

Climber approaches mountain goal one step at a time

Rappel record attempt on horizon for summer

By DAN O'BOYLE
For the Rocket

In his weekly role, Dirk Siron works to live the motto: "One shot, one kill," as a TOW missile engineer in the Close Combat Weapon System Project Office.

But as next summer approaches, he also is tightly focused on a personal motto: "One mountain, one goal."

Specifically, Mount Thor in Canada's Auyutmaq National Park will be the site where Siron and his other seven team members attempt to set a world rappel record. The Canadian National Park Service has to grant permission to the team for the attempt first.

Siron was part of a seven-member team that tried to set the record in July 2004.

"I wasn't recruited, but I happened to be in the right place at the right time," he said. "I was thankful that I was thought worthy of being on the trip. Plus, I had the money and the built-up leave time."

The expedition team had no support crew and no sponsor and did everything necessary at a price tag of \$3,500 each.

"In that summer of 2004, we had possibly the longest rope in the world," Siron said. "That rope was specially made in Canada by Esprit Ropes Inc., measuring 9 mm (0.35 inches) in diameter, 5,784 feet in length and made of static kernmantle nylon."

That rope, in fact, proved to be but one of the many challenges that the team faced, as the rope had to be transported in 80- to 90-pound back packs from the park entrance at Overlord to the expedition base camp at Mount Thor's base.

"All told, we had to hike 75 miles to get the rope, a backpack filled with camping gear, fuel and rigging supplies, and a backpack filled with food for a month to the base," Siron said. "We had to cover the 15-mile route five times to get each of the rope, gear and food-filled backpacks to the base. It was mind-numbing."

In poignant testimony to the invincible Mount Thor when the team abandoned the rappel attempt and had just finished de-rigging the rope, the weather cleared.

From their base camp, the team members had estimated that it would take five days to get to Thor's summit, rig and drop



Photo by Dirk Siron

FATE TEMPTERS—Redstone's Dirk Siron was part of a seven-member team that attempted to set a rappelling world record in 2004, and will try again this year.

the rope. In reality, it took 12 days, with the mountain's 45-degree, car-sized boulder-filled scree slope proving to be more than expected. What's more, on the first day of the summit assault, an avalanche was encountered.

"In the park, there is nothing but rocks," Siron said. "There are no trees and the wind cuts right through. Once we decided to abandon the attempt, all that we could think about was getting off of the mountain alive."

The rocky terrain was covered with lichen, which is OK under dry conditions, but slippery and dangerous when wet.

"I started training in February 2004 by wearing a backpack wherever I went, including to work, gradually increasing the weight until the pack weighed 100 pounds. I also climbed 1,500 feet of rope per week," Siron said. "I got some pretty funny looks, when I would walk in from the parking lot with that backpack, as well as wearing it to meetings and on test ranges. But I needed to take advantage of every opportunity to train. It may have been more psychological than anything, but I knew that this was going to be one of

the hardest things that I ever did in my life.

"I wore that backpack everywhere, except to the bathroom. I have my limits. I also took five-mile hikes during the week and 14- to 20-mile hikes on weekends."

Siron and the team's 2006 goal is to beat the current world rappel record of 3,627 feet, set by four British Royal Marines who rappelled down the Cleveland, England's Boulby Potash Mine in 1993.

"I have been kind of miffed," Siron said. "These big, tough Royal Marines did this in the ventilation shaft of a Potash mine, Dark Matter Research Facility in the UK and I was thinking to myself that they probably took an elevator back to the top. Since returning from Mount Thor I rappelled off of El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park. Now, there's only one thing left to do."

El Capitan is a 2,650-foot rap-

pel. Siron, 47, has also rappelled off the new River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia - 876 feet - and the Black Canyon in Gunnison, Colo. - a 1,570-foot rappel.

Compellingly enough, Mount

Thor — which bears the same name as the Norse God of Thunder, War and Strength — has been the answer to Siron's question.

"Although it was in the summer of 2004, we were well above the Arctic Circle, with daytime highs only in the 40s," Siron said. "It's hard to adjust and keep on schedule, because the sun never sets and the mosquitoes attack viciously and relentlessly."

Siron said that for the first time in 15 years, he wore a wristwatch — solar-powered, on military time and synchronized by satellite signal. He would also pull a headband down over his eyes during sleep hours, "because if you wake up in the middle of the night, the sun is still shining."

During that expedition, the team had a satellite phone, but the written instructions were lost on the way to the park and the team could not get it to work. The team was incommunicado for 31 days.

"Planning for the food, gear and supplies on a month-long effort like this is crucial," Siron said. "We also knew that we would encounter quick sand,

have to make numerous river crossings and might have polar bear encounters."

On the way up to Thor's summit, a camp dubbed "Meat-grinder" was established, as well as one aptly named "The Donner camp" since they were snowed in and running out of food during the three days they camped there.

When the team did finally summit, they had been gone from base camp for nine days. Then as quickly as the weather cleared, it worsened.

"Now we're snowed in on the summit," Siron said. "When we got back to our base camp, we were completely exhausted. Altogether, I lost about 25 pounds on what I call the Mount Thor diet."

"Surprisingly, I have a healthy fear of heights. Heights are scary and intimidating. But that is a fear that I felt I could overcome. That healthy fear keeps me sharp. The events of Sept. 11 had a lot to do with my desire to do what some might consider extreme. Sept. 11 taught me that life is short and that we need to grab every opportunity to enjoy life to its fullest. Plus, I wanted to show my kids that even an old man like myself should never stop trying to better himself and challenge himself."

Siron said that like any aircraft landing that you walk away from is a good one, any caving or rappelling activity that is completed safely is a good one. His personalized license plate reads "OFFROPE," which is a vertical cavers' safety term, meaning that the rappel or climb has been completed successfully and that no one is "ONROPE."

A life member of the Huntsville-based National Speleological Society, Siron has been a caver for 10 years and is also a member of the Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit.

"When I first enter a cave, I am in an exploration mode," Siron said. "But as soon as it's time to turn around and head out, I'm in the 'self-rescue' mode. Preparation is the key."

Siron's fervent prayer is the Hail Mary.

"I lived through something that I knew I could die any second," he said. "One wrong step is all it takes. And I especially extend heartfelt appreciation to my supervisor, my co-workers, my team, and — most importantly — my wife, Cindy. The knowledge of their support and encouragement, throughout this experience, has made my endeavors possible."