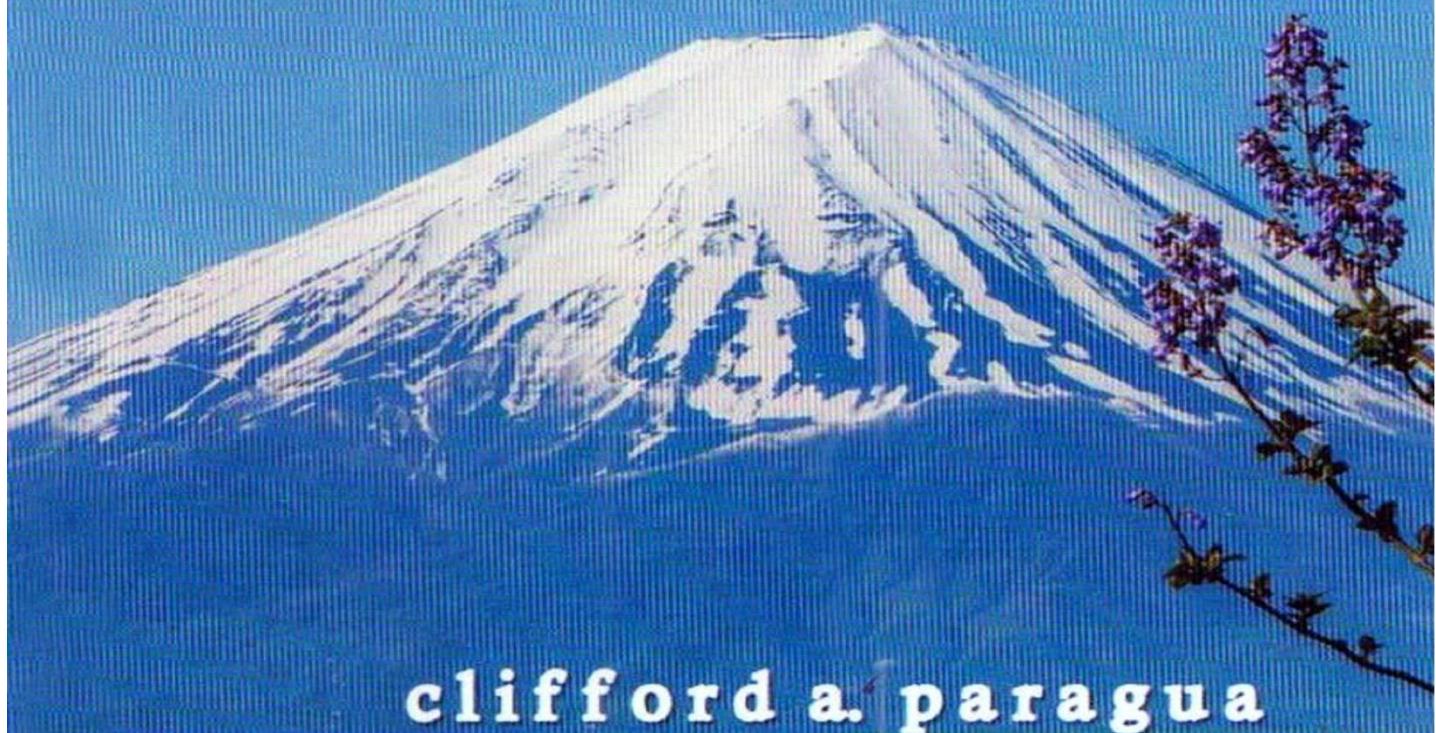


the conquest of Mt. Fuji



clifford a. paragua

photo courtesy of
Julius Angelo
fotografia

The Conquest of Mt. Fuji

**Clifford A. Paragua
December 2014**

Clifford A. Paragua was stationed at the Philippine Embassy in Tokyo, Japan as Labor Attaché II from March 19, 2011 to March 18, 2014.

He retired from government service on March 20, 2014 after serving for more than 39 years in various positions. He scaled Mt. Fuji at the ripe age of 64.

*Dedicated to the men and women of
Peace Striders Running Club International
Tokyo, Japan*

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Foreword: A call too late

She was somehow worried that something untoward will happen to me, knowing fully well how the ups and downs of my blood pressure sometimes bother me.

So the wife called me to check whether I did decide to make the climb or not. Perhaps it was even a plea meant to dissuade me from joining the trek to Mt. Fuji.

But her call came too late.

By the time her call came in, the group was halfway the climb. Realizing the futility of her effort to stop me from making the climb, she checked whether I brought along my maintenance medicine. I assured her that I have all the things I needed for the climb.

The wife also asked to me to take good care of Jeryc, my son who joined the group to Mt. Fuji. I told her to consider it done.

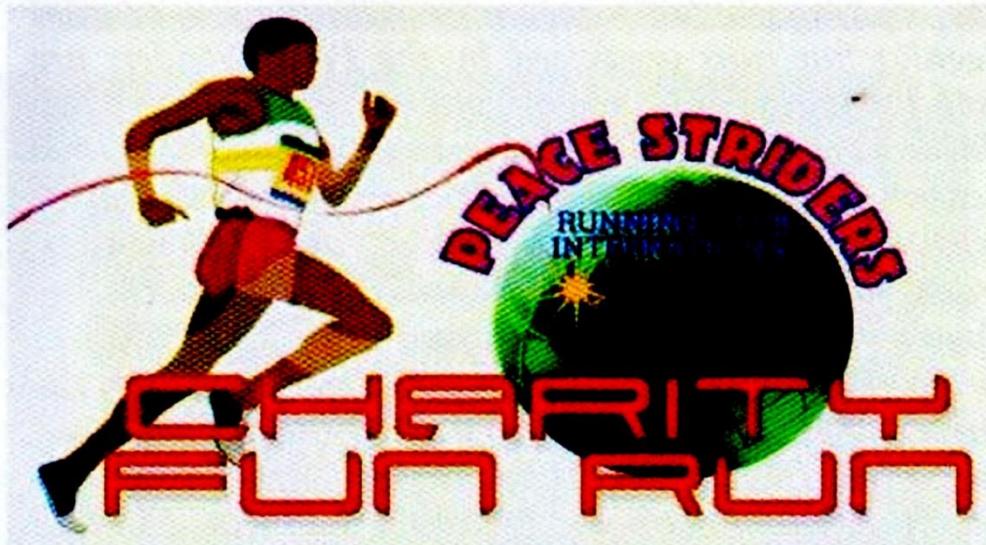
I am not sure whether she was sleepless that night, but I am certain that our group, eight women and four men in all, did not have any sleep the whole chilly night of August 17, 2013 that we spent at Station 8 of Mt. Fuji.

A date with the Peace Striders

It was more than the usual 5K fun run at the Imperial Palace Gardens.

I could not refuse this surprise invitation from the Peace Striders to join the group in scaling Mt. Fuji in summertime in all its magnificence and quiet splendor.

The Peace Striders is a group of runners committed to the idea of promoting good health and doing a good turn by using the fun run proceeds to build classrooms for Filipino children in rural areas in the Philippines.

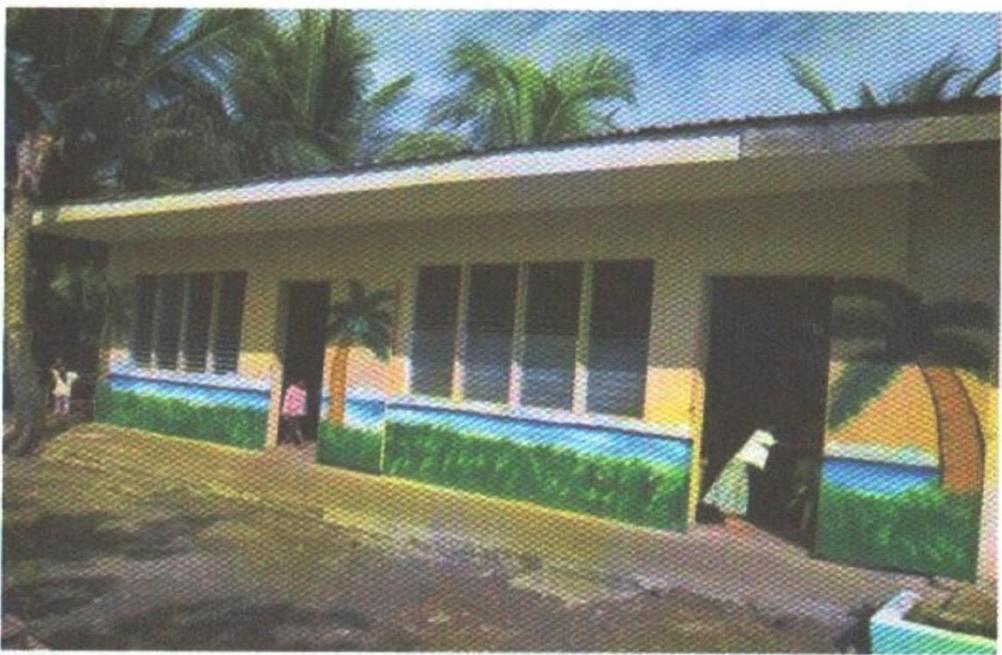


A recent Peace Striders Running Club International banner for one of its regular Charity Fun Runs. The group organizes charity runs and uses the proceeds to build classrooms in rural barangays in the Philippines.

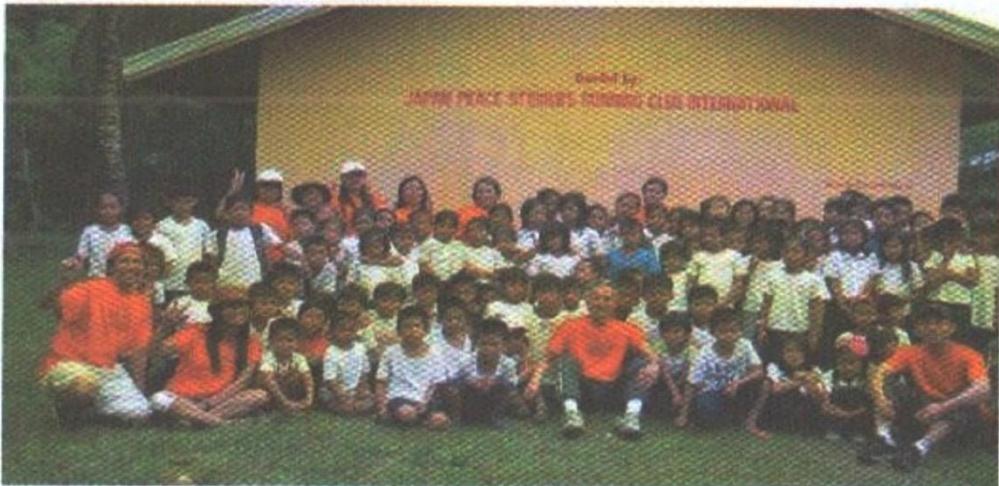
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Regular fun runs organized by the Peace Striders are usually joined by guest runners from the Toyo University, Japan's national champion runners. Coach Reuben (right) with Toyo University Coach Sakai (left), one of TU champion runners, and Coach Kase, ardent supporter and adviser of the Peace Striders. The Toyo University champion runners finish the 5K run in less than 15 minutes. Regular runners can cross the finish line in more than 25 minutes. When I first joined the 5K run, I came in at the tail end of the runners at one minute shy of 1 hour. On my second run, I shaved off some 10 minutes from my previous time. I received a bronze medal (Senior Division) for my efforts. Later on, I learned that there were only three runners in the Senior Division which explains why I got the bronze.



Classrooms constructed in a poor barangay in Butuan City in Mindanao through the efforts of the Peace Striders. The group utilizes the proceeds generated from the regular fun runs that the Peace Striders organize to build such classrooms in the Philippines.



Caoch Reuben (extreme left, front row) and Caoch Kase (center) pose with other PS members together with schoolchildren from a barangay in Batangas where PSRCI donated another classroom.

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I was introduced to this motley group of young men and women when I was invited to give a short inspirational talk before the starting “gun” was fired for one of their regular 5K runs at the Imperial Palace Gardens in the heart of Tokyo.

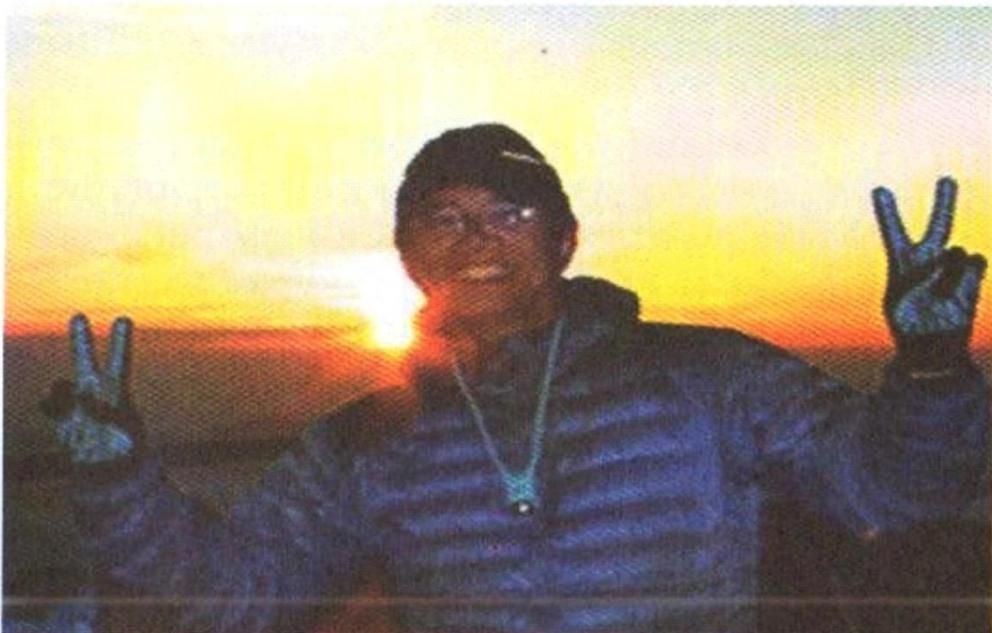
To manifest my support for the group, I dutifully put on a running gear and prepared a few good words for the runners. I was not physically and mentally prepared for a 5K run, so I just watched and cheered from the sidelines as the real runners surged ahead.



A souvenir shot of Coach Reuben, prime mover of the Peace Striders Running Club International, at the marker of the Mt. Fuji summit and crater, taken on August 18, 2013.

The main catalysts of the Peace Striders are Coach Reuben Cruz and Vice George Astilla.

With the support of Mari “Mayang” Nihei (of the Japan Association of Novo Ecijanos) who usually makes arrangements for the fun run venue, the group has been staging 5K events on a more or less regular basis.



Vice George Astilla, co-prime mover of the Peace Striders, with his double victory sign taken against the rising sun at Level 8 of Mt. Fuji.

So far the Peace Striders have donated some 5 classrooms in an equal number of poor barangays in the Philippines.

The Mt. Fuji trek turned out to be a greater challenge for the Peace Striders – and for Jeng and Charmaine of POLO Tokyo, for my son, Jeryc and certainly for me.

A triumphant moment

At about 11:30AM on August 18, 2013, a group of eight women and four men reached the summit of Mt. Fuji after a long and tiring but truly exhilarating climb. What was expected to be an enjoyable and leisurely climb, which started at 2:30 in the afternoon of Saturday, August 17, 2013, turned out to be a 21-hour long, eventful and really dramatic experience.

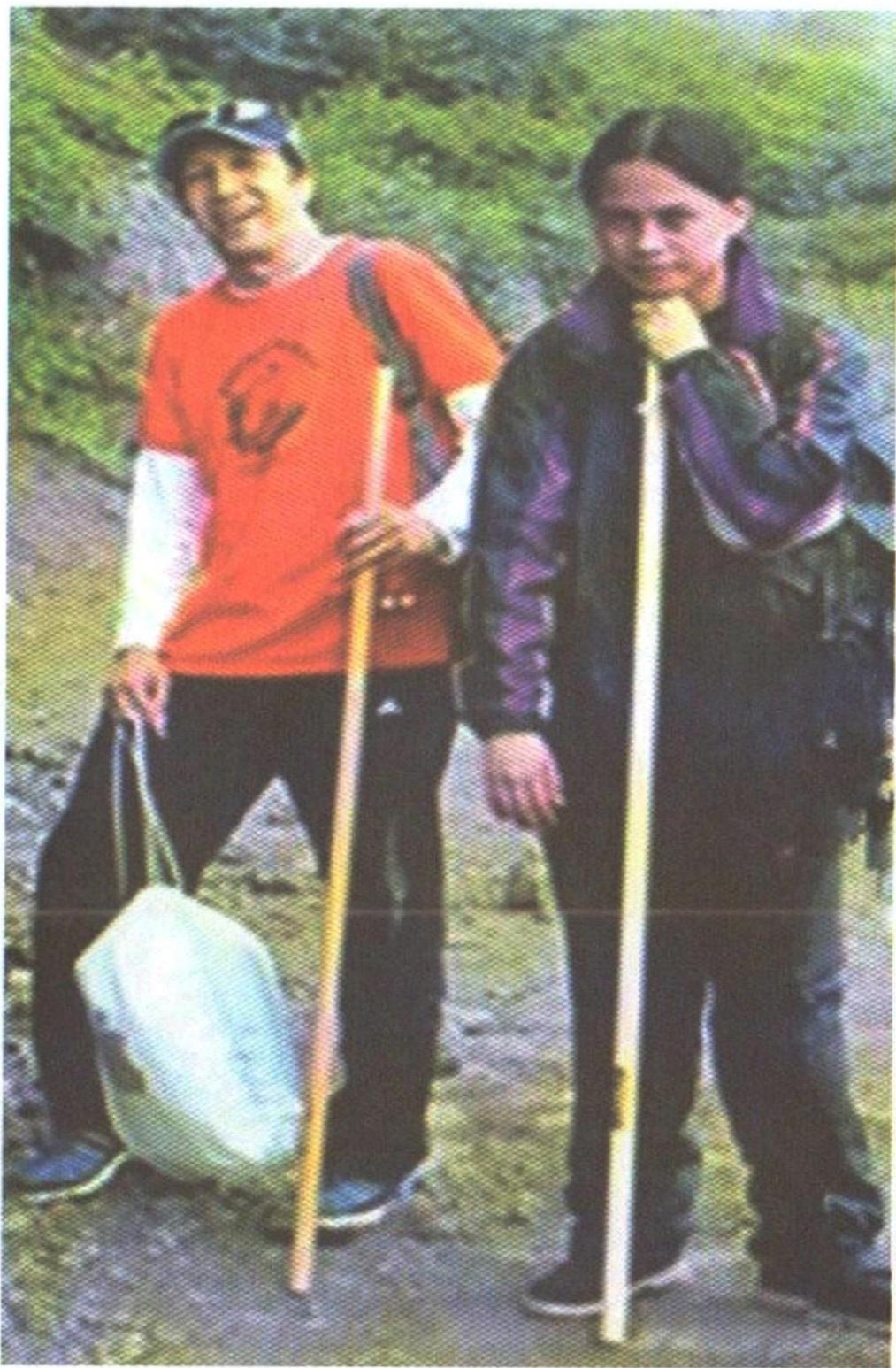
I chose to tell this story from a first person perspective, not only because I was part of the group, but simply because, from a very personal perspective, I was a major participant in the many twists and turns of our adventure to Mt. Fuji during those two fateful days.

An Auspicious Start

I woke up quite early that Saturday morning, August 17, to prepare our backpacks (my son's and mine) for the climb. I also boiled half a dozen eggs, just in case. Jeryc, my son, woke up a bit late so I had to prod him to prepare as quickly as he could because we had to catch the 9:45AM bus (so I thought) in Shinjuku to the 5th Station of Mt. Fuji.

On the way to the train station, we dropped by a food store to pick up some “unigiri” (rice cakes wrapped in “nori” or black seaweeds), a few bottles of drinking water and some bars of chocolate.

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My son, Jeryc (right) and Coach Reuben (left) with their climbing sticks at Level 6 of Mt. Fuji.

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Jeng and Charmaine, both officemates in POLO Tokyo, were waiting for us at the train station as it was getting late. I knew that the train ride to Shinjuku station from Azabujuban takes some 12 minutes, so I was certain that we could make it to the bus station for the 9:45AM schedule.

When Jeryc and I made it to the Azabujuban Station, I noticed the worried look in Jeng's and Charmaine's faces. I suppose their gut feel told them that we may miss the bus and forever miss the opportunity to scale Mt. Fuji and make our own kind of history.



Charmaine poses for this souvenir shot against the early morning sun at Level 8 of Mt. Fuji.

But fate, it seems, had its uncanny way of making the right things happen.

On the train, we learned that the bus will actually leave at 9:40AM and not 5 minutes later, as we had always presumed. I thought that it will be a race against time, since we got off the train at 9:38AM. Fortunately, I was familiar with the terrain, in a manner of speaking, and the four of us had to literally run through the escalators and through the stairs leading to the main road above going to the bus station.

I was hoping against hope that we could make it in two minutes, but we got a call from Vice George (of the Peace Striders) that the bus had left a few seconds ago and was now making



Coach Reuben gives a thumb up as he poses among the metal walls barricading the Level 6 trail of Mt. Fuji.

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a turn to the main road. As he called, we reached the corner where the bus was making a turn and we saw Vice George talking to the bus driver, apparently requesting him to stop for a little while to pick us up.

Knowing that Japanese drivers are sticklers to discipline, I thought that the bus driver will not stop and we will miss the ride. But, surprisingly and unexpectedly, the bus driver did stop, opened the bus door and let us in.

This will perhaps go to the history books.

Coach Reuben of the Peace Striders said it was some sort of a miracle, and that it was a sure sign that we were really destined to make it to Mt. Fuji on that fateful day.



Taking a short rest at Level 6 just before it got dark with Jeryc (left) and Coach Reuben (right).

An Uneventful Bus Ride

As that Saturday was still part of the long Japanese holidays (Ubon), traffic in the highway was a bit congested in some parts and I knew that the two hours twenty minutes ride will stretch to about three hours or more.

I took time to do some unfinished office work on the bus with my Galaxy Note and my Wi-max Internet device. Coach Reuben, who was seated beside me, took a little time to doze off as I did my work. We were seated just beside the bus water closet (WC), so it was not really the best place to be. Well, the situation had some advantages, nevertheless, as the trip proved to be a bit long.



Mt. Fuji Station 5 where our adventure trek started.

We made it to Station 5 of Mt. Fuji just in time for lunch. The weather was good, but the early afternoon fog was starting to build up. We started to look for a nice place to have lunch in the vast Station 5 area, as PS (Peace Strider) Angie suggested that we should try the mini park just behind one of the souvenir shops in the place.

The Missing Eggs

We got ready for lunch as the early afternoon fog came in. Jeng and Charmaine of POLO Tokyo, my son Jeryc and I joined the Peace Striders team, led by Coach Reuben, Vice George and six PS ladies, Angie, Gemma, Eva, Marie, Lenny and Jo who had all so kindly packed some delicious lunch.



(From left) Jeng, PS Angie, PS Lenny, PS Marie and PS Gemma take a rest and a photo at a trail junction.



The group takes lunch at the mini park behind one of the souvenir shops at Station 5 before the climb. (from left) Vice George, Coach Reuben, PS Gemma, PS Eva, PS Marie, Jeng, Charmaine, me, PS Angie, Jeryc (partly covered) and PS Lenny.



With all bags still full of provisions for the climb, part of the group posed for this photo before the start of our 21-hour climb to the summit of Mt. Fuji.

I started looking in my backpack for my boiled eggs to share with the group but I couldn't find it. I looked into Jeryc's backpack but it was not there either. Holy cow! I left the darn thing at home!

Jeryc and I settled for our "unigiri" and the pansit and chicken and hotdogs and mongo that the others had brought along, as we had nothing to share with the group.



Thumbs up from Vice George (second from left) with Coach Reuben (left), PS Gemma, Jeng and PS Lenny.

Lunch was quite uneventful and we had to make sure that we had enough provisions left for the climb, as we had expected to get to the summit some nine to ten hours later. Before the long trek, however, we had time to go to the shops to get our walking sticks for 1,000 yen apiece, but we refrained from buying any item as

souvenir since we expected to get back to the same spot on Station 5 the day after.

Everyone had enough time for necessities and last minute preparations before we lined up for the trek to the top at 2:30 in the afternoon. The sky was cloudy so the afternoon sun did not really bother us that much, although we were still in our summer outfit.

My First and Last Time

Full of enthusiasm and anticipation, the Daring Dozen started the climb at 2:30PM from Station 5 where there was a paved route and trees still abound.



(From left)PS Jo, Charmaine and Jeng are still all smiles at Level 6 where trees still abound and the long trek has just practically started.

Along the way, we met a number of climbers already on the way down to Station 5.

Most of them looked like American servicemen, and when we asked them how the climb was, invariably all of them said, "It was good, but that's going to be my last".

We were somewhat puzzled by their reactions, but these fueled our enthusiasm to get to the top. I thought that if those guys were able to get to the summit within the same day that they started the climb, I imagined that our own climb will be a breeze. Of course, as things turned out, this was rather a big miscalculation.

The Exciting Climb

The trek to the sixth level from our starting point on the fifth station was not very eventful, as the afternoon sun was still up and the trail was not as steep. There were many other climbers ahead of us, mostly in groups with their own guides.

We didn't have any guide, but this was the least of our concerns, although practically all of us were first timers, except for Coach Reuben who made the trek some years before.

As we struggled to the seventh level with the fading afternoon sun, we gradually followed the marked trail of rocks, stones and gravel which endlessly lined our way. As we went higher, the trees were all suddenly gone, except for a few

small bushes here and there. From a much closer view, Mt. Fuji really didn't look as beautiful as when viewed from a farther vantage point.



Jeng and PS Eva, together with other groups of climbers follow the trail leading to Level 6. Bushes and trees still abound at this lowest trekking level of the majestic Mt. Fuji.

We reached the seventh level as dusk came and I thought that it was a long, long way to go to the 11th level summit. As the sun faded in the horizon below, I suddenly realized that I didn't bring along any headlight. The climb through the rocky mountainside is going to be difficult, I thought, especially in pitch darkness.

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The Daring Dozen who trekked to Mt. Fuji on August 17, 2013 and in 21 hours made it to the summit the day after – (from left) Coach Reuben, PS Marie, PS Gemma, PS Angie, PS Lenny, Jeng, PS Eva, PS Jo, Charmaine, me, Jeryc and Vice George pose for a souvenir shot for posterity.

Vice George had brought along an extra LED light which he gladly offered to me. This helped me a lot as we inched our way up the rocky and craggy mountainside.

As the group slowly moved up to the next level, darkness gradually came. We took comfort in the presence of many other climbers who, like us, must have been looking forward to the many rewards of an once-in-a-lifetime adventure. The marked trails on the mountainside set aside any fear of losing our way to the top. It was just a matter of time, I whispered to myself.

Then PS Eva offered me a headlight which I eagerly wore as I took the rear position together with Vice George. Coach Reuben and my son Jeryc took the lead position, and all the ladies followed, with Vice George and me maintaining our protective rear position.

Between the seventh and eighth levels, there were a number of rest stations. We found out, to our sheer delight, that in each of these rest stations, bottled water and hot cup noodles and other basic provisions were available, albeit at somewhat steep prices.

A bottle of cold water came at 200 Yen and a cup of hot noodles was priced at 500 Yen. Come to think of it, these provisions came at a fair price, considering the convenience that a lighter backpack can give, if we did not have to carry that extra weight.

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Also, rest rooms were available in each rest area for 200 Yen per person, per entry, maybe. But we had to answer the call of nature, especially with the temperature getting lower and lower as we wound our way up through the rocky mountainside.



Vice George (left) and Coach Reuben carry more than their share of bags as some of the PS ladies experience the first signs of fatigue upon reaching the 7th Level of Mt. Fuji above the clouds.

The trek from one rest area to the next gradually became a steep challenge, as we literally had to climb some 60 degrees of elevation to the next target area. From our vantage point in one rest area, we could see a long line of headlights winding their way higher to the next well-lighted area, the next place to catch our breath and spend a few minutes lying back on some paved flat surface. But we had to

go on, despite the enormity of the challenge of the climb, to the next rest area, which took an hour or more to reach.

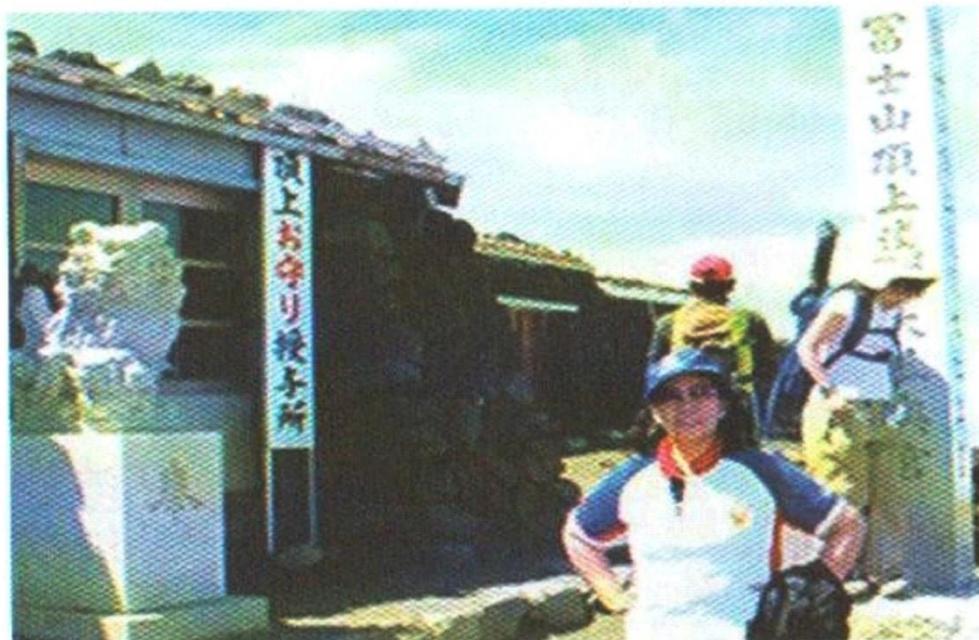
Originally, we thought that we could make it to level nine before midnight, but at about ten o'clock, we were still struggling to make it to the eighth level. And we had to go on as there was really no point in turning back, even though such thought may have occurred to some or to all of us. Besides, the thought of going down the mountain at ten o'clock in pitch darkness is probably not as exciting as continuing the climb under the same condition.



Almost at the summit at 3,250 meters, a souvenir shot with (from left) PS Lenny, Coach Reuben, me, Charmaine and PS Gemma.

We finally made it to the eighth level at half past ten, and we immediately looked for the best place to lie down and rest. By the time we made it to the eighth station, the temperature had

dropped to about 5 degrees. I had put on two T-shirts, one long sleeves thermal shirt, one sweat shirt and one jacket, but I could still feel the cold as the unabated strong chilly wind came. The thermal blanket that I brought along was almost of no use, as I struggled to catch some sleep, which did not come until daybreak.



With her arms akimbo, Jeng proudly poses for this shot in front of Kusumi Shrine at the summit of Mt. Fuji.

The ladies, along with Jeryc, lied down beside each other, probably in the effort to conserve some warmth so that even for a fleeting moment some sleep would be possible. I suspect though that the early morning chill was really too much to enable anyone to get any honest to goodness sleep.

I suggested to Coach Reuben and Vice George that it would be most prudent to simply

spend the night in the eighth level, rather than hurriedly try to get to the summit in time for the early morning sunrise. I was sure glad that they agreed with my suggestion and so we witnessed the beautiful sunrise from our vantage point at the eighth level rest area. Cameras clicked to no end to record this historic event, although everyone knew that there was really much more climbing to do.



Another shot at the 8th Level at 3,250 meters against the early morning sunrise with (from left front) PS Jo, PS Marie, and PS Gemma, (from left back row) Jeng, PS Lenny, Coach Reuben, me, and Charmaine.

Although we had not had any sleep, I thanked God as Jeryc and I had some hot coffee available at the eighth level store. As we were taking our sip of the hot brew, however, Jeryc suddenly asked, "Daddy, aakyat pa ba tayo?"

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His question caught me by surprise as I felt that there was a tone of resignation in his voice that he could not make it to the top.

Mustering my best courage, I replied, "Nandito na tayo, kaya tapusin na natin. Malapit na tayo sa itaas." I knew that he realized that I was really determined to make it to the top, no matter what.

I was looking at his eyes for any hint of desperation, but I didn't find any. I thanked the good Lord again.

So with the early morning sunrise, and refreshed a bit with a brief night rest, we started the climb to the ninth level, hoping that we could make it to the top before lunch.



All smiles with no sign of fatigue, (from left) PS Marie, Jeng, Charmaine, me, Coach Reuben, Jeryc and PS Eva.

As we made the trek, and as the sun came up, we started to feel the temperature rise. At some point, Jeryc and I got ahead of the others, trying to catch up with the PS ladies who seemed to surge ahead of all the rest of us.



Framed by the 8th Station arch, the group is dwarfed by the immense background below as we prepared to continue the trek to the summit, (from left) Jeng, PS Gemma, PS Lenny PS Jo, Coach Reuben, PS Eva, me, Charmaine and PS Marie.

At one point before we reached a rest area leading to level nine, Jeryc suddenly stopped and would not budge an inch, even with my prodding, or pleading, actually.

I urged him to go on, but instead of moving on, he suddenly grabbed his walking stick, swung it on a rock and broke it in two. As I was picking up the pieces, he quickly continued

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with the climb alone, leaving me with my own walking stick and the broken stick that he left behind.

I spent the rest of the hour or so climbing alone, making sure that those behind me were just close enough for comfort.



PS Eva poses for this shot at the 7^h Level. She kindly shared her headlight with me and gave me more confidence to continue the climb during the night.

After about half an hour, as I was about to take a short rest, I caught a glimpse of Jeryc on his way down, with a hurried look on his face.

When he finally reached me, he suddenly began to shed tears and with a weak voice said, "Daddy, uhaw na uhaw na ako! Naubusan ako ng tubig kanina pa!"

I had about 120 millimeters of water left in my bottle and I gave it all to him, reminding him to take the water gradually and not in one quick gulp.

He must have felt relieved but my mind began to wonder how long I will be able to last without water. Luckily, Coach Reuben caught up with us. He had an extra bottle of water and he gladly shared this with us. Jeryc and I continued the arduous climb to the ninth station together, stopping every now and then to catch our breath and to estimate how much time we had before we could make it to the summit.

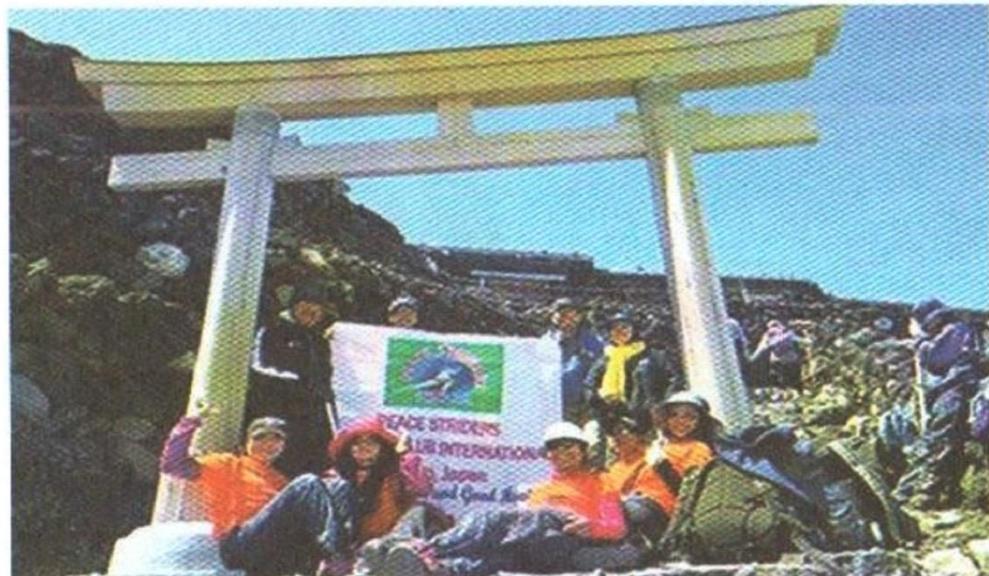


A striking shot for posterity at the Mt. Fuji summit and crater marker, August 18, 2013.

To The Summit

The view from the ninth station was rather spectacular as we could get a glimpse of the white arch that marked the entry to the trail leading to the summit. It seemed so near and yet it was still really far as the rocky trail snaked through, with the near noonday sun gradually sapping our remaining strength. But we did not compromise our determination to make it to the top.

Inch by inch, we took few short steps, stopped for a few moments to catch our breath and muster all our remaining strength to reach our goal. Coach Reuben gave the orders, “Five steps, pahinga nang kaunti, limang hakbang ulit. Makakarating din tayo!”



The Peace Striders banner is unfurled at the summit arch of Mt. Fuji – the conquest is achieved!

True enough, with such a simple formula, the whole group made it to the top at about 11:30 that fateful morning of August 18, 2013, after a grueling 21 hours of climb. We did not encounter any untoward incident and the weather was fine throughout the climb. I thought that we were truly destined to make it to the top.

As we reached the summit arch, I took a 100 Yen coin from my wallet, inserted it in one of the crevices of the arch and murmured a prayer of thanks. I mumbled my own personal wishes as the group assembled and posed for some souvenir shots. The Pease Striders banner was proudly unfurled and everyone chose a vantage point as the cameras clicked.

We have made some kind of history. Our own kind of history.



Vice George gives the Victory sign as he poses for this photo with the Mt. Fuji crater behind him.

The Crater

There is a piece of flat land on the summit approximately half a square kilometer or less where some restaurants, souvenir shops and lodging houses have been built. After resting for a few minutes, we looked for a place to have some lunch. We found a nice place which seemed to double up as a lodging place.

Charmaine and I ordered our favorite Japanese beef curry with rice while the rest ordered their own favorite dish. The price of food was almost double, compared to city prices, but who cares! Having freshly cooked Japanese beef curry on the summit of Mount Fuji is truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience!



Coach Reuben and PS Gemma with their thumbs up pose for this photo at the summit with the Mt. Fuji crater behind them.

After a sumptuous lunch, I had my walking stick branded for 200 Yen to serve as true evidence that we made it to the summit. We then spent a few more minutes sitting idly to rest, wondering in awe how we finally made it to the top and wondering still how we will be able to get back to the point where we started the climb.



With Coach Reuben, and with the Mt. Fuji crater in the background, I posed for this photo with my branded trekking stick before the group started our descent.

We decided to go to the crater and marvel at its size and terrain. We were told that it will take about two and a half hours to go around the crater.

That said, we decided to forego the walk around the crater as we realized fully well that we needed to conserve our strength for the long way down to the fifth station where the bus was supposed to be waiting for us.

We hurriedly picked up our own souvenir crater rock and then decided to follow the trail that will lead us down to the fifth station where we started. Or so we thought.

The Way Down

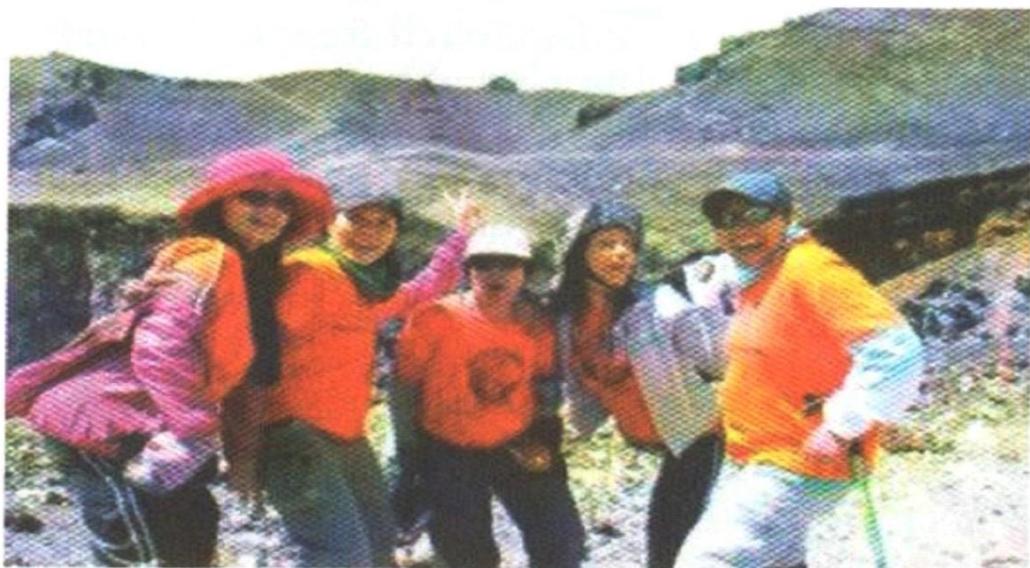
After about an hour at the summit, we started the downward trek. I was at the head of the group as we slowly followed the downward trail.

After about half an hour, we came to some kind of a junction with the red trail going to the right and the yellow trail going to the left. All the other groups that were somewhat ahead of us turned to the right and I thought that that would be the right way to go. So we followed the herd, in a manner of speaking, and thought that we were on the right way.

As needed, we stopped to rest at a number of places, always making sure that there were other climbers who were also on their way down.

As we rested at one point, I checked the two large Salonpas plasters on my right knee that Coach Reuben had kindly applied to make sure that I could endure the still long and difficult way down. As we made the downward trek, I felt some pain on my right knee but I knew that I had to go on. Vice George also brought along a canister of muscle pain spray and this somehow gave me some measure of relief.

Then we made it to a rest area which gave us the opportunity to ask for directions and try to confirm that we were indeed on the right way down. We were somewhat surprised and disillusioned to know that we were on the way to the Gotemba or Shizuoka side of Mount Fuji – the wrong way!



PS Gemma, PS Jo, PS Eva, PS Lenny and PS Marie giving a wacky pose at the Mt. Fuji crater.

We were also concerned about Charmaine and Vice George who were the last to go down as they were nowhere to be found. We just prayed that they followed the yellow trail and went the right way down. As it eventually turned out, our prayers were answered.

Charmaine and Vice George did go the right way but, like us, they reached the Station 5 bus station long after all the buses to Tokyo have left the place. As a resort, they had to take a cab

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to the nearest train station, paying some 13,000 Yen in the process.

On the other hand, our group was advised to go back, climb for another 20 minutes to the eighth station and look for the yellow trail – the right way down.

Upon hearing this, Coach Reuben looked at me and he probably thought that, given the two Salonpas plasters on my right knee, tracing our way back to the eighth station by climbing again was definitely out of the question. The supposed 20 minutes climb may turn out to be more than an hour!



A group shot at a downward slope of the Mt. Fuji crater (from left) PS Lenny, PS Gemma, PS Eva, Vice George, me, PS Jo and PS Marie.

Perhaps concerned with my aching right knee, the group asked more questions. We were

told that if we continue on the trail that we have mistakenly taken, we will reach a place where we could take a bus to the Gotemba train station in three and a half hours.

We took the gamble!

So we continued on the wrong direction which led to a trail of loose gravel and stones and rocks that we had to traverse for more than an hour and a half! The supposed three and a half hours target stretched to almost twice the time to reach the place where we were supposed to take a road leading to a bus that will ferry us to the Gotemba train station.

We were told that when we reach the end of the trail, we will find a store where we could ask for directions to the bus station.



With Coach Reuben, I pose for this souvenir shot at the Mt. Fuji summit and crater marker before our descent.

We did find the store, or stall, to be more precise, where we had some cold drinks. Mercifully, the stall had some cold beer which I could not resist.

Dusk was coming but there was no bus in sight. We asked some questions and we got some answers. The guy manning the stall pointed towards the direction of what we thought was a road leading to the bus station.

As we moved towards that direction, a couple who looked American suddenly took the lead and we helplessly and unquestioningly followed them. What we thought was a road became a forest trail of rocks and trees that seemingly winded to nowhere.



At the summit crater of Mt. Fuji, Coach Reuben, with outstretched arms, declared – “We made it!”

As the dark of night came, we had to use our headlights to make sure that we don't stumble on any unwanted rock or branch or whatever was in that forest.

It was an agonizing hour of forest trail in pitch darkness, but the thought that we were at last heading to the bus station kept us on our feet. So we moved forward and after about an hour hike through the forest, we saw some bright lights which looked like we have finally reached civilization.

And so it came to pass that we reached the bus station for the last 8 o'clock trip to Gotemba train station! We made it back!

What we projected as a sixteen or seventeen hours journey to the summit and back to the fifth station turned out to be a twenty-nine-hour climb of a lifetime!

Not so bad for a Daring Dozen who had the mind and the heart to make a dream come true!



Sidebars

Body Pains

Some two months before our climb to Mt. Fuji, I have had some back pains which made getting up from bed in the morning somewhat difficult. I just assumed that this may either be due to too much beer or to my advancing age.

Also on that fateful day of our climb, my left ankle was bothering me. Maybe I exerted too much when Charmaine and I took a practice 5K run at Sakuradamon some nights before.

But, as they say, the show must go on.

Despite all these pains, however, and with sheer determination possibly, I made it to the top.

During our descent to ground level, my backache was gone together with the painful feeling on my left ankle. However, my right knee began to hurt, which disturbed me now and then, especially because the whole weight of my body was exerting pressure on my feet, legs and knee.

Coach Reuben applied two pain relieving plasters and Vice George added some pain relief spray on my knee and these somehow lessened the pain as we made our descent. Surprisingly, all those body pains have gone away the day after

we made the climb. In fact, on the night we were able to return to Tokyo, I did not feel any pain in any part of my body. The pain in my back, on my left ankle and in my right knee were all gone. Until this very day.

Later, I found out, to my sheer delight, that going to high altitudes, where atmospheric pressure decreases and oxygen content of the air becomes thin, is actually therapeutic. This situation increases hemoglobin and red blood cell mass in our body to carry more oxygen.

Then I met a Japanese inventor who came up with the idea of a hypobaric chamber that simulates the conditions near the summit of Mt. Fuji. I had the opportunity to enter this chamber twice and I felt the positive effects on my body.

In the hypobaric chamber, the first 15 minutes creates the same sensation as that inside an airplane taking off. The next 15 minutes feels like one has reached the altitude of 3,500 meters above sea level, almost equal to Mt. Fuji's 3,372 meters elevation. The last 15 minutes feels like an airplane on descent mode and finally landing.

I also learned that professional athletes, especially long distance runners, achieve a lot of benefits in terms of better performance after going through high altitude training.

All these simply mean that another climb to the summit of Mt. Fuji is just a matter of time.

Rest in Peace

It was somewhat providential that during our entire climb and descent, the weather was good and no untoward event was experienced by the group. Although practically every one of us was an inexperienced climber, we completed the challenge without any scratch, in a manner of speaking.

We made some mistakes, here and there, for sure, but we could not be faulted due to our inexperience, or ignorance, if you may.

For one, we brought along so much provisions especially food and water, not knowing that we could purchase these in the rest stations, albeit at prices double the usual.

In my case, I had a newly bought pair of high cut shoes that I thought would be ideal for trekking. The pair was made of soft leather and they fit me like my ordinary shoes for daily office wear. My choice of a suitable trekking shoe proved to be one big mistake.

A few days after our climb, I found out that five of my toenails (three on my right foot and two on my left) started to turn dark, although I really did not feel any real pain. As the days came by, the five toenails became darker and I realized that my toenails were dead.

A week after, all five dead toenails were gone. I plucked them off my toes but strangely I did not feel any pain.

As the days came by, my missing toenails were gradually regenerated without me feeling the slightest pain.



The pair of trekking shoes that I wore for the climb, still with the dust of Mt. Fuji. I have chosen to just let everything remain as they have been during the climb.

Charmaine and Jeng had similar experiences with their dead toenails.

This incident taught me another lesson – to choose my trekking shoes and socks wisely – at least one size bigger than usual and, if possible, made of canvas or soft leather and thick socks.

I suppose I made the right decision to bring along a pair of soft leather gloves. When I bought the gloves from a shop in Shinjuku, they were jet black in color. After the climb, the gloves were somewhat worn out and they almost lost their bright black color.



I bought this pair of black leatherette gloves for the climb. The 29 hours climb took its toll on the gloves as evident in the above photo.

I have kept both pairs of shoes and gloves in their used, worn-out condition to remind me of the rigors that we went through during our climb.

Me too

Some months after the climb, I was invited to a beauty contest organized to select a Miss Thai-Philippines in Japan. I was requested to deliver a short speech representing the labor office of the Philippine Embassy to inspire the contestants and wish them luck.

While waiting for my cue to speak, I had some coffee with the organizers of the contest. One of the organizers was a Thai gentleman whose name escapes me now. Over coffee we did some idle talk and I told him about my Mt. Fuji adventure.

As a reaction he said that he had been to Mt. Fuji too, and he enjoyed it so much. I said I enjoyed the Mt. Fuji adventure too.

“What station did you reach?” he asked me.

“All the way to the summit and it took us 29 hours to reach the top and go back to ground level”, I replied.

“How long did it take you to reach the summit?” I asked him.

“Oh I just took the bus up to Station 5”, he replied!

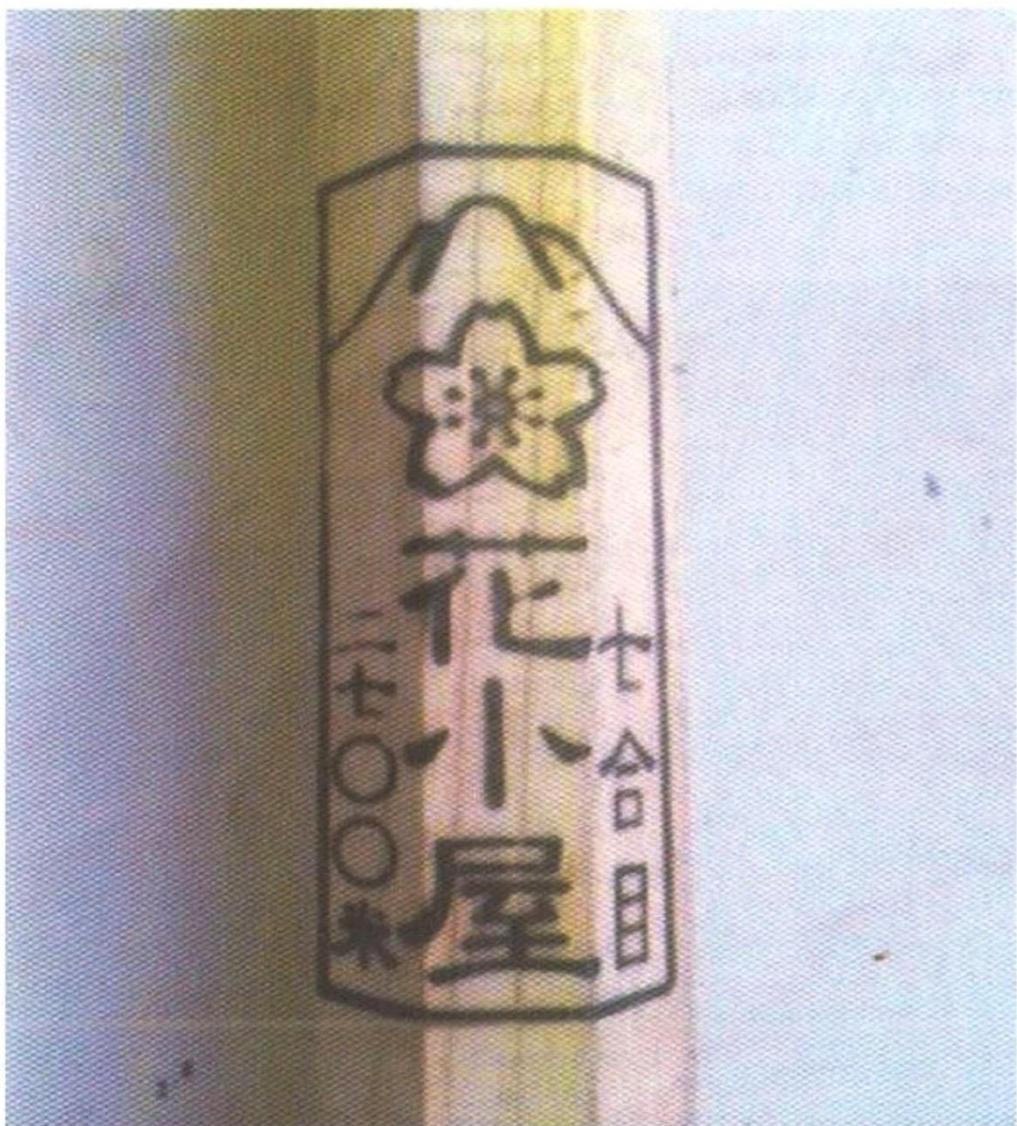
It turned out that he made a trip to Mt. Fuji by bus but he did not attempt to climb the mountain. The fact is, since our successful climb, I have met many Japanese, young and old alike, who have gone to Station 5 by bus but never got the courage or the inspiration to actually climb to the top.

It really feels good to have done such a feat!

Branding of our Trekking Sticks

Station 5 is the place where we started the actual climb. It is also the place where a number of souvenir shops cater to the needs of climbers and those who just have a round trip bus ticket for a Mt. Fuji sightseeing tour.

Trekking sticks were available with a 1000Yen price and I got two pieces for me and my son, Jeryc. Charmaine and Jeng also bought their own sticks.



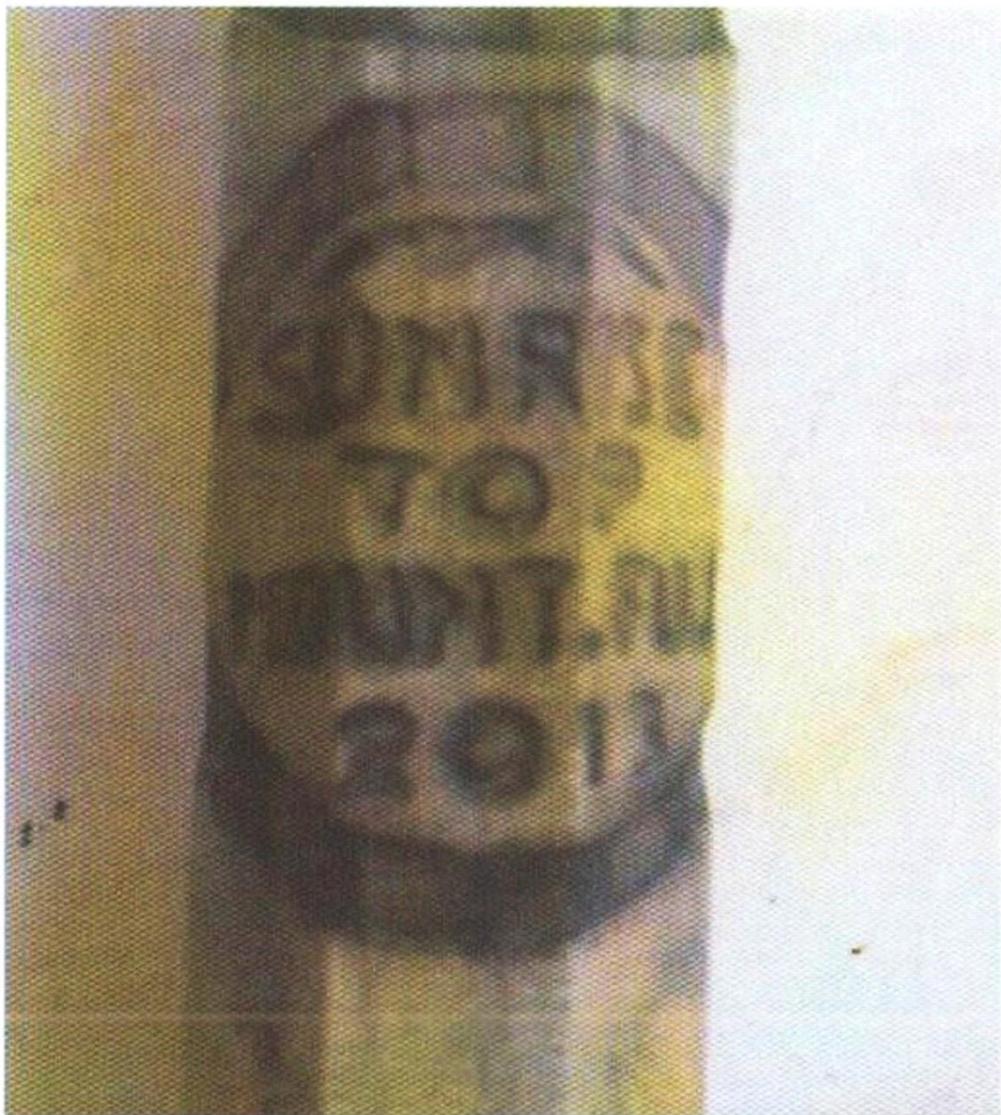
My trekking stick bore the brand of the souvenir shop where I purchased it. The markings indicate that it was made at the 5th stage which may be considered as half way to the summit.

The trekking sticks proved to be a lot of help, especially in terms of supporting and maintaining our balance as we went through the steep rocky part of the mountain.

As we climb to the next higher station, we were supposed to have our sticks branded with red hot iron stamps to serve as evidence that we reached a particular station.



The marking of the Flower Cottage on the 7th Level of Mt. Fuji at 2,700 meters above sea level.



The evidence – Sunrise Top Mt. Fuji 2013 – a marking made on my trekking stick when we reached the summit.

The markings cost some money but who cares about cost when this opportunity may only come once in my lifetime.

the conquest of mt. fuji



The ultimate marking – TOP MT. FUJI ALT 12,385 FT. - the final brand on my Trekking Stick just before we started our descent to ground level.

I will always keep my trekking stick as one of my souvenirs to remind me of this wonderful once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The Long Ride Back to Tokyo

We took the Chiyoda Line to take us back to Tokyo. Although we were all tired and sleepless, the mood on the long train ride was predominantly light and happy.

Some were quite worried, though, that they may not be able to catch the last connecting train to their final destination. Others were concerned about where they will have to spend the rest of the night if they do miss the last train schedule.

It seems that Jeng, Jeryc and I will be the last to get off the train as the others will get off in other stations before ours. But everything went well and we managed to reach our station at half past midnight of August 19, 2013.

As the traffic was light at that early morning hour, we reached our place after a short 20-minute taxi ride.

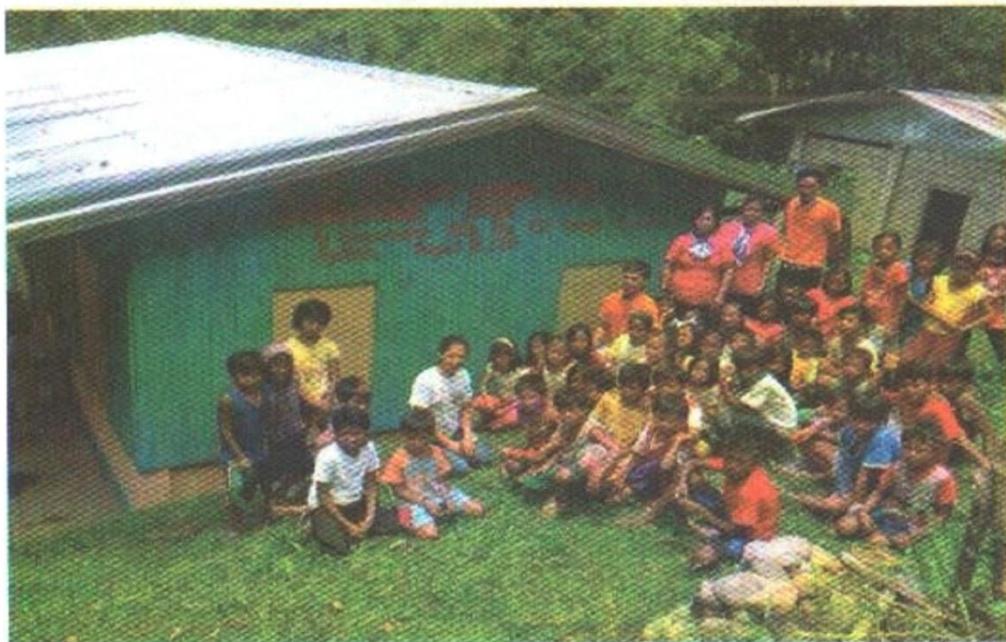
At last Jeryc and I settled into our soft and warm beds, finally able to take a needed rest and sleep. As I dozed off to dreamland, I began to wonder when I will be able to make it back to Mt. Fuji and go through the same wonderful once-in-a-lifetime experience again.

Post Script

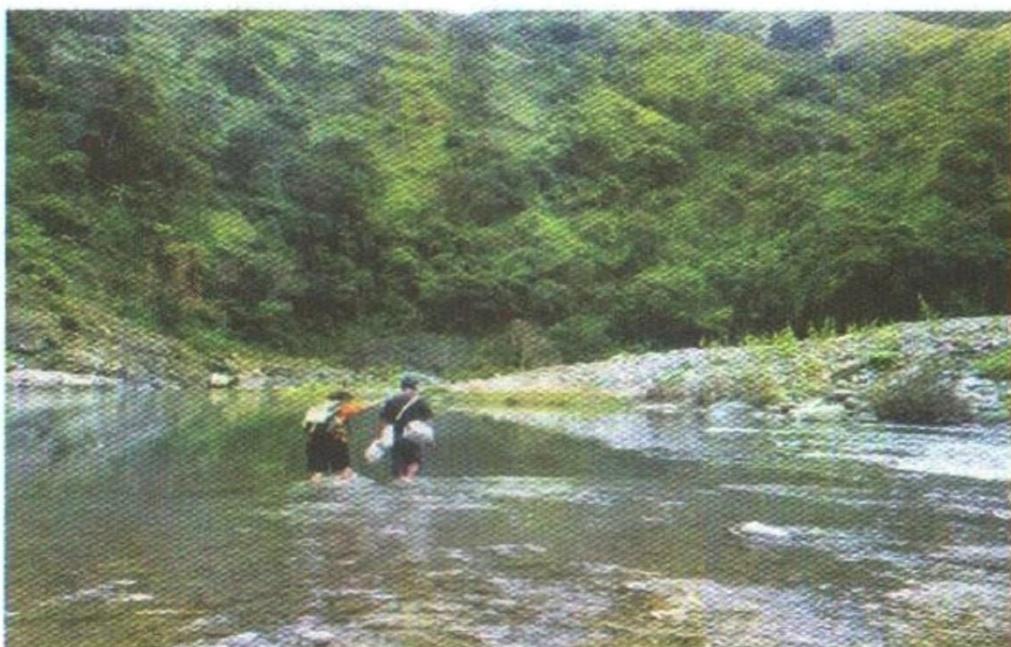
The Peace Striders Story Continues...

The trek to Mt. Fuji was simply a small diversion for the Peace Striders as they continue to pursue their mission of promoting good health and goodwill.

About a year to the date of our Mt. Fuji climb, the group completed their latest project, another classroom in a remote barangay in Lacub, Abra, some four hours ride from Bangued, the capital town. The school itself, Bacag Elementary School, is a good two-hour mountain hike from Lacub town proper.



the conquest of mt. fuji

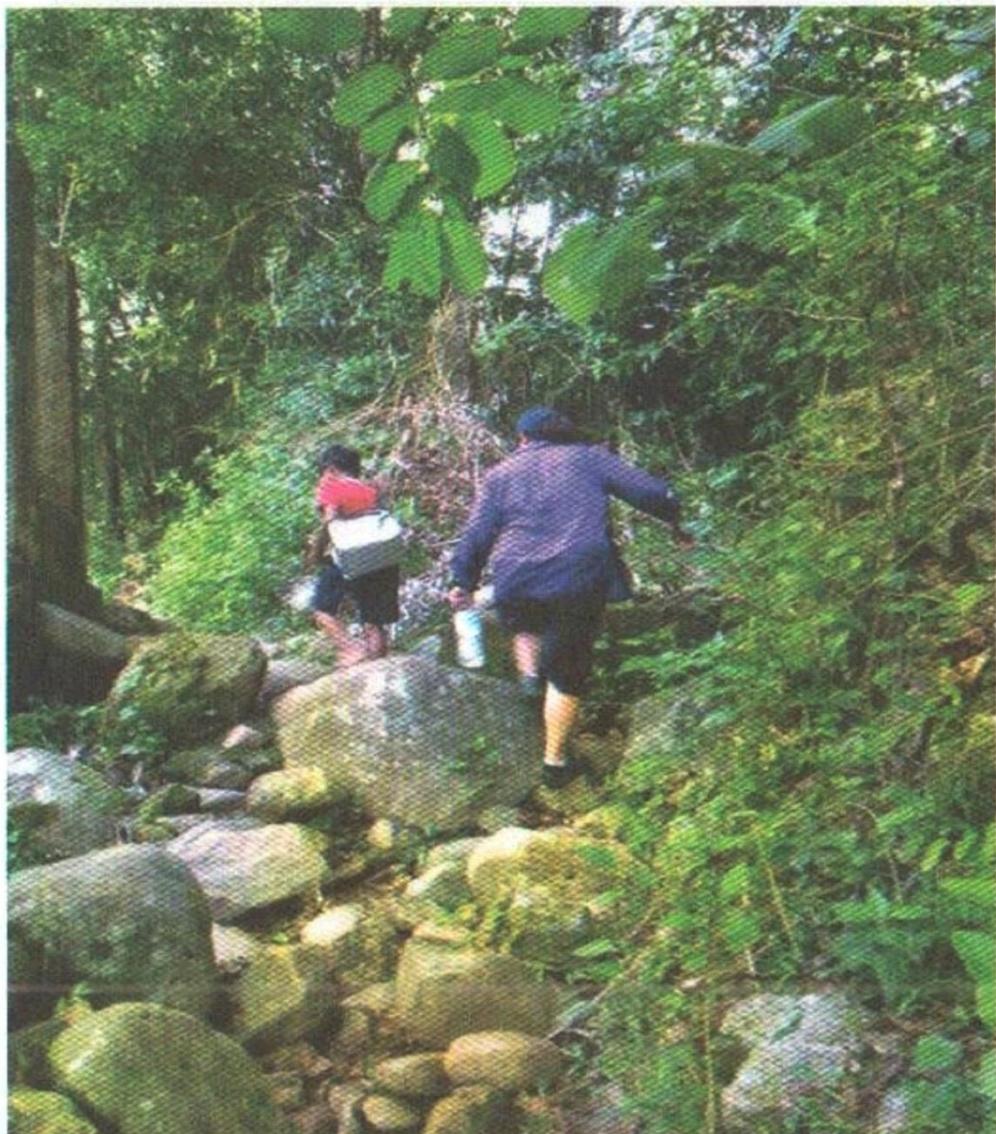


Crossing a river by foot to get to the school.



Going through ricefields and terraces which may seem like another Mt. Fuji experience.

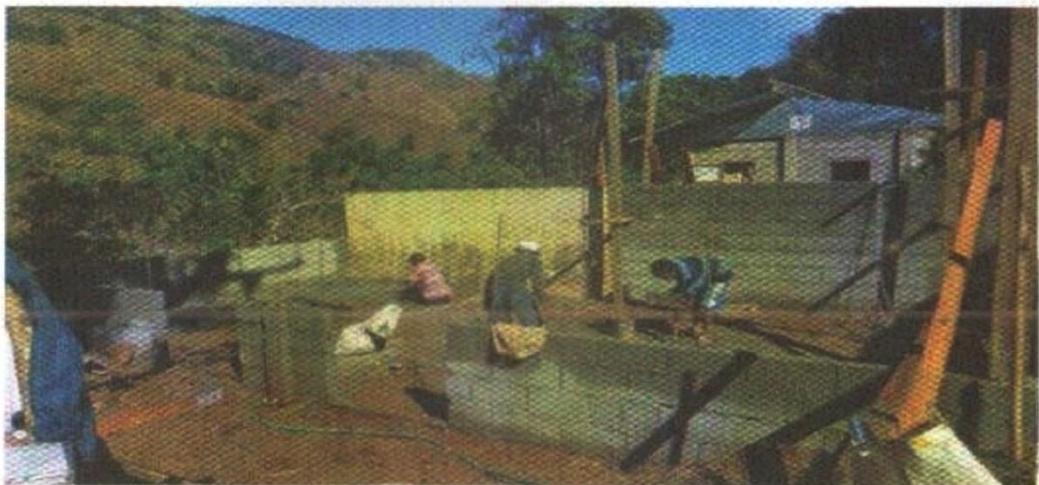
the conquest of mt. fuji



Through the rocky mountainside...to reach the school...one can imagine the rigors that the barangay people and the Peace Striders had to go through to pursue their build-a-classroom project...a truly noteworthy and commendable task that the group has committed to pursue.



A Bacag villager carries galvanized iron sheets to the construction site, some two hours hike from the town proper.

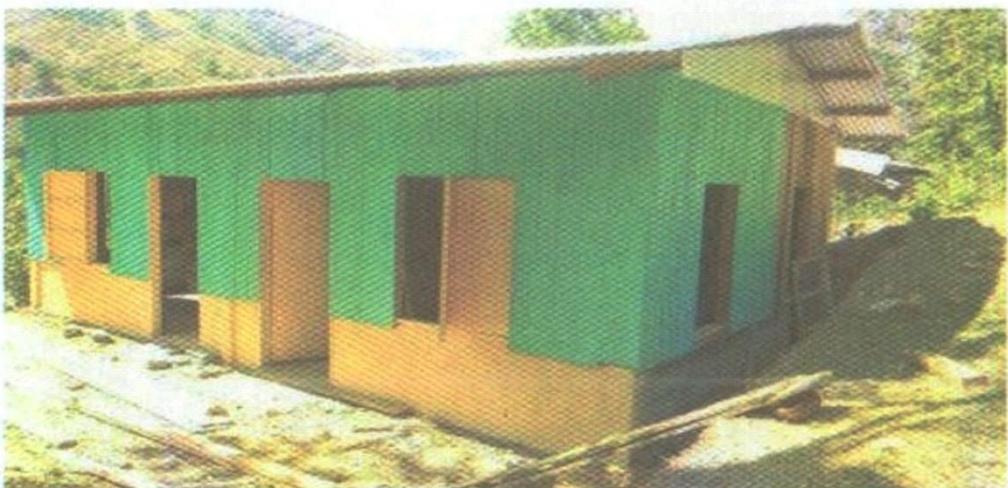


Bayanihan-style self-help construction of the classroom in full swing. The villagers, the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and the Peace Striders joined hands in making a dream into reality in this remote barangay of Lacub, Abra.

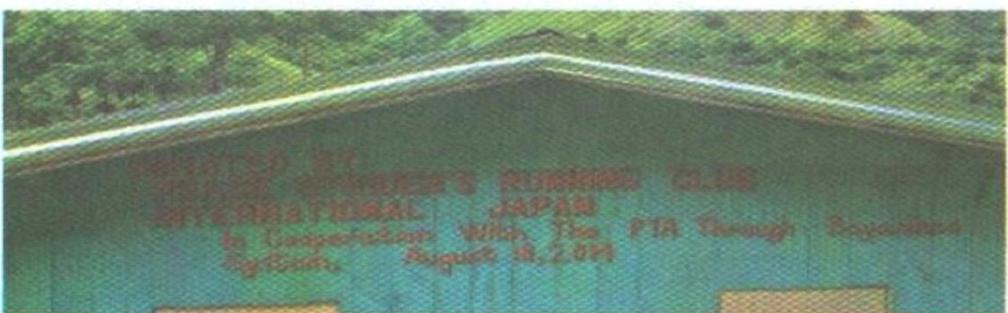
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A schoolroom goes up....

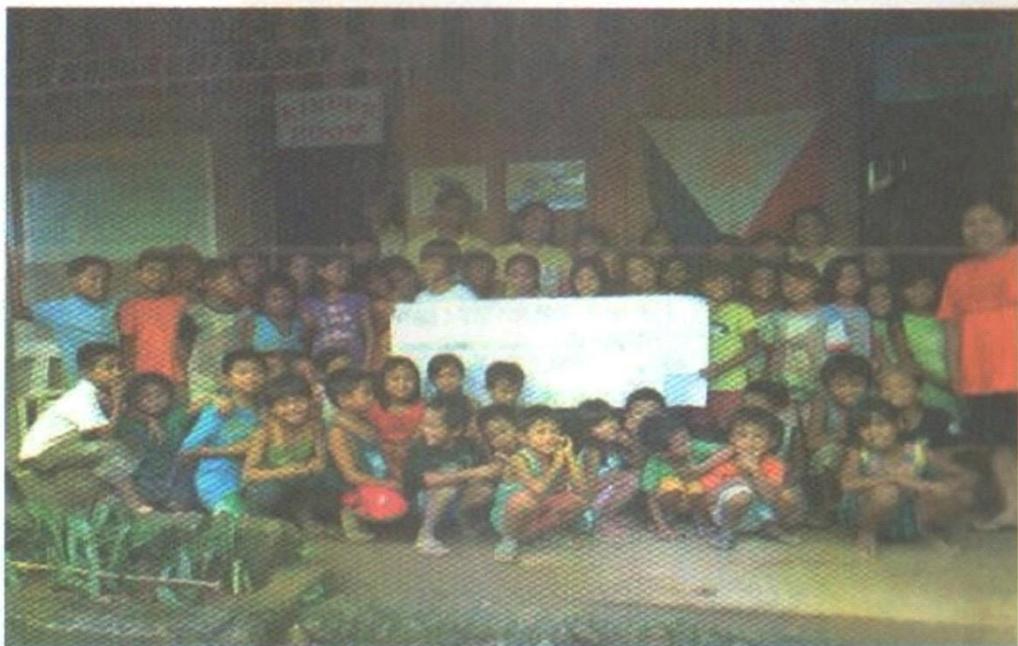


And takes shape...





Bacag Elementary School grounds...

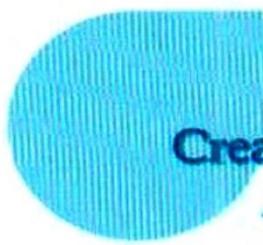


All smiles from the faculty and school children with PS Bernie from Abra (extreme right).

**...and for the Peace
Striders, more mountains
to climb, more classrooms
to build...**

**Good luck and may
your tribe increase!**

At about 11:30AM on August 18, 2013, a group of eight women and four men reached the summit of Mt. Fuji after a long and tiring but truly exhilarating climb. What was expected to be an enjoyable and leisurely climb, which started at 2:30 in the afternoon of Saturday, August 17, 2013, turned out to be a 21-hour long, eventful and really dramatic experience. Mt. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan at 3,776.24 meters or 12,389 feet.



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