

Jim Whittaker Oral History Interview –RFK #1, 4/25/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: Jim Whittaker

Interviewer: Roberta W. Greene

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Biographical Note

Whittaker, Jim; Friend, associate, Robert F. Kennedy, 1965-1968; expedition leader, National Geographic climb, Mt. Kennedy, Yukon, Canada, 1965; campaign worker, Robert F. Kennedy for President, 1968. Whittaker discusses the climb he led up Mount Kennedy which included Senator Robert F. Kennedy [RFK], the formation of their relationship due to this trip, and his thoughts on RFK's personality, among other issues.

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Jim Whittaker – RFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JIM WHITTAKER

April 25, 1969
Hickory Hill, McLean, Virginia

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: Okay, Mr. Whittaker, why don't you describe the circumstances under which you first met Robert Kennedy.

WHITTAKER: Well, I was asked by the *National Geographic* [Society] to lead a climb of Mt. Kennedy in the Yukon because of my climbing experience and because I had done Everest and *National Geographic* had been the major part of that climb. It had not been climbed before and had only recently been named Mt. Kennedy by the Canadian government; so at that time, it actually became quite a prize, the highest unclimbed peak in the Yukon, named after the late president. I was still pondering it when I received a call from *National Geographic* that Senator Kennedy would like to come along, and possibly Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] would come along, too. And so I said, "Yes. I'd like to lead the climb." I thought it would be the best time. In the Yukon it is. The weather is better and the climbing is better. McKinley's climbed then; most of the bigger mountains are done in May. The winter storms have stopped, and it's before the summer storms. And so I was in charge of getting all the things together, the equipment and everything. I got a telegram from the senator's office saying — I had requested his size; we needed to fit him out and everything. I remember the telegram came giving the details: height, 5'10"; I think weight was 150 pounds, 140 or

50 pounds; shoe size, 9. And they gave a description on — down at the bottom of the telegram his staff had put, “Wiry as hell,” at which I said, “Well, that’s good,” because I didn’t know the senator.

I really wasn’t that involved at all in following him, hadn’t really read any books on the Kennedys, on the legacy, except I knew about Jack [John F. Kennedy]. I had received a — I suppose the first time I met any Kennedy, I had received a Hubbard award for the climb of Mt. Everest from the president, President Kennedy, back at the White House. Of course, I was delighted at that. Bob wasn’t there then. But it was a big thing to me, and that made it even more important that I should lead this climb up Mt. Kennedy because I had met the president, received this award from him.

And so when I first met Bob, he was on the plane from the East, that landed at the Seattle-Tacoma Airport, and I was waiting there to meet him. He was going to spend the night before we went up the next morning into the Yukon. I got on the plane before anyone came off. And I remember, he was just awakening — this East and West travel is tough — he’d flown in on a non-stop. I think that it was probably that 6:30 flight out of here that gets in about 8:30 or 9 o’clock in Seattle. He had kind of unfolded because he’d been curled up on the seat. And he unfolded very slowly and got up very slowly and, carefully because he was still half asleep. He looked tired, and when he got up, I thought, Gosh, I wonder what kind of condition he’s in. And so I was concerned that he might be not in good condition for a climb, especially a difficult first ascent. I was concerned about that.

I shook hands with him. And he said hello. And I said, “Are you looking forward to the climb?” And he said, “Well, I think so.” I later said, “What have you done to get into condition?” And he said, “I’ve run up and down the stairs at home and practiced hollering ‘help’,” which I liked. So then...

GREENE: I think maybe when the airplanes come, it might help a little bit to...

WHITTAKER: Shout.

GREENE: ... no, but just to turn a little bit towards it.

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WHITTAKER: Speak louder. We chatted, and he got off the plane, and he seemed very interested in the climb. He spent the night at the Hyatt House, and I went home with my wife and the children; they were there at the airport as well. And then the next morning we left for the Yukon with all of our gear. We had another couple of climbers that had advanced our camp. They had gone into base camp and helped set up base camp... Well, there was myself and Bob and Dr. Washburn, Brad Washburn, from the Boston Museum of Science who had done geological studies and surveys up there and had worked back in 1935 in mapping that area, so he was familiar with the country although not a climber as such.

And so we went into the White Horse area. I remember there were problems, though, with weather. The Yukon is a storm maker of a sense. The storms built up in the Mount Kennedy region. It's a long flight into that section, so that it's a good hour. And we kept waiting for a plane to take us in, a ski-plane of some sort. And Bob began to grow impatient, as I did. You know, I mean, here we are stopped this far, and we've got to get on the mountain before we can begin to do anything. And then he went to work. I saw him make a couple of phone calls. And then he asked the pilot, "When can we go in?" And then, "If we can't go in, is there another plane that can go in?" I began to become more impressed with his executive ability. Finally, he did manage to get assistance. He had talked the Canadian government into loaning us one of their large helicopters, and they flew us into the base camp. And the weather was beautiful, justifying Bob's position and making the other pilot look foolish because the weather was good. They had just not taken the chance that the weather may be good. So we got into base camp. Another interesting thing is, on the flight up from Seattle to White Horse, that I sat next to Bob all of the time and I've never been.... I'm always interested in people and ask them questions. And I generally feel that I can find out about them, and, in a sense, I can probe into some of the attitudes and so forth. And I did learn about Bob, but nowhere near as much as he learned about me. He asked questions about everything, about the Mt. Everest climb, about how I felt on it, about essentially who I was and what I was and where I was going and what I was doing, and, you know, did I like this.... I mean, I've never been so cleverly interrogated and enthusiastically interrogated. He was interested; so he could draw one out. I thought this was incredible.

By the time we got to base camp, he knew so much about me and about mountain climbing and climbing stories, things that had

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happened in the climbing world and so forth. So he really became very knowledgeable on it, and he seemed to retain all of that, too. A couple of the climbers in the base camp was Dee Molenaar who was on the K 2 expedition in 1952 that made the attempt on K 2 and they lost one man. They didn't make the summit. But these stories all interested Bob and he had a real desire to know people and to know what made them function, really. He had a keen interest in people, which I thought was tremendous.

Well, we got into base camp and the weather was beautiful. We were sleeping that night in a large tent. The temperature was around zero. The weather was clear. Bob had never, of course, done this kind of thing before. We had packs and all the gear for him, Korean boots, and all the down clothing and so forth. But he was a skier and this was an advantage. We spent the night comfortably and then the next morning had to move from that camp to the next higher camp on the mountain.

We had landed at eight thousand, so we were moving to about eleven thousand. We had three thousand feet to do the next day. It was still winter. The snow was soft. We had snowshoes and ski poles, ice axes in the packs, and we were roped together. We roped up on the glacier at the camp just before moving up. You rope up to avoid the problem of falling into a crevasse. The rope is essential.

So we started out, and by then we'd become pretty well acquainted. Bob was an easy person to know because he was interesting, and because he was interested in other people. There was nothing hidden.

So I began to really like the guy and then.... I mean I've guided a lot before, and I've guided people up many mountains, up Mt. Rainier and so forth, and some you like and some you don't, but Bob right away I liked. And it wasn't because of what he was, that he was a senator. I mean, that wasn't it at all. It was just that it was Bob, someone that enjoyed what they were doing. So we started moving out.

It was funny because the guide sets a pace that is slower than.... Well, a profession pace is a pace that moves slow enough for the client, that he figures is a good enough pace to get everyone to the top of the mountain and to get back down again, you don't burn up all the clients energy, you've saved a little reserve for emergency and this sort of thing. And so we moved up, began to move out. I was in

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the lead of the rope, Bob was next, and Barry Prather who was a member of the Everest expedition, was third on our rope. And so we moved out, up the mountain, and I set the pace.

In not too many minutes, Bob was right behind me. I could hear his snowshoes behind me, and I stopped. He was up to within four or five feet of me, and I said, "Well, the rope should stay out Senator, because the thing is that it doesn't do any good if we're all bunched together. We'd all go in the same crevasse. The rope should be really stretched out." And he said, "Well, can you pick up the pace a little bit?" And I said, "Well, I hate to go too fast because of, I mean, what kind of condition you are in, maybe." And he said, "Well, let's pick it up a little bit." So I said, "Okay, fine." So I said, "You wait until the rope's out again."

So I started out, and we're moving out faster now at a fairly good pace. And pretty soon I hear more breathing behind the back of my neck, and here's Bob again and he says, you know, "Is there anything you can do to speed it up?" And I said, "Well, my God, I don't want to.... I mean we're going fast." And he said, "Well, we want to get up. I mean, don't we go up to there?" [Laughter] And I said, "It's true, but", I said, "you know, we don't want to get tired out." So he said, "Okay. Well, let's do it." And I thought then, "Well, we'll just do it until he gets tired, and then, we can slow down and have a normal pace into camp. It's not that far. I know we'll make it to that camp." We had an ice cave built up there.

And so I started to move out at a very brisk climbing pace, and I kept moving at that swift pace and moving and moving. By then I began to get more excited about it because I knew that he was then in excellent condition, and I was delighted. I thought, by God, we'll get this peak. That's when I first felt that we really might do it because he was in such good condition. And so we kept this pace up all the way into high camp and I said, "Man alive, if you can do that in the next couple of days, no problem at all. No problem."

And I remember at base camp, too, that Barry Prather had said that — Bob had said, “Well, what do you think of the climb.” And Prather said, “Well, let’s put it this way, Senator, I think there’s a pretty good chance of making it.” And Bob said, “I know we’ll make it,” he said. I just wondered what it was like.” And I thought, oh brother, he really doesn’t know what’s involved, because it’s hard to make a statement like that in the mountains. I mean, you could have a three

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week storm up there. You could have winds over a hundred miles an hour, and you don’t move, which happened incidentally, to another group, part of the mapping group later on after we left the mountain.

But so we reached the high camp, and as I say, I was delighted. We had an ice cave built there, and we put up a four-man tent to take care of the group and the crew and everything. Then, it started to snow. The snow was coming down. The weather looked like it was closing in, which was rather discouraging, so we had dinner inside the ice cave. They’d taken a spray can and painted on the inside of the wall, “Senate Chamber.” Bob got a kick out of it. We swapped stories and had a lot of fun.

And then we went to bed in the tent. I thought it might be more comfortable, there’d be a little more oxygen; but the wind was blowing and the tent was flapping and I couldn’t sleep. We went to bed about ten o’clock, and at one in the morning, I was still awake. I’m always inclined to go over the route in my mind before an actual climb. I didn’t know what was above, but I could imagine. I always seem to have to climb in my mind the mountain before I go up it. So I really couldn’t sleep. And it was about zero or a little below. We were tossing back and forth, and I remember grabbing my — I had a wolverine tuft on the rim of my parka hood, and I was using it as a pillow, and Bob was next to me, and I pulled that wolverine tuft to get it more comfortably under my head, and in reaching for it had mistaken Bob’s hair for the wolverine tuft and I yanked it. [Laughter] And Bob said, “What’s going on?” There came a kind of shout. And then I was really — “Oh, my God, I’m sorry.” But so I woke — I guess he had been sleeping.

The wind died down about four in the morning, and about five it began to get light. The sun was out, and there was a fifteen-mile-an-hour wind is all, and sunny. It was beautiful weather. And we had a quick breakfast and started up. We moved up in good shape. This time we were on crampons. The snow had firmed up so that we could use crampons. The route opened up beautifully. We worked up the ridge, came to the last really steep wall. When I got to that, I saw it would go. Up until then, I didn’t know that the mountain would really go by this route.

And so we came to this schrund, a separation between the snow and the rest of the mountain. And actually what it is, it’s the last crevasse on a mountain, and it’s called a bergschrund. Well, the schrund was lying at the bottom of the cliff, and the

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wall above it was steep. I could see that it would go. It was the steep ridge which dropped away on either side; one side only about five or six hundred feet, but the other side fell about three thousand feet. And the ridge itself was quite steep. So you'd have to go up this ridge with the foot sort of right along the spine, and it was a steep spine, and you'd — I mean, it was a little technical, but nothing that couldn't be done. I could see right away and I said, "Great, we're going to do it."

And Bob was still in good shape, still going strong. He actually didn't slow our party down at all. As a matter of fact, the professional climbers — well, they're not really professional, but the climbers in the group by then were beginning to suffer. We had a photographer along from *National Geographic* that had come to take pictures, and he was in the condition. He had begun to slow the party down. So that it wasn't Bob that slowed it down. I kept taking the fastest pace we could with the weakest member, and it was the photographer. And he kept saying, "No senator from New York is going to out-walk me," and he was a young kid who was supposed to be in good shape. Do you mind if I take off my...

GREENE: No, of course not.

WHITTAKER: And so we got to this wall, and then Bob said, "Where do we go from here?" Then I said, "We go up, right up this little thing here." And he said, "Do you take your ice ax?" And I said, "Well, you take your ice ax and you cut a few steps and get onto this ridge, and then we go up." And he said, "You take your ice ax and you do what to who?" He was still joking about it, but he said later that actually that he didn't know that we could go there, that it would go or was possible. And I said, "It'll be alright because I'll go up first; then I'll anchor, and you can come up; then we'll have to bring Barry up to where you are; and then I'll move up ahead." And I said, "Well, I think it will be better (thinking about it), because it's just a narrow spot to stand, I'll bring you up to where I am; you stay there; then I'll move on up ahead; then you bring Barry up to where you are and so forth."

And he said, "Okay." I mean, he didn't say okay, he just was looking at the wall. He really was concerned about it. Bob doesn't like vertical walls. I mean actually he doesn't like vertical heights that much. Most people don't. Even mountain climbers feel a certain pull from a wall that is steep. If you look down a thousand foot cliff, or if I look

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down a ten story building against the wall and begin to pick out hand holes and things, I can feel the pull of it. I mean, it's something that in a way you like — I mean you like the danger of it — but it's terrifying to people that haven't ever been on it or haven't done anything with it. However, I wouldn't climb with anyone that didn't have that fear to a certain extent.

But anyway, Bob had it, and he had it probably a lot. I mean, he just didn't like walls. We, since then, have scrambled up some rock cliffs in the Grand Canyon and so forth, and you could see he just doesn't like vertical rock. I think it makes him nervous. And you get.... Your hand holds begin to shake; then you peel off. So anyway I went up, kicking steps and cutting in the ice and

moved sixty feet up. Barry Prather belayed me from right next to Bob, so that if I fell, I wouldn't pull either one of them off, pull Bob off and in turn pull Barry off.

Then I anchored up there, cut a belay place in the ice and got set. And then I said, "Okay, Bob, come on up." And he said, "Here goes nothing." [Laughter] And I was sure that he was going to fall. It was a steep slippery wall. He started up. The inclination is to lean into the slope. I mean, everyone will want to hug the slope. When you do that, your feet are inclined to kick out. And when your feet kick out, you slip. And so he started up, and he came fast because he wanted to get it over with. He's really breathing hard, coming up fast; I'm waiting for him to fall. If he does I've got him on the rope. I know he won't go anywhere, but he's going to hang on that rope over a three thousand foot cliff, and it's going to be quite a thrill. And, by gosh, he didn't slip.

He came all the way up to where I was, to my ax that I had in the ice. So I anchored him and got him into position and so forth, and then I said, "You see how I brought you up. The main thing is that you just take the rope in for Prather because I don't think he'll peel off. And if he does, I'll have you anyway from up above." So I said, "You just stay here now, and I'll go up above, and I'm not going to fall off," because if I had fallen, he really couldn't have held me. So anyway, I continued on up the ridge, and I got up to the point where it leveled off on the nice flat where the summit starts to round off, really nice.

And so then I looked ahead and I saw me had it. I anchored him while he brought up Barry. Barry came up to where he was, and then both were there. And then I belayed, again, Bob and he started up the pitch again. I said, "You know, this is a fantastic spot." I said, "I'd like to get a picture of it." And then he said something about, "I don't care about the picture. Just get me the hell up this mountain," or something

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in a statement like that. So we got up to the top of that pitch, brought Barry up, and then moved up a little farther on the ridge in deep snow; it was soft right near the summit.

And then we saw that the summit was there, not too much higher. Both Barry and I stopped and let Bob go ahead. Bob went ahead the last sixty feet, and he knelt down on the summit and crossed himself. It was a very emotional experience for all of us. I went up to him and put my arm around him and I crossed myself and said a prayer. We took pictures on the summit. Bob had a PT109 that he put in the ice. He had the Kennedy half dollar and some other Kennedy mementos, and he carved a little hole in the ice with his ice ax and put those in it. And then had the flag of the family crest.

I had a little American flag that we brought along. I should have thought about it. On Everest we had the same problem; we had needed flags. We had brought them along, and it was all right. But I really hadn't brought along any flags for this thing, so we had to make a *National Geographic* flag. We did that at night. We cut up some green pack and made it, took a black stocking from somebody, and we put together something that looked like it, and then took a felt pen, and made a *National Geographic* flag. Then we had the little American flag. The family crest flag was

quite big. When we flew them, we took some pictures. Well, the picture that appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine showed the Kennedy crest flag much bigger than the American flag, from which he got static but it wasn't.... I mean, of course, these are the things that are so unfair. I mean, under the circumstances, I thought we were lucky to have an American flag.

But anyway, it was great. We celebrated our ascent on the top just by pictures and slapping each other on the back. I cried a little bit. It was a tremendous thing. We'd been so lucky. We moved up in good weather, and everything had worked. Everything had clicked. The senator was in good condition and.... I mean, it was a beautiful, beautiful climb. And it had never been climbed before, so he was the first man to stand on top of the peak named after his brother.

Well, we started down, went down that pitch without too much difficulty. Prather first and then Bob went down, and then I followed as anchor man. We had, of course, another rope team that came up after us and then went down before us, so we were the last off the peak. Going back down, I could see that we could make it to high camp, but if we really went fast we could make it farther than that.

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We could make it down to base camp. And I mentioned it to Bob, and he said, "Well, I think I can do it." And so I said, "In that case, then we could get out the next morning rather than lay over another day." And he said, "Well, I'd like to do it. You know, I'm busy," and so forth.

I didn't mention on the summit, there was — all the planes were circling. The silence of the upper air was shattered by, I think there were ten small planes with photographers circling that peak. I couldn't believe it, couldn't believe it.

So anyway, we started down, and this was when we started to run — not really run, walk quickly — and so we came down moving out fairly fast, came down to our high camp. And by then the photographer was really dragging, really dragging, and a couple of the other climbers were beginning to look bad. And I thought, "Gee, they're really shot." And then we picked up our gear, loaded up all of our extra equipment that we had at high camp and then started moving on to base camp. And this was when... And Bob was carrying just as much as everyone else.

And pretty soon we began to slow down and drag and it was getting dark and I thought, "We're not going to make it down except by flashlight." And the people who were slowing us were the climbers on the group. [Telephone ringing]

GREENE: Is that for you?

WHITTAKER: Let it ring.

And so the people that were slowing us down in the party were the — there was a Canadian climber with us because it was a Canadian affair, and these other things, so that... And Bob was moving out in great style, and I was moving out, and a couple of the other fellows were in good

shape. And it was our own climbers, the semi-professional climbers, the ones that had climbed all the time, that had been in the mountains, that were supposed to be in good shape, that knew about this climb, and all of this, that had the time to get in shape, that were slowing us down, and I blew my top.

I said, "For God's sake, if you can't move, we're going to leave you up here on the mountain." I said, "I've never seen anything so pitiful in my life." I really lit into

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them. I mean, they were destroying our whole schedule. Sometimes I can get upset with people when they do things that aren't compatible to the good of the party, which I've done before, I guess, on mountains. But anyway, I was furious with them, furious, and I lit into them. I said, "You're children if you can't even walk down the damn mountain." And Bob was just plugging along there, going like a gut shot cougar. I took some of their equipment on my pack to help lighten their load and so forth. We tried to help them out. Bob offered to take some equipment, and I said, "Now, you know, this is ridiculous. The senator from New York has to carry for the professionals." I said, "My God, I can't believe it."

GREENE: That's great.

WHITTAKER: And so anyway, that's the condition that he was in. And we moved down. We got down just at dark.

We had pretty good rations, but they were freeze-dried and so forth. They weren't — you know, you don't eat as well on a mountain as you do down below. But the press had been in, and *Life* magazine had been in, and all of these people are flying in with ski-planes to base camp. And so we came in there, and there was a *Time* — I think it was *Time* — photographer there, and he said, "Well, would you like..." He came over to the camp, and I was really upset that they were taking pictures and things because I felt in a sense we had this obligation to *National Geographic*, because they were the ones that financed the trip, and here was *Life* and all these others that were taking pictures, in a sense scooping *National Geographic*. But it was not really a — they're not really a news magazine. But anyway, I felt they were out of line to intrude that much because it just didn't happen in climbing camps. I'd never been involved with press in climbing camps, so I was a little upset with them.

They said, "Well, we've got this food over there that we couldn't eat. There're steaks, and we've even got ice cream and everything." I thought, "Gee boy that ice cream sounds good. I'd like to kind of..." I said, "Well, Bob, shall we do it?" And he said, "Why not? Might as well." And so they brought over the food. And I'll be darned if they didn't write a story saying that when they came down off, "They ate this luxurious food that had been flown in," and so forth. And they're the ones that gave us the food. I mean, the damned.... The terrible, unjust....

Anyway, we had a nice dinner and slept well that night because we'd done the mountain, flew back the next morning to White

Horse and back to civilization and that other life. The press was, of course, at every stop. We came to Seattle and then I had — they wanted me to do the story at *National Geographic* on the climb, so I flew back with Bob here to Washington.

Then at the airport he was met by Ethel [Skakel Kennedy] and the children. This is when I met Ethel. There were two cars, and we had the luggage, and Barry Prather came back with us. And here are the children, and I mean, it's really a carload with just the children and Bob and Ethel; and so I started to get in the other car with Barry, and Ethel said, "No." And Bob said, "Let's all get in this car." And I thought, well, I mean, "It's jammed." Well, that's all right. Pile in," you know. And that, to me, typifies the attitude of the senator and Ethel. I mean, it was, "Join us, come on in, jump in the car. There's room for everybody." To me that's their whole attitude, you know: There's room for you in what we do.

Of course, by then I loved Bob because of what he'd done, of what he could do, and how he acted, and everything else. I mean, I saw that he just wasn't a senator from New York, which wouldn't have particularly impressed me at that time, but that he was really all things, an outdoor man, a mountain man, athletic and capable of doing all things. I mean, I was dumbfounded every move he made. He did it in a manner of competence. So this is where I really grew to know him. When you're on a mountain with someone and participating against the elements, you know, where you're really both on a team to pull this thing off, well, you really draw together.

And back here, we jammed in the car and came back to Hickory Hill. And I remember Ethel... Bob said, "Look at this gear." He was pulling some of the stuff out of the pack, showing the children what all this stuff was and everything. They were, of course, interested as the devil, and Ethel was, too. When the sleeping bag came out of the pack, Bob unrolled it and Ethel climbed into it. [Laughter] They were all so delighted with the trip and everything. So that was my first encounter here at Hickory Hill.

I stayed four days doing — Barry left — I stayed four days doing the story, five days, going into *National Geographic* and then coming back to Hickory Hill, not all the time at *National Geographic* but some of the time. And so we played touch football, which I really hadn't played much before, and tennis. And I left to go back to Seattle. When I got on that plane, I could hardly walk up those steps. I was so stiff and sore, so I found out how Bob partly stayed in condition. I mean, I couldn't believe how stretched out of shape you can get playing touch

football and these other sort of things. There was a quote in *Sports Illustrated* that said that as I limped onto the plane — and I really limped because I'd been... I think it was Matthew [M.T. Kennedy] or Michael [L. Kennedy] had taken me out, and I had gone into the bushes trying to get someone else that had the football. I was really stiff and sore. As I limped on the plane I had said, "I'm going back to the mountains to build back up my ego." [Laughter]

So that was the first association. And I think the next time, I called Bob at his office or something, and he said, “Well, Jim, are you in trouble? Do you need some help on the mountain? Do you want me to help you with the rope or something?” [Laughter] He had a great sense of humor.

GREENE: What about that Explorers Club criticism of him having been carried up the mountain?

WHITTAKER: Yes, of course, that was the thing; they said, that he’d been carried up the mountain, which was so much not the truth. Barry Bishop, who had not gone on the climb, spoke to the Explorers Club, and they had a little film that was taken of the climb. Barry didn’t even know about it. How he was invited to make the presentation of the Mt. Kennedy climb, I’ll never know, but he apparently was and apparently there was some joking done.

I was a member of the Explorers Club and sent him a letter that I was going to resign. I tendered my resignation because of the misinformation that had come out of that meeting. And they wrote back and said that they were very sorry that *Time* had picked that up, but they were joking about climbing, and it wasn’t really done in any serious intent. I don’t know. I’ve known, you know, the press does make mistakes and this does happen, but it couldn’t have been further from the truth. That was the upsetting thing. I mean, to carry him up, hell, he carried up the professionals damn near. But yet, even now, some people say, “Oh, you’re the guy that carried up Bobby Kennedy.” And, of course, I hit them with both barrels, and they don’t say it anymore. The other people in the climb, I mean, are the first to admit that hell, he was in better shape than they were. And it just seems that some people wanted to put him down, that’s all, that they’re small enough to need that. It’s too bad that people are that small.

GREENE: How does he react to that kind of thing?

WHITTAKER: Well, he took it better than I would. I mean, he reacted well. I would like to punch somebody in the nose. And he just, well, he said

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“These are the things you have to expect.” No, he reacted in a very understanding manner regarding them. I think he probably had to build up to that attitude. I think initially anyone would react — I mean, I would. I would react violently. I wanted to do things. I really wanted to strike out and set the record straight, but there wasn’t much you could do, although I did tell the Explorers Club they were a bunch of dumb nuts, way out of line, and they ought to think before they speak. And I made sure that the press in Seattle knew what the story was and so forth.

I told them that he could have climbed almost — I think he could have climbed any mountain. I think he could have made Everest if he wanted to. I mean he could have done anything that he wanted to do. He had that determination and the will power, you see; he could overcome

physical problems and other problems. I mean he had the determination and... Well, he had... I mean, God he was beautiful.

GREENE: Anyway, how did your relationship develop after that?

WHITTAKER: Well, then Ethel came out to Seattle. It was the summertime and I invited — Blanche, of course, wanted to meet Ethel and the children, so we invited her out. She came with — I think there were seven children, and she crashed into good old Seattle with seven children. It was summertime. I live on Lake Sammamish and fortunately the house next door, which we owned and rent, was available, and so we put the children in there and Ethel in the house, so that they spent a few days water skiing and swimming. We had a great time then. And then we decided to go on the river trip to float some rivers on the rafts. That was Bob's idea. And so we got together a few people and floated down the Green [River in Wyoming] and Yampa [River in Colorado] on the Fourth of July with all the children.

GREENE: What year is this now? 1965 still?

WHITTAKER: Yes, 1965. And so then we really got to know each other, too, under comfortable surroundings. And we had a chance to socialize and chat and so forth. Then we learned more about each other and different things. I began to be more aware of Bob and what he was doing politically. Up to that point, I was not a political animal. Hell, I was the farthest from it. I mean, I was an outdoors man, and I was a recreation man, but I wasn't... I mean, I knew there were problems. I'd seen the people starving in India, and I'd seen other things, and I was thankful to be a

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Christian living where I did, but I didn't know what the hell I could do to change things over there.

It's interesting, just from that climb, though, Bob began to expand my horizons because the *Life* magazine, that had got some pictures that Bob had taken, gave him ten thousand dollars, which he turned over to a Sherpa scholarship fund in Nepal, and just because of what I had told him on the plane on the way up. And so this was Bob's move out to help. And of course, I saw all this. And my horizons grew in that area.

I remember then, of course, I met his friends at Hickory Hill a lot of evenings, and they turned out to be such interesting people. We played games, and you do things where you can probe a little bit into a person's life. I remember Bob and Ethel saying something about "Let's take a vote in the family." He was always doing things like let's take a vote in the family. "Would we like Jim, if he hadn't climbed Mt. Everest, would we have liked him anyway, or would we have not liked him?" [Laughter] You know, and things, like that. And they they voted and said, "We came up with a vote, and we decided we'd like you anyway." But things like that so, you know, it gets kind of right down to it, but it's done in a funny, friendly manner.

And those things went on all the time, and in all the things that we did there's, in a sense, a testing. I'll never forget sitting at the Cape one day and Kathleen Kennedy and Anne Coffey, who were very close friends, were sitting around and Ethel and a few of us, nice day, sun out, shirts off, in a bathing suit and things. Michael and David, I think, had boxing gloves, and they were scuffling around a little bit. And the Kathleen said, "Let us try them." So they put them on and actually boxed, I mean hitting each other, Anne and Kathleen, and really hitting and little tears in the eyes even, but still friendly, but very competitive.

And then Bob said, "How many would like to see Jim and I fight?" And I'm sitting there with a Bloody Mary, reclined on the nice comfortable couch, and I think, "My God, he's serious. I think he means it." And the children, of course, "Yeah, let's see it." And then he said, "Now, how many? Let's see a show of hands. I want to see how many." So he counts all the hands and everything. I mean, I'm sitting there and I think, "Now if he does this, I'm going to have to fight him because I think, well... I'm going to have to hit him. I'm going to have to really smash him because he'll be after me and," I thought, "Well, I'll have to..." I mean, my God, all these thoughts went through my mind. I said, "I'd

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have to knock him down." And I'm thinking, you know, gosh, and all of this stuff. And then he said, "Okay, well, that's clearly a majority." Then he said something about, "Well, I think that I'd better have another drink first," or something like that. And so, you know, then the pressure went off, but, up until then, I thought he'd be willing to do it.

GREENE: You were almost a foot taller than he was?

WHITTAKER: Yes. I was terrified to think about it. I thought that I could probably take him, but I mean, he was... I mean, physically, I could take him. I mean, I'm two hundred and five and six foot five, and I try and stay in good condition. But I thought in order to do it, I'd have to hurt him. I mean I'd have to break a nose or something.

GREENE: Maybe his thoughts were the same as yours. [Laughter] He might have been just as glad to get out of it. [Laughter]

WHITTAKER: Well, I think he was kidding. I think he was just kidding, but it certainly gave me some moments of awareness. And yet I would have done it, I suppose. I mean, he knew I would have stood up and fought him. Maybe that's what he liked, I don't know. But I had told him — he knew me and Everest. He knew the challenge. And he knew that we went up over — that the people were killed on the mountain, on the expedition; and that we had problems, and that we had to, you know, we had a real difficult time, and that I reached the goal even though it was the most difficult. And all this excited him. I mean, he wanted to know how hard it was, and he wanted to know how much we had to work to get to it. And I mean, it was really exciting to him and I think that's why he liked me, essentially,

is because of that, being able to win on that mountain. I think that he liked people who could do things, you know. He really did. And, of course, he attracted people to him because he did things.

GREENE: Was he mainly interested in all of these things from a personal standpoint, you as a man, the effect of these experiences on you? Or was he also interested in the technical aspects of the mountain...

WHITTAKER: No, mostly it was what effect it had on me, and me as a man, mostly. I mean he was interested in the technical aspect, but mostly it was, "Well, what happened when you were about to fall?" And, "What was the reaction and what would have happened here," this and

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that. This was his main interest. He was interested in people. He had this keen interest in people, I think, what made them tick and what motivated them.

GREENE: You were talking about this raft trip. Who else was along on this?

WHITTAKER: Well, the first river trip we had Willy Schaeffler, and the Hatch Brothers was the expedition, the team that had the rafts. And I believe Claudine Williams — was it? Yes. No.

GREENE: I think she was along on the Salmon River trip.

WHITTAKER: Yes, she was on the Salmon. Was Andy [Williams] along? No. These trips have all overlapped, in a sense. Let's see, who was that? Well, there was the smallest group that we had because it was the first. So he had the children; there was Blanche and I with our children, Bob and Ethel, Willy Schaeffler, it wasn't Art [Buchwald].

GREENE: The [John H., Jr.] Glens. Were the Glens along?

WHITTAKER: Oh, I think, yes, yes. John and Annie Glenn were along, and I think there was someone else. I'd have to think about that, but I'm not sure. They all overlap, but it was a beautiful trip. Oh, I know [Mrs. Dean] Susie Markham, was along, I think. You drift along and have water fights and so forth. Bob was very active; there's never a dull moment — of course, Bob and Ethel both. And they just would do these things. Something was happening all the time. In a sense, you were on guard. If you wanted to lie down and sleep on the edge of your raft, it would be the greatest mistake you could ever make. [Laughter] They were great trips.

GREENE: What kind of conversations would you have with him on occasions like that? Were they ever serious or always kind of fun?

WHITTAKER: Oh, yes. No, we had serious and so forth. Some were fun. Once, I remember, we discussed his funeral. It wasn't a morbid thing; it was just that we had... We started talking about how many friends we had. And you know, you get down — funny the things that you

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talk about. But, you know, when you're with people a long time, you say everything that you really — you say how you feel. And so we wondered how many friends everybody had. And then you said, well, because of the number of friends that you might have, you wondered if they, you know, what were your good friends. And then they say, "How do you determine who your best friends are?" And they say, "Well, then who would be your pallbearers?" you see. And then they'd say, "Well, that, I suppose, is a good way of thinking right now, who would be your pallbearers." And so then we got on that and then, "Well, what would this friend do?" And then he said, "Well, Andy Williams would sing," you know, and so we got... And it's funny that that's how it worked out, that it actually had been discussed. But that's the way it came up is that we were just talking about friends.

GREENE: Who did he number among the friends that he felt were real friends?

WHITTAKER: Well, I think that he numbered as... Of course, there were times — and we discussed this. I was interested in politics at the time, and he said that, after Jack, he could count on his hands the number of friends that he felt that he had, you know. Before there were so many, and after some certain things, that there were fewer. And I said, "Yes, isn't that true, that that is life, in a sense, because it comes and goes." So discussions centered — we talked about everything. Then we told — I mean, stories are always told about how [K. LeMoyné] Lem Billings did this and that. Now, I don't know if Lem was along on that trip or not. I'd have to....

GREENE: He was on one of them. I'm not sure which one, either.

WHITTAKER: Yes, but I don't think he was on the first one, no. I think he was on the....

GREENE: Salmon?

WHITTAKER: Salmon, too, yes.

GREENE: Can you remember any of the people he mentioned, the names of people he really felt close to? This is an interesting question when you consider how many people were always around him.

WHITTAKER: How many were always around him, yes?

GREENE: Yes, how many did he really trust?

WHITTAKER: But then there were the social friends, and there were the political friends, and, you know, I think he had.... I suppose the social friends are the true friends. I don't know. But then if you think of who his close friends were.... I considered myself as one of the closest. I don't know why. I felt that it was because we were so close on the mountain. And I felt at that time that I would have done anything to get him up it, and then when he did as well as he did, well, I was sold on him because of what he did on the mountain. And so I considered myself one of his closest friends, and I think there were many people, probably, that did. But I mean, like Lem, they were all close and....

In a way, I think he had qualities in him that I had in, that I could see in me. He liked to be alone some of the time and I have felt the same way, and I remember a few trips — I remember even on Mt. Kennedy he'd walk off in the snow from camp twenty-five feet and just stand and look at the mountains and so forth and be thinking. And I'd think, "God, he's got a lot on his mind." Then he'd do it on the river, too. He'd walk over and just sit by the rocks, you know, and be thinking. And I knew that he liked to get alone and do things. He liked to jump into the — when the rapids came, he'd jump into the roughest parts, and you get a kick out of that, which I would do too, and doing it kind of alone in a sense. He seemed to like some of the things that I liked in our own private worlds, you see.

And so I thought, too, that I could really relate to him. We didn't have to talk. There are times when we didn't talk, and there are times when we did. I don't know. We just seemed to hit it off; everything seemed to click. Everything seemed to click with Blanche and Ethel and with the children. But I — well, you know who his friends were, I think. I mean, I think that's down on record.

GREENE: Yes, but of course, there's always the question of people who number themselves among his close friends who he may not have really felt that close to. That's what I was wondering about. You know, who...

WHITTAKER: Well, I wouldn't hope to guess in what position the friends were. I mean, I'd be more than.... That would be awfully bold on my part, I think.

GREENE: Well, I thought that perhaps he had mentioned specific names of people.

WHITTAKER: No, he didn't say number one is this, number two is this, number three is this. No, he didn't.

GREENE: No, I wasn't even thinking in terms of order of importance, but did he mention names in general of who he counted among his closest, those he....

WHITTAKER: Well, the group on the river, the groups that were there. No, I really wouldn't get into names. It's the people that he admired. There were so many people that he admired and respected. There were people that were not his generation who were older that he admired, Maxwell Taylor, and some of the people that he's named his children after. I mean, all those people had, you know.... And, of course, his family meant so much to him. And you know, he had these ties that, I think, are really apparent. [Laughter]

GREENE: How are we on time? I don't want to hold up your tennis match. Can we go for a little longer or....

WHITTAKER: Well, whenever they're ready.

GREENE: Okay, can you keep your eye out and just say when you think you've got to stop?

WHITTAKER: Sure, yes.

GREENE: All right, then you also went on the Salmon River and the Colorado River trips. Are there things that stand out about those that might be different from the first trip?

WHITTAKER: Yes, the Salmon was colder water, and the stream was not quite as big, but the rapids were great. It was a more vigorous trip. I can recall one incident when there was a high rock off one of the pools in the river, and the children — Joe or one of the older boys dove off the rocks. And then Bob said, "Well, that's okay Jim. We better do it or, you know, we won't look good." And so we went over and dived off. And it was a long dive. And then the next youngest child went, and pretty soon they're all going, you know. I mean, this is for something to do. The women didn't. But then here's little Kerry [Mary Kerry] Kennedy. And Kerry was — I don't know what she was, seven or eight at that time — and standing on the edge of this thing with someone holding

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her from behind. By then, Bob and I were on the other side of the rock, and I said, "I'm terrified."

WILLIAM VANDEN HEUVEL: I don't want to interrupt your reverie but are you ready for tennis?

WHITTAKER: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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