

A photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. The scene is dominated by white snow and ice, with a path leading through the snow towards the background. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall tone is cold and serene.

# The Ahern Mile

The Winter Crossing of Glacier National Park

*Story and Photography by Richard Gene Layne*

# The Ahern Mile

*Trip Six*

May 5th through May 10th, 2006

*The Winter Crossing of Glacier National Park*

RICHARD GENE LAYNE



***May 5th, Trip 6, Day 1.*** In the distance I could see Iceberg Peak and Ahern Pass. Though no longer covered in the large quantities of snow, it still had all the flavor of putting a lump in my throat. More than that, when the storm of May 7th was finished it would take the traverse and summit to new levels of terror.

FOR JIM WHITLOCK, MY SCOUT MASTER  
WHO REALLY GOT ME GOING HARD, BUD  
RICHARD, MY TEACHER, MENTOR AND  
CARETAKER, BRIONNE AND THE REST OF  
THE CREW OF BACKCOUNTRY RANGERS IN  
OUR GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

## FOREWARD

April 27th, 2006

From the summary of Trip 5:

“That’s that black and white part of you showing up again Richard.” My wife, Carleen said.

She was observing my self-condemning statement of being such a loser. It had been less than forty-eight hours since the end of my last trip into Glacier National Park.

My goal of crossing it had not been accomplished. I had made five trips into the Park from the end of January to April 25th, 2006. All of them had been either scouting trips for the crossover or actual attempts. I had spent 30 days out of a ninety-day period making the trips. All were designed to get to know the area and eventually make the crossing, safely. While I surely got to know a winterized Glacier National Park, I failed in my objective. Therefore I could only be a total loser.

“Do you have any idea what you have accomplished?” She continued.

“Yeah, I failed to make the crossing.” I dripped. “That makes me a loser.”

“So all those trips mean nothing?” She argued.

“Pretty much,” I replied.

“Do you know anyone else who could do the trips the way you did?”

Now she had me cornered. Yes I know some good people for the backcountry travel. But to go in solo in those conditions, for that amount of time, and with all that weight on one’s back, I surely didn’t.

“No I guess I don’t.” I gave way to her persistence.

Continuing from my summary of Trip 5:

**The lack of familiarity of the route prevented my crossing the Park during the winter of 2006. Ahern Pass is passable at this time, the last week of April. This person, coming from the west just can’t do it. With a load on my back of over 70 pounds, going down 2000 feet at the angle I was faced with would be a task of foolishness. If only I had taken a shot at it anyway. That apparently was not to be this season.**

*But there was this one thing I noticed while standing up there on Ahern’s summit . . .*

*April 24th, Trip 5, Day 5.* I am at  
the end of the line on Ahern Pass  
and can go no further. I have  
failed to make the crossing . . .



## CONTENTS

FOREWARD	5
THE AHERN MILE	9
TRIP 5: THE PRELUDE TO A CROSSING	12
MAY 5TH, DAY 1	19
MAY 6TH, DAY 2	22
MAY 8TH, DAY 4	31
MAY 9TH, DAY 5	55
MAY 10TH, DAY 6	62



**May 8th, Trip 6, Day 4.** The storm was passing in a hurry. From my camp the traverse and Ahern Pass, 2100 feet above me, looked impossible. I thought I would go get a close-up look though . . . before heading back down Belly River and home.

# THE AHERN MILE

## TRIP SIX

### MAY 5TH TO 10TH , 2006

It was happening again. Only this time I had watched with my own eyes as I walked, then climbed right smack into the middle of hell. “What are you doing?” I asked aloud with the horrid fear spreading from my chest and into my throat.

The last time I had felt this panic was in a tent two and one half months before, in February. On my seventh and final night out in the Belly River area of Glacier National Park the temperature had unexpectedly dropped to approximately -36°f. There had been no forecast before I left on the trip of what was coming. My one warning was when my barometer went screeching for the moon 48 hours before the frigid air arrived so devastatingly. I had lain in my damp sleeping bag convinced I wasn't going to

***May 8th, Trip 6, Day 4.* found me on a climb into hell. What amazed me most about the early part of the climb was me actually attempting it at all, since it had become my intent not to. It was also at this point of the climb that I found I was unable to turn around and go back down. Helen Lake is directly below me and Elizabeth is in the distance.**

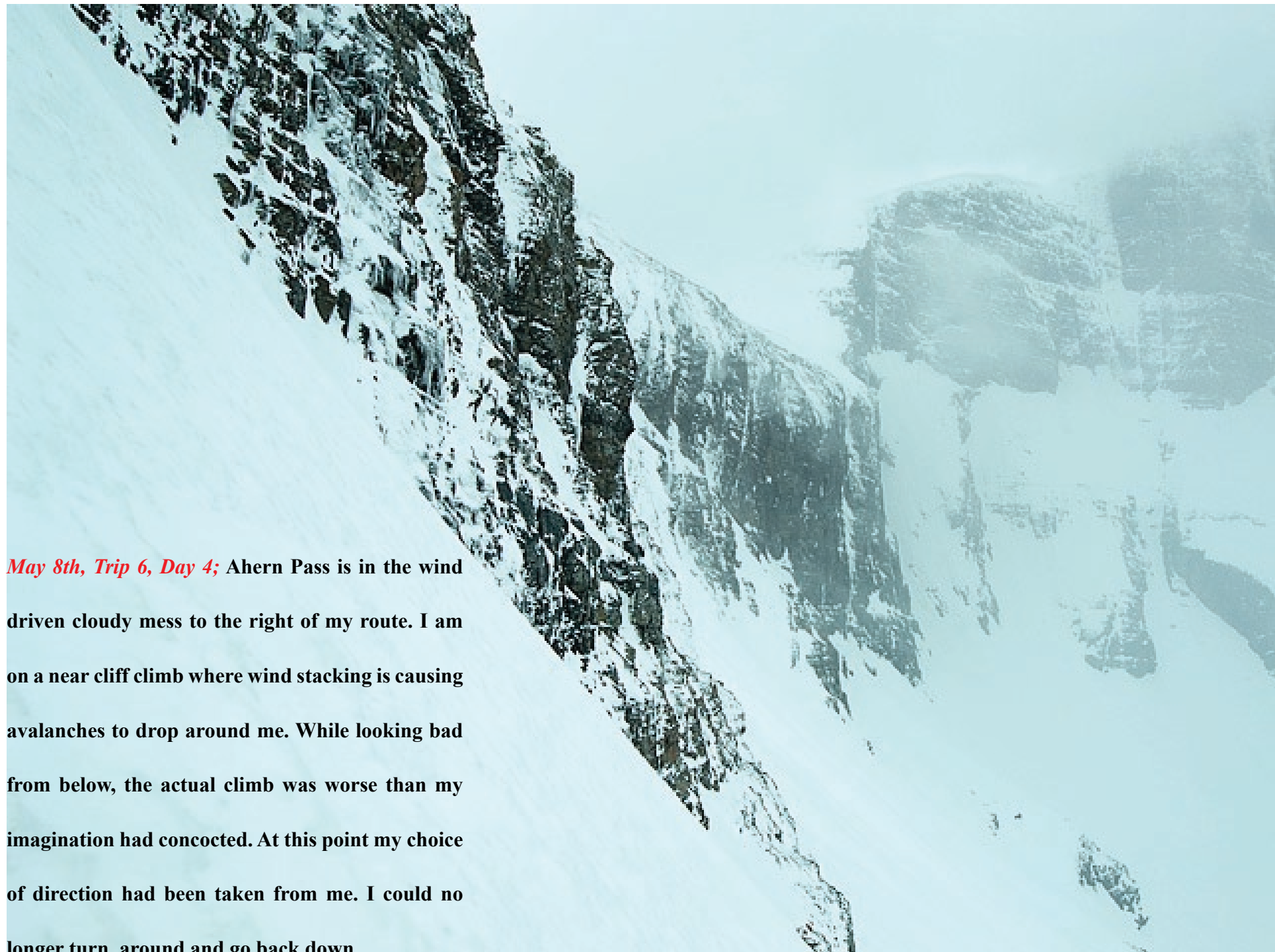


be alive come dawn. Yet a way was found and I did survive, only to be caught again, and so soon after the other near disaster.

This time seemed a lot different with the same possible results. I had seen the slope that was between Ahern Pass and me from several miles off and then repeatedly as I closed the distance to Helen Lake and the base of the Pass. Though I was worried at what I had seen, I headed for the traverse anyway. Now I was on a slope carrying an eighty-pound pack and no way I could go back, even if my ego had said it was ok. But to go ahead was no better. What I was facing was a climb of just short

of being a cliff. Actually in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness we do call that sort of thing a cliff. But in the Park it's just a steep slope. So I was now in a self-induced pickle in which there was a mounting chance that I was on my way to getting killed. Nevertheless, going forward was the direction, just as it had been for the last 100 plus days in this winterized Park. That being the case I decided to pull my Nikon D2X out and get some more shots. If today was to be the day then any pictures I took were going to be real valuable. Too bad I wouldn't be around to enjoy the fruits of my efforts.

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*May 8th, Trip 6, Day 4;* Ahern Pass is in the wind driven cloudy mess to the right of my route. I am on a near cliff climb where wind stacking is causing avalanches to drop around me. While looking bad from below, the actual climb was worse than my imagination had concocted. At this point my choice of direction had been taken from me. I could no longer turn around and go back down.