go and my excitement grew stronger.

My preparation Thursday night involved a mental list of all the items I would need to pack, along with some map surveying. I had decided which side I would approach from, but the exact trail route was still up in the frosty air. After some reading in my worn and tattered Long Trail Guide book, I came up with two potential routes. The route I would choose would be decided in the morning, possibly even as I stood at the trailhead. I figured I would wait until I saw the weather, the time I embarked, and how I felt.

My excitement must have been more prominent than I was conscious of because I didn't seem to sleep that well that night. I generally have no problem with that unless I am excited about the next day, or if I'm suffering from too much Mexican food. But I wasn't concerned about my reduced sleep. I wasn't running a marathon that day and I could afford less than 100% of my usual reserves. Morning came quick enough and as expected, I sprang out of bed ready to go. Sprang may be not be the most appropriate word for I'm not a great morning person, but for me, I felt as if I sprang.

My drive to the mountain was uneventful. It was clear that it was a workday for the traffic was pretty light. My route to the trailhead consisted of 4 state highways and additional town roads. With over an hour behind me, I was now entering the town of my destination: Huntington. Shortly after reaching the town limits, I caught a good glimpse of what I had been waiting for. The portion of the mountain that was visible to me was stark white and hovering over the mostly brown hills in the foreground. I dare say my heart rate picked up at that point. I recall myself even saying aloud, "Oh Yeh!" There is something about the sight of snow capped mountains. Because of the striking contrast they often create in the landscape, I consider some winter scenes to be as beautiful as peak foliage in Autumn. I often find myself scanning the mountains as I drive around Vermont. I am always trying to identify the mountains I see, wondering if there are good views on their summits, and recalling hikes I've done on quite a number of the peaks I pass by. I can confidently say that a love of hiking is in my blood. Soon after that bit of eye candy, I turned onto Camel's Hump Road and began my ascent to the trailhead.



Having been on that road once before, I didn't hesitate when I reached two forks in the road. My gut guided me without error to the parking lot. The fact that there were four other cars there did not surprise me. If it was summer, the lot may have been full, but today, four cars was an expected amount to me. As I stepped out of the car and surveyed the conditions, I knew I had to get to the summit as quick as I could. The weather was just perfect. There was not a cloud in the sky, the air temperature was good, and hardly a breeze to be felt. One of my two routes I was considering was about a mile longer and one I was not familiar with. The notion of exploring a new trail was appealing, but at the moment, I was focused upon reaching the snow capped trees with the valleys behind me. So it was with that thought that my route became the Burrows Trail.

As quickly as I left the Sign-In box, I was greeted with a view of the Hump up the trail from me. I had forgotten how this trail offered great views of the summit for the first portion of the trail. This was an advantage of doing this hike during the winter for you could not see much of the summit through the foliage of summer. The trail was well packed down. This was a benefit of my delayed hike because it gave time for many others to hike before me and make my trek a bit easier. There had been a good amount of snowfall during the past couple weeks, but the log book showed that there was a least a dozen people that preceded me in the past week. The trail was so well packed, it resembled a bobsled course. I often imagined how fun it would be sledding down the trail afterwards. "Perhaps another day," I told myself.

It had not taken very long before I met up with another hiker. It was an elderly woman hiking with two black labradors. One of them came running back down the trail to greet me as the other stayed by their leader. As soon as the dog greeted me, we made friends and we continued on. It may have been my imagination, but the dog's tail was wagging just as fast as my heart was pumping, and that was pretty fast. I think those two pups were enjoying themselves as much as I was.

Shortly after I decided I had better shed a layer of clothing for I was working up quite the sweat. I had not allotted myself much of a break yet as my pace was brisk with energy. Not only did I shed an undershirt, I removed my hat and gloves. The temperature felt like it was close to 30 degrees and if I kept moving as I was, I would be very comfortable and maybe still too warm. Keeping the body regulated in winter is always a challenge. But except for the days that are close to the zero mark, my pace usually keeps my body and extremities comfortable while in the shelter of the woods.

The isolation in the woods always seems to heighten my senses. Perhaps it is a survival instinct coming to the surface. As I began to breathe heavier, I could smell the woods around me. I noticed fresh cut blowdowns as I passed them. I listened to the sound of the snow under my feet as I crunched along its surface. The woods were quiet otherwise. I heard no birds and the wind was only blowing gently enough to occasionally hear branches rustling against each other. The air seemed to be incredibly clear as I breathed it deeply into my lungs.

Further up the trail I met two other groups of hikers descending. I was impressed with how early they must have begun their hike. I didn't get the earliest of starts, but I wasn't late either. They were very cheerful as we exchanged greetings. I found myself using the word "great" with them at least twice. I seemed to be a bit excited and I didn't care if it showed. How could I not be? The weather was perfect, I had the day off, I was on my favorite mountain, and soon I would be "on top of the world." OK, I knew I wasn't hiking Everest, but to me, it was like the top of the world.

I met at least one other group descending along with one solo hiker that passed me while we were both was ascending. It is not often I am passed and this young man was clearly very fit for the task at hand. It was difficult judging how deep the snow was that I was walking on, but the amount of snow in the trees was quickly growing. For a while I was able to follow the blue blazes that marked the trail, but suddenly I realized they were completely covered by the heavy snow on the trees. Or maybe they were under the snowpack for all I could tell. I also found myself ducking under branches more often as the trees seemed to get shorter and closer together. My pace had slowed some as I meandered through them.

My body seemed to be handling the effort alright, but soon it would need more fuel to keep up the pace. At that time my legs were burning some, but I didn't want to let up my pace. The snow appeared to be getting deeper still as the trees held a miraculous amount of snow in their branches. As I pressed on, it seemed as if I should be reaching the clearing soon. I was right. The view of the sky seemed to widen as I emerged from the deep woods and into the clearing.

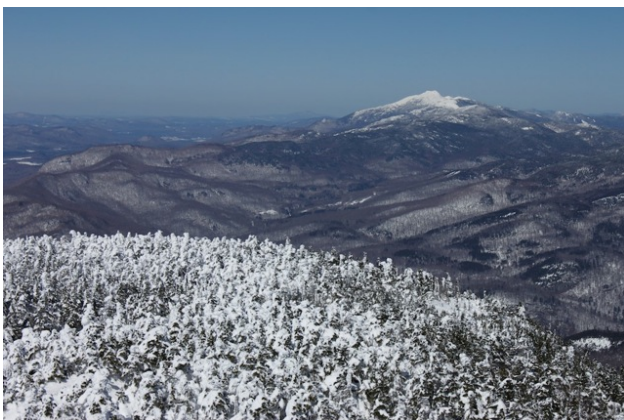


The clearing I reached was a junction of three trails and has a long history of being an area of refuge. That was my time for a much needed snack, liquid and change of clothes. I easily found a pile of snow to collapse onto and effortlessly removed my backpack. As I changed my undershirts from cold sweat-filled ones to dry replacements, I took comfort in knowing I packed well for the journey. Having a nice dry shirt to change into can be as comforting as a good

lunch to dig into. I was immensely relaxed on that pile of snow as I ate my lunch and drank heavily from my water bottle. As much as I wanted to spend a lot of time on the summit, I knew from experience that it may not be the most hospitable climate for an extended stay. And I was hungry! That bagel I had sure was amazingly delicious. There is something to be said about food on top of a mountain. It always tastes better. I know the obvious reason is because you are often very hungry and in need of replenishment, but I'd like to believe the higher altitude somehow enhances the flavor of food. It seems as if the low atmospheric pressure can turn an ordinary bagel with cream cheese into a juicy filet mignon.

After taking numerous photos of the area and the view of where I soon would be climbing, I packed up all my gear and prepared for the final push to the top. The last segment was only three tenths of a mile and soon I would be on top of the "Lion's" head. Immediately I could tell that I was leaving the forest behind. The snow was so immense. The snow had formations like that of ice crystals in a household freezer. It is said that a Vermonter can identify ten or more kinds of snow. Well on top of that mountain, there are sights that are rarely seen down below the tree line. Leaving the protection of the trees behind, the wind began to show its force. Considering how much wind there was, there was very little blowing snow. It was as if it was all cemented in place except for what slid down the slope behind my steps. The top was near, and I couldn't wait.

Much faster than expected, I found myself leveling off. "Could this be the top?" I asked myself. I could not see anything higher than where I was looking so I believed it was true. But where was all the wind-swept rock and ledge? It was nowhere to be seen and I only could see white snow. It was so very surreal. The only other time I had hiked the mountain in the winter, it was closer to spring and there was much less snow. The logical, calculating side of my brain was quickly being subdued by my excitement now. I was standing on the summit of Camel's Hump, completely in awe of what laid before me. I had reached my destination, and much to my disbelief, I found myself completely alone on top of the iconic mountain. I had hiked the inspiring mountain countless times before, but never had I encountered the summit completely unoccupied and so welcoming. I found myself in a moment that rarely is duplicated and I was completely happy.



I quickly roamed around the summit soaking in the all the views. It was a top notch day for visibility. I make that conclusion based upon how far I could see. I could easily see all of Lake Champlain, the presidential range in New Hampshire and the Adirondacks of New York. Finding a nice wind-sheltered location was my next objective. As I had the last time I was on the summit, I found my way to the south side by a steep wall. It was there I ate the remainder of my lunch, with my gloves on I must say. Even where I was, the wind was making its presence well known and keeping my body heat was certainly a challenge.

Having enjoyed more food, I had to get back to soaking in the views. Every direction was amazing and I just couldn't get enough. Being the obsessed photographer that I am, I repeated a pattern of taking my gloves off, taking photos until my hands were numb, huddling up until I felt warmer, and then repeating the cycle elsewhere on the summit. Even though I had this tremendous view that couldn't be captured fairly by photos, I was already looking forward to seeing what I had taken. Soon after taking another batch of "no pain no gain" photos, I was met with a couple of humans! "Oh, that's right," I thought to myself, "this mountain isn't just for my enjoyment". So on that note, I figured it was time to share it and was thankful for my time alone on top of the Hump.

As I descended back to the clearing, I began to warm up and feel the sense of accomplishment that I earned. As I worked hard on the summit to keep my hands warm, I was reminded how dangerous a mountain could be in the winter. Thankfully I was prepared, careful, and respectful of the dangers that persisted. It was because of these things that I was able to enjoy the great hike and all the emotions that came with it. I really appreciated my hike alone for it was a good escape from work and life. Hiking always gives you time to think, or if you prefer to, not think and just be. Sure I wished friends and family could be there to enjoy it with me, but there will be other times and I was very glad I had the opportunity.

Completely dissimilar to the hike up, the passage down was quick and effortless. Gravity was now on my side! My snowshoes gave me great traction and the snow gave my knees just enough cushion to please them. At times I felt like a boxer winding my way through the thick snow filled trees. I dodged, ducked, and bobbed my head side to side trying to avoid the big heavy branches. If I'd dumped any of those branches on me, I sure would have given myself a good whitewash!

Soon the portion of the trail with the "toboggan" course reappeared. I recognized many dips and turns and was quite aware that I was then approaching the trailhead again. On the side of the trail was a wooden bench that I noticed on the way up. This time I decided to take a seat and enjoy the view. With the lack of foliage in the trees, you could see the Green Mountains in front of me. Mt Ira Allen was directly ahead, to the left was the Wind Gap and further left was Camel's Hump. I studied the topography and made educated guesses as to where the Food City trail might be. The approach from the south sure looked steep from where I was sitting. "Another day," I thought. Having one last good view of the mountains, I returned to my feet.

Just then a very unlikely song entered my head. It was the song called "Lose Yourself" by the Rap star, Eminem. The lyrics that came rushing out were "Snap back to reality, oh there goes gravity..." Perhaps for him he was referring to coming down off some great state of mind, and in a way, it was for me too. My adventure up the Hump was like a natural drug that eased my mind, fueled my memories, and of course, tired my legs. It was time to return to the muddy

roads that bullied my winter tires, frost heaves that would make my suspension groan in pain, and traffic that would return me to the laws and discipline of society.

That did not mark the end of my wonderful day. The back roads invited me and I found myself exploring some less traveled parts of the state. On one stretch of road, I followed a school bus dropping off kids along the way. As I watched the kids exit the bus, I recalled my own memories of riding the bus and the joys of getting dropped off on Friday afternoons. Then I thought about how great it is to be able to occasionally "skip school" now that I'm an adult. I listened to many great songs while I drove, recounted all the sights, sounds, and smells of the hike, and savored the moments of solitude on top. I had heeded the call from above, and Camel's Hump continues to hold a special part in my heart.

