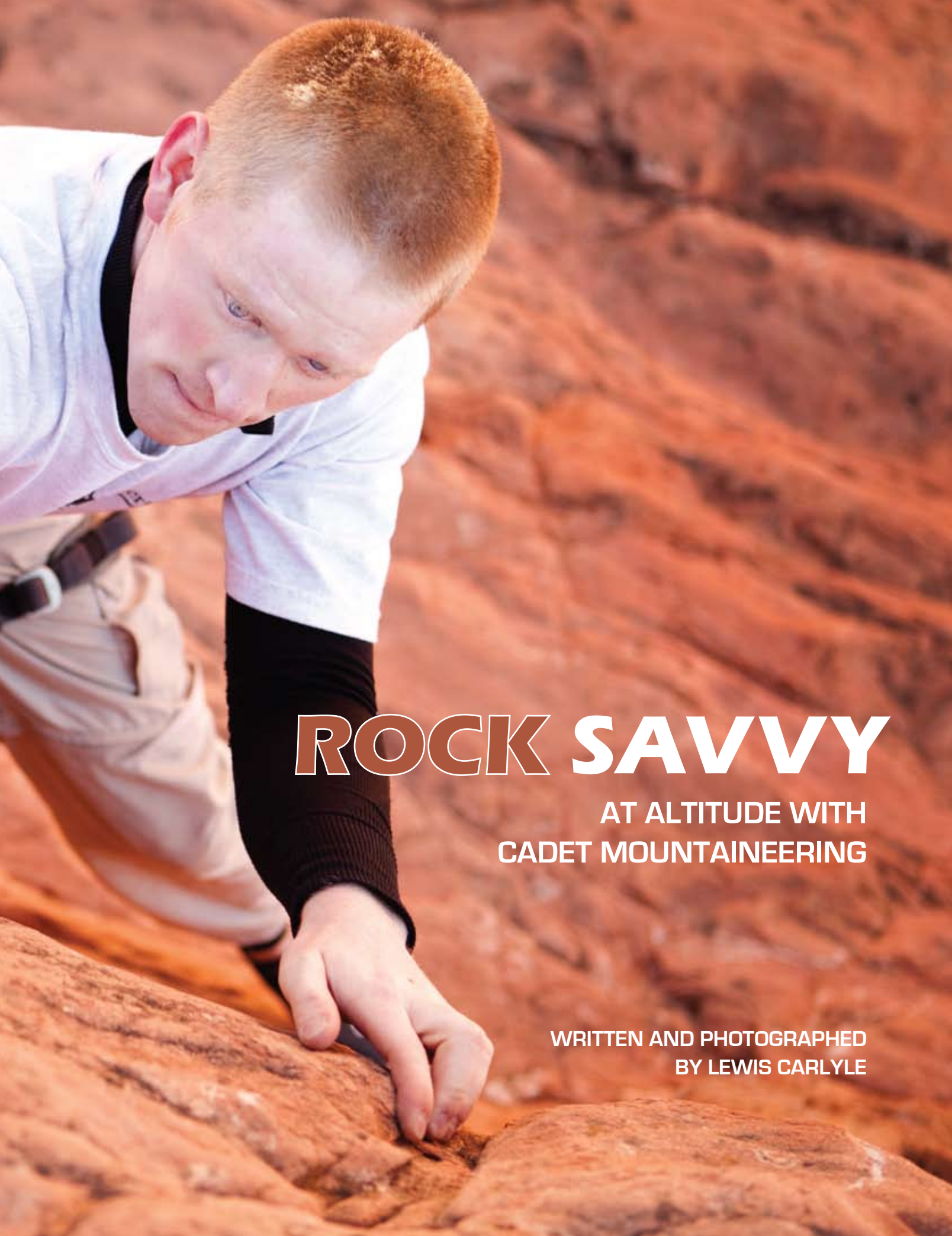


DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME

C2C Hayden Richards climbs a pitch at Garden of the Gods Park.





# ROCK SAVVY

AT ALTITUDE WITH  
CADET MOUNTAINEERING

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY LEWIS CARLYLE

# ROCK SAVVY

C2C Patrick Waters shields his eyes against the noon day sun as he peers up the monolithic spine of red rock ascending towards the sky. It is a crisp clear day at Garden of the Gods Park, and the air is just right for rock climbing. Waters looks to his partner, C2C Hayden Richards, who is engaged in the spaghetti junction of knotted safety lines securing his climbing harness. The pair is preparing to take on the rock spire known as Montezuma's Ridge, a popular 120 ft bolted sport climb jutting from a series of towers which spring from the center of the Garden. The two cadets do a final safety assessment, cross checking one another's harnesses, ropes, belay devices and locking carabiners. Once all is set, Patrick speaks the words which traditionally precede every one of the duo's climbs. "Onward Tenzing!"

"To the summit!" Hayden echoes. "Climbing!"

"On belay," Patrick responds.

Their homage to Sir Edmund Hillary and his sherpa Tenzing Norgay (the first humans to summit Mt. Everest) concluded, the two set their minds to the task at hand. In mere moments, Hayden is 40 feet overhead, lead-climbing steadily and attaching safety gear as he makes his way up the rock. Patrick watches with keen interest: should his climber fall, Hayden's life is in Patrick's hands.

The two climbers represent a small contingent of the Cadet Wing who are part of the Mountaineering Club, one of the longest standing cadet organizations at USAFA. Aside from sharing a love for the wilderness, these cadets take on a number of community service roles to benefit the local outdoors community.

Patrick Waters recounts, "The Mountaineering Club is a community of climbers, hikers and mountaineers who get together to enjoy the great outdoors. We take on everything from technical rock and ice climbing to hiking fourteeners; basically everything a person can do to get up and down a mountain. The club is also involved in lots of community service projects, including local search and

rescue operations with the Falcon Fifty here at USAFA. We also lead efforts to clean and maintain the trail up Eagle's Peak (that's a new program this year called the Eagle's Peak initiative)." As anyone who comes to Colorado soon discovers, the state is world-renowned for its plethora of outdoor activities. From hiking and climbing to alpine mountaineering, Colorado offers the biggest, boldest, and often most dangerous terrain in much of the western United States. Cadets who hail from places such as Texas or Florida are often drawn to the allure of the mountains, and those who attempt to take on Colorado without proper training can quickly place their lives in danger. For this reason, the Cadet Mountaineering Club takes on the initiative of placing experienced outdoorsmen with those individuals who are looking to break into the world of hiking, climbing and alpinism.

Hayden explains, "Mountaineering has physical, emotional and mental challenges all wrapped into a single sport. It involves pushing past your limits and doing things you're not entirely comfortable with; but we get to explore some of the coolest places in the world." ▷

“Once we challenge these people to get past their fears, the feeling of accomplishment is amazing.”

C2C Patrick Waters climbs Montezuma's Ridge in Garden of the Gods Park.





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“We have a lot of people who come to this club not knowing how to climb,” says C1C Logan Lastovica. “This ends up becoming a huge confidence builder for them. If a beginner sees people climbing around on a vertical cliff or traversing a knife edge ridge up on a fourteener, he might be inclined to think: ‘there’s no way I could ever do that.’ But once we challenge these people to get past their fears, the feeling of accomplishment is amazing. Having the confidence to succeed against a challenge you thought you could never overcome is a great trait to have as an Air Force officer.”

Each club member has his or her own reasons for becoming a part of the outdoor culture. For some, it’s the exhilaration of solving a difficult route on a climbing wall; for others, it’s the feeling of sheer freedom one gets from standing atop one of Colorado’s 55 peaks which rise above 14,000 feet, or two and a half vertical miles above sea level.

“I enjoy the mental challenges of rock climbing because it’s like a giant puzzle,” Lastovica says. “You’re working your way up this wall that you’ve encountered for the first time and you don’t really know what’s coming. It provides a physical and mental challenge all at once. I also really like the idea of going places that not everyone has been to before, especially when it comes to the mountains. I’m from Texas and we don’t have a whole lot of mountains; it’s such a different environment from what I grew up in.”

Patrick Waters comes from a legacy of outdoorsmen, including his father. “My dad, Robert Waters, ’82, was in the Mountaineering Club at USAFA in the 1970s. Years ago he took me climbing when I was a kid and that’s what sparked my interest in the sport.”

In addition to offering cadets a release from the rigors of military life at the Academy, the



Above: C2C Patrick Waters traverses a bouldering route at Garden of the Gods Park.

“Our whole purpose is to enjoy and to give back to nature. In return, nature gives us experiences, stories and fun.”

Mountaineering Club also provides them an opportunity to give back to the local community. Patrick explains, “Some of us have the chance to work hand-in-hand with Teller County Search and Rescue operations. We’re not only helping the community, but we’re also learning new skills from trained professionals. I think these aspects of the club will help cadets become better officers because it gives us the opportunity to work with our civilian counterparts and to provide a foundation of service to the community.”

C3C Chloe Waham is among the more experienced mountaineers in the club. “I got into search

and rescue a few years ago,” she recalls. “My favorite part about it is that it’s always about someone else. We’re using the skills we’ve learned to help others. It’s great being a part of a community whose sole focus is giving someone else a second shot at life.”

Chloe indicates a strong interest in continuing her search and rescue efforts as an officer in the Air Force. “People think it’s rough being outside because mother nature is unpredictable or even unfair, but this sport is all about your knowledge and your skill. If you can do it, the mountain will always be there waiting.” ▷

# ROCK

## Avalanche Transceiver

Emergency locator for search and rescue efforts.

## Digital Altimeter

Digital watch, compass and elevation guide.

## Ice Axe

Used for deep snow probe and self-arrest in steep alpine terrain.

## Traditional Rock Climbing Gear

Consists of cams, nuts and hexes. Used for placing temporary safety anchors in a rock face for lead-climbing.

## Ice Screws

Used for anchors and protection during ice climbing.

## Belay Device ATC and Locking Carabiner

Both highly versatile pieces of gear used for self and fellow climber belay and rappel.

C3C Chloe Waham

# SAVVY

Yet another element that cadets are able to draw from their mountaineering experience is the art of self reliance. There are no locker rooms at 14,000 feet—no baseball dugouts, water coolers or aid stations. When entering an alpine environment, a mountaineer and his team take only what they can carry and must be fully self sustaining for the duration of their journey. This includes both knowledge and supplies. On any given trip, a climber must know how to belay both herself and a fellow climber, set up safety anchors in the rock, rappel from a cliff face, administer first aid, search for a fallen comrade in pitch dark, prevent frost bite and guard against a myriad of other nasty physical conditions which can arise when humans are subjected to sub-zero temperatures and extremely hostile environments.

Despite the alarming number of factors which make the great outdoors a dangerous venture, the cadets who dare to set ice axe to snow are seasoned with the survival knowledge that empowers their journeys and fuels their lust for adventure. “Our whole purpose is to enjoy and to give back to nature,” Patrick says. “In return, nature gives us experiences, stories and fun. I love mountaineering because when you’re at altitude, covered in snow in sub zero temperatures, freezing with your buddies as you drink cider from a pot you lugged up 14,000 feet of trail, it reminds you of how fragile life really is. It brings us closer to something bigger than ourselves.”



Above: C1C Logan Lastovica negotiates a mountaineering rout on Pikes Peak.

Center: C3C Chloe Waham climbs a chute at 11,800 ft.

Right: C2C Hayden Richards plunges chest-deep in snow during an expedition.