



ARK FEVER

RoBERT CoRNuKe



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cornuke, Robert, date.

Ark fever / Robert Cornuke.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0296-6 (sc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0296-7 (sc)

1. Noah's ark. 2. Cornuke, Robert, date. —Travel—Turkey—Ararat, Mount. 3. Ararat, Mount (Turkey)—Description and travel. 4. Cornuke, Robert, 1951- —Travel—Iran. 5. Iran—Description and travel. I. Title.

BS658.C67 2005

222'.11093—dc22

200513140

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



PART 1
Early Explorations



CHAPTER 1

HOW I CAUGHT ARK FEVER

Mount Ararat, Turkey, August 1982

Former Apollo astronaut James Irwin was above a treacherous northern chute high on Mount Ararat when he stopped, unable to descend further. His heart thumped against his rib cage as he gulped in the cold, thin mountain air.

The cumbersome metal crampons lashed to his boots had worked great up on the glacier, their steel fangs biting clean into the slick slab of ice. But now, as he was about to cross a boulder field on his way down to base camp, the crampons would be of no use. He sat down on a spine of rock jutting out from the snow and reached down to undo the leather straps that secured the crampons to his boots. He was irritated with himself because a few hours earlier he had failed in an attempt to reach the summit of

17,000-foot Mount Ararat. In frustration he had decided to leave the rest of the climb team and walk down to base camp alone.

He never arrived.

Mountaineering protocol dictates that climbers never go solo, and Irwin's uncharacteristic behavior had surprised the rest of the team. But Irwin was unaccustomed to defeat; after all, he had once planted an American flag in the gray dust of the moon.

A rock came loose from above and tumbled down the steep decline, clipping the base of Irwin's skull. He was sent cartwheeling like a rag doll down the craggy slope, eventually stopping on an ice-crusted rock field far below. Unconscious, his contorted body was a bloody mess. Four big gashes gouged his head, four teeth were knocked out, and his hands were cut so severely that they would swell to almost twice their normal size. His entire body was busted up, bludgeoned, sliced, and badly bruised.

When the rest of the team arrived at base camp and found that Irwin was missing, they searched for him into the night. Their headlamps groped the crags and sheer drop-offs for any sign of the famous astronaut in the inky blackness. But the terrain was too dangerous and steep, and they had to give up. They prayed all through the long, freezing night and hoped for the best, but everyone knew that other climbers had gone missing on these unforgiving slopes, never to be seen again.

When Irwin came to, writhing in pain and shivering from an icy wind, he somehow managed to get his backpack off and remove his sleeping bag. Ever so slowly, he shinnied inside the sleeping bag and rolled a few feet to a sheltered spot behind a big rock. Just then, a boulder dislodged from above and rumbled down the mountain-side, colliding with Irwin's stone shield. The sound of the thunder-

ous concussion was the last thing he remembered before lapsing into unconsciousness again.

The rescue team found him about eight o'clock the next morning. His sleeping bag was soaked in frozen blood, and the fabric had to be literally peeled away from his body. The Turkish commandos escorting the climbing group knew that if Irwin was to have any chance of survival, he needed to get off the big mountain soon.

While several of the climbers attended to Irwin's numerous injuries, one of the commandos hiked to a nearby village of nomadic Kurds living in tents. The soldier frantically requested that the Kurdish elder provide a donkey to carry the injured astronaut down to a hospital, but the elder refused to help. The Kurds hate the Turks and were not willing to cooperate.

Enraged and desperate, the Turkish soldier pressed a pistol to the Kurdish leader's forehead and threatened to kill everyone in the village and burn their tents if they would not comply.

The donkey was quickly made available, and Jim Irwin was soon brought down to a road where a car was flagged down to drive him to a medical facility. Somehow, he survived.



Colorado Springs, Winter 1985

When I first met Jim Irwin, I noticed a gray-white scar above his eyebrow, an indelible memento from his mountain accident three years earlier. We were in a restaurant having lunch with a small group of his family and friends. At the time, I was grappling with a strange midlife crisis. I had recently made a sudden, jarring exit

from law enforcement after a ten-year career. After moving my family from Southern California to Colorado, my snap decision to quit police work and go into real estate left me badly disoriented, wrestling with withdrawal from the excitement of my former job and yearning for something to fill the gap. But what could replace the sense of adventure and accomplishment I had enjoyed all those years as a cop?

I eased into the booming Colorado real estate market of the mid-1980s as a private developer. My brother Paul and I carved out a successful business in Colorado Springs. It got off to a fast start and occupied my days, but I still felt a hollow place in my chest just below where my badge had been.

I was presenting a talk one day to the Colorado Springs Board of Realtors when I met a man who said that he knew Jim Irwin, the famous *Apollo 15* astronaut. I had heard of Irwin, of course, and knew that he lived in Colorado Springs. I had also seen news reports of his expeditions to look for Noah's ark. When the man mentioned that he thought Irwin was planning another trip to Turkey to look for the ark, I asked him if he could arrange a meeting. Surprisingly, he agreed.

Jim and I hit it off immediately. He was a humble guy, lacking the self-importance that his astounding résumé might be expected to bring out. He put me at ease, conversing easily about a variety of topics, including his historic space flight and trip to the moon. At one point, he told me about a life-changing experience he'd had on the lunar surface that set the future course of his life's pursuit and inspired his belief in the truth of the Bible.

"David Scott and I were busy taking soil samples," he said, "collecting rocks, doing an endless list of tasks. It was a pretty tough

pace, and we were sweating buckets from the glaring sun. I stood up for a moment to rest, turned around, and there was the earth, hanging like a droplet of water in the black vacuum of space. It looked misty, framed in bright greens, blues, and whites—like it was breathing.”

He paused. “I felt like I was standing on the threshold of infinity and staring back at a little round ball of life that could only have been fashioned by the hand of an infinitely wise Creator. It wasn’t a cosmic accident. I realized in that instant that there was a God and that there was a higher purpose for my life.

“When I got back to Earth, I felt it was time for some new goals. It’s my calling now to give believers—and unbelievers—solid evidence of the Bible.”

After Jim retired from NASA, he formed the High Flight Foundation, a nonprofit ministry based in Colorado Springs that channeled resources into searching for lost biblical sites and artifacts, including Noah’s ark.

I admired his conviction, but I wasn’t quite sure what to make of a famous astronaut investing his life in search of a legendary old boat. Nevertheless, the appeal of the adventure drew me in.

After lunch, Jim turned to me and said, “I hear you were a policeman—a SWAT team member—and that you’ve been shot at and had to shoot back. I also hear you were trained to handle hostile situations.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. I didn’t know why he’d be interested in my past.

“Someday I might need someone like you to go with me to the eastern frontier of Turkey. That country has been in ethnic turmoil, with Kurds fighting against Turks in a bloody civil war that

has gone on for generations. I would want a guy like you along, just in case.”



Several weeks later, Jim Irwin called me and asked if I'd be interested in helping him raise the funds needed for another exploratory trip to Turkey.

“Sure,” I said. “I'd love to be a part of something like that.” I had no idea *how*, but I was getting my first taste of ark fever.

I recruited my brother to help me raise some money for the High Flight Foundation. We decided to build a house and donate the profits. Paul and I put up the project money and used our contacts to get discounts on labor and materials. The house, which we called “The Noah's Ark House,” sold quickly, and we turned a tidy profit. The day after the closing, I handed Jim Irwin a \$15,000 check. The next day, he invited me to join the expedition to climb the massive Mount Ararat in Turkey. I jumped at the opportunity.

A climb of that magnitude requires some serious training, so even though spending long hours punishing my body has never been my idea of fun, I jogged mile after mile down lonely mountain roads and spent weekends on training climbs up icy mountain peaks in the Colorado Rockies.

Because I didn't know the first thing about mountain climbing, I enlisted the help of two experienced climbers, a couple of free-spirited guys from a neighboring town. Together, we climbed Pike's Peak in a snowstorm, and a few weeks later we trudged through waist-deep snow to the top of Mount Quandary.

On my last training climb, the three of us tackled some steep

cliffs above Leadville, Colorado. One of the climbers, a guy named Steve, tied off on a boulder as he prepared to rappel down a forty-foot rock face. It had rained the night before, and when Steve was just over the edge of the cliff, the egg-shaped rock he had used for his anchor hold rotated in its muddy base, releasing the rope. Steve fell. I was right below him, standing next to the other climber, but all we could do was watch helplessly as Steve plummeted onto a rocky ledge. I heard the sickening sound of his leg snapping as he flipped backward and careened down a patch of dirty summer snow, coming to a hard stop on some rocks.

Steve lay there, his foot and lower ankle bent sideways. The other climber began to panic when he stared down at Steve's mangled leg. The sight sickened him, and he could hardly draw a breath. I seized him by the collar and looked him in the face. "Don't lose it now," I ordered.

I stabilized and splinted Steve's leg as best I could and asked him whether he could handle the pain if we carried him out. He nodded, but I could see in his twisted expression that he was suffering unimaginably. I didn't want to leave him with the other climber who by now was walking around in circles, hyperventilating.

It had taken us a couple of hours of climbing to get to where we were, and I was disoriented because I had not been paying attention to landmarks along the way. I learned a big lesson in what not to do on a mountain. I had assumed that Steve would guide us out because he knew the area well, but he was of little help now.

The sun was setting behind the snowcapped peaks, and I couldn't tell which of my companions was worse off. With darkness fast descending, we decided to get Steve down as best we could.

Six hours later, exhausted beyond description, we finally reached the car, and Steve was soon in emergency care at a local hospital.

After hearing about Jim Irwin's fall—and now witnessing Steve's—I was fast learning that mountains are unforgiving and dangerous. I knew that Mount Ararat would test me to my limits.

