

Concordia University

<http://www.concordia.ca/content/shared/en/news/offices/vpaer/aar/2017/01/31/risking-it-all-for-the-climb.html>

Risking it all for the climb

Alumnus Capt. Antoine Labranche has conquered some of the world's tallest mountains, all before the age of 30

Posted on January 31, 2017 | By: Jeremy Glass-Pilon Source: [Advancement and Alumni Relations](#)



RCAF captain Antoine Labranche, BA (hist.) 09, vehemently believes “you can’t expect reward in life without tackling risk. The reality is that it’s exponential; the greater the risk, the greater the reward.” | All photos courtesy of Antoine Labranche

It’s early March in Argentina and Captain Antoine Labranche, BA (hist.) 09, stares up at the looming clouds approaching the base of Aconcagua, the tallest mountain of both Americas. As the dense clouds break the summit, Labranche knows these clouds can only mean one thing — trouble.

Regardless, if they only push forward to reach high camp one — the first camp site on their climb towards the summit — they can set up their equipment and return to base camp before the storm hits.

He doesn’t have much choice since base camp is closing at the end of the week and their chances to summit this beast are getting narrower by the minute.

With their gear on their backs, like “pack mules” as he jokingly describes, Labranche and his climbing partner Thomas Laussermair begin the ascent to Camp Canada, the first base of the nearly 7,000-metre climb.

By the time they reach high camp one, the clouds are so dense they can barely see ahead of them. Deciding to forgo setup, they drop their equipment, committing to return the next day.

As they descend, Labranche begins to feel the tapping of hail through his Gore-Tex suit. He immediately recognizes this as the first sign of a mountain storm and increases his pace.

He continues down the slope, with minimal visibility at this point, and begins to notice that although he feels the ever-growing stabs of hail he can’t see the source. He removes his gloves and goggles to get a better sense of his surroundings and realizes there is no hail.

What he had been feeling as it stabbed through his burly coat was the needle-like stinging of static electricity. He was trapped in a growing lightning cloud.

Needless to say, this was the most harrowing experience of his life. “I’ll never know if I was a matter of seconds away from being hit by the lightning,” Labranche says, more than six years later. “What it did, though, was give me a few white hairs, that’s for sure.”



Labranche's most recent climb took him to the summit of Mount Eiger in the Swiss Alps. His climbing team consisted of French certified mountain guides Stéphanie Maureau (left) and Guillaume Omont (centre-right), along with American climber Alina Zagaytova (far-right).

Royal Canadian Air Force pilot

The Canadian Air Force pilot from the 438 Tactical Helicopter Squadron “City of Montreal” —the official squadron of Montreal — has been pursuing high-risk, high-reward activities for most of his adult life.

He was first introduced to helicopter flight at the age of 18. Labranche’s high school friend had just enlisted with the American Marine Corps and he was invited to visit the base in California.

“He sat me in an AH-1W SuperCobra and I just knew,” he says. “That’s sort of what sparked it all, just sitting in that helicopter cockpit in the United States.”

Labranche always wanted to join the military in one way or another. However, he credits Concordia for giving him the proper tools to approach a military career, both in academics and sport. In his first year at university, he made varsity in cross-country running and became co-captain one year later.

He says he received three major “pillars” that played a large role in his transition to the air force.

“I had the academic pillar that was completed at Concordia because of the care of the professors and the quality of education,” he says.

“I had the athletic pillar that was fundamental to my future career. And I also had the leadership pillar in the military, where I was being groomed as an officer. It all really gave me a strong basis.”

Now an air force captain, his work involves supporting land forces via air mobility, aerial firepower and reconnaissance. Unlike fighter pilots who work alone in a single cockpit, as a tactical pilot he works in a crew cockpit with all types of people — including civilians — a concept he especially likes.

However, the job is demanding and requires a steep learning curve.

“By the virtue of the complexity of helicopters in tactical aviation, we are required to be very flexible,” he says. “And that flexibility requires a certain amount of situational awareness and intense preparation.” These skills have saved him a number of times in the mountains.



For almost a decade, Labranche says, he's been seeking the immeasurable feeling of witnessing the profound sights from the summits of the world's tallest mountains.

The climber

Labranche has been climbing mountains since 2009. During this time, he has scaled summits across the world, from Kilimanjaro in Africa to Mount Elbrus, Europe's tallest peak, in Russia. His expeditions have been sponsored by organizations such as Concordia, Caisse Desjardins, CASOL Villa France and the Canadian Department of National Defense.

His love for mountaineering stems from his involvement with a rock-climbing club during CEGEP. “For the first time in my life, at 17 or 18, I started rock climbing indoors,” he says. “The truth is, I didn't like it at first, it felt unnerving — it wasn't natural.”

As he grew more acquainted with the equipment, he grew more daring. During a student exchange he did in China, Labranche decided to climb his first mountain: not a very technical or difficult climb, yet he would thirst for the feeling of reaching that summit for the next eight years.

Not two months after his return, he flew to Tanzania and conquered Kilimanjaro. Eight years and over a dozen of the world's tallest mountains later, he is still pursuing that indescribable feeling.

Labranche has many exhilarating and fond memories from his expeditions around the world, yet his experience fighting against the elements has led him to the vivid realization that "you have to respect the mountain."

He has plans to tackle more summits in Peru, Bolivia, Alaska and even the Antarctic. However, once he completes his greatest challenge yet, most likely Shishapangma in Tibet, one of the 14 mountains over 8,000 metres, he plans to put down the ice axe for good.

"After this, it will be the end," he says. "I will have completed a long passion of mine and it will be time to move on to something else. But we never know — the mountains may call me again."

#CUalumni

© Concordia University