

26 FEET FROM HISTORY

Our Continuing Efforts to Claim the Highpoint of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

All we can say is, "We gave it a good try!" In May 2015 we devoted five days of climbing and hacking through Sword Grass to ascend 3,140' up the slopes of the volcanic island of Agrihan. We reached the crater rim, but not the highest point of that rim (3,166'). There we encountered severe terrain, and so CNMI's highest point remains unclimbed.

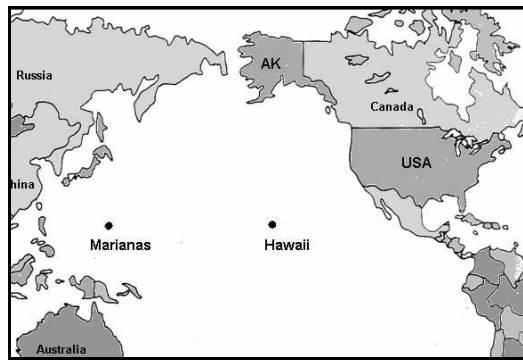
Our article in issue #107 (14q4) described our 2014 attempt when **Roger Kaul**, nephew **Clint Kaul**, and **John Mitchler** spent 3 days and only made it half way up. This article also explains the importance of CNMI (USA territory with postal code MP) as the only unclimbed highpoint of a governed division of the USA (50 states, D.C., US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, CNMI). Its location is dramatic; uninhabited and remote in the western Pacific Ocean.

As a follow-up to our 2014 recon (we don't use the word failure for something as extreme as this), we three were joined by fellow adventure enthusiasts, **Roger Wendell** (Lakewood Colorado), **Jeremy Dixon** (Yellowknife NWT Canada), and **Father Morgan Batt** (Brisbane Australia).

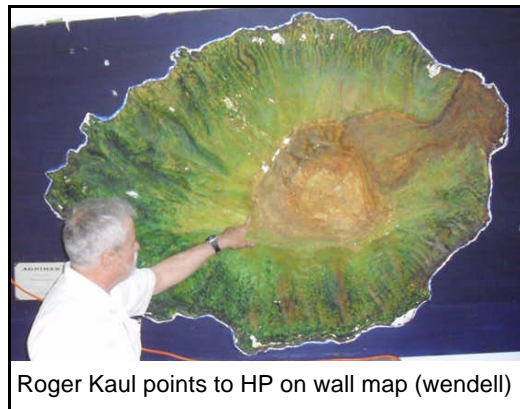
We flew to Guam and then to Saipan where we spent a couple days to plot our expedition, obtain permits from the Mayor, and buy food and water. As in 2014, we again employed **Keli Tenorio's** boat, *Super Emerald*, which would take us on the rough 22-hour voyage from Saipan to the deserted southwest landing beach on Agrihan.



Not Airbnb -Tarp on hill. Sleeps six. (kaul)



Saipan to Agrihan by boat (batt)



Roger Kaul points to HP on wall map (wendell)

The expedition's 6 climbers were supported directly by 17 locals. Our guides (aka Sword Grass cutters) were **Joe Omar, Patrick Santos, Vincent Falig, Ton Aldan, Lawrence Stole**. Boat crew were **Captain Ernesto Rangamar, Captain Bob Taguchi, Calito Daguro, Keli Tenorio**. Boat and shore support was provided by **Gary Sword, Rosemond Sword, Ben Santos**. Saipan support was provided by **Gordon Marciana, Mayor Jermone Aldan, Lee Kaipat, Marty Dalsaso**.

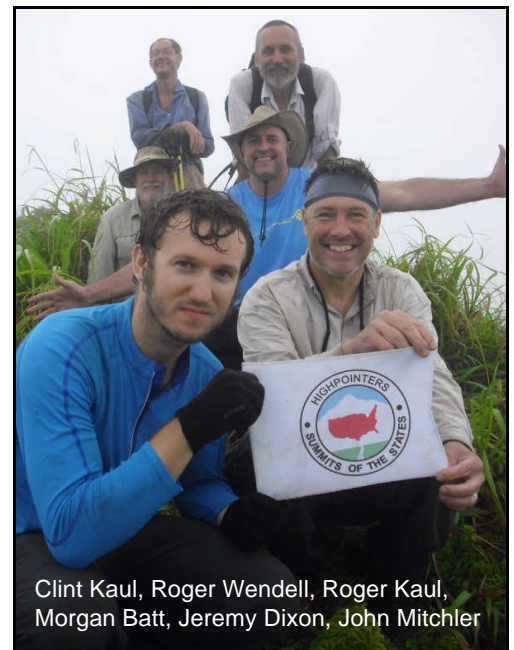
Once ashore, we established a radio network between 1) the boat anchored offshore, 2) the main encampment on the beach, and 3) the trail crew which was making its way through the dense vegetation. Clint and RogerW provided route finding as they climbed three days, establishing two tarp camps

along the way. During day four on the island, all climbers ascended to high camp as the exhausted cutters descended to the shore camp. On day five, the climbers ascended to the crater rim where we stopped at a deep cleft which separated our narrow ridge from an isolated mud pillar.

We were 26' short from making a historic first ascent.

The expedition's leader, **Roger Kaul**, asked geologist **Nicholas Schmerr** about the dissected nature of the crater rim. Dr. Schmerr wrote, "The rims of volcanoes are often gravitationally unstable due to over-steepening that occurs from excavation of the cavity (e.g. eruptive explosions) and deposition of lava and ash on the flanks. I don't think it is unusual for a fissure or crack to open up as the rim slumps under its own weight. This can happen if you have a natural break already present in the rock, or when a piece of the slope detaches and slides down hill. It's possible this detachment might form a fairly extensive circum-caldera fissure. I would warn that the formation of such a crevasse may be an early indicator of a forthcoming landslide, which is probably something you don't want to be in the way of!"

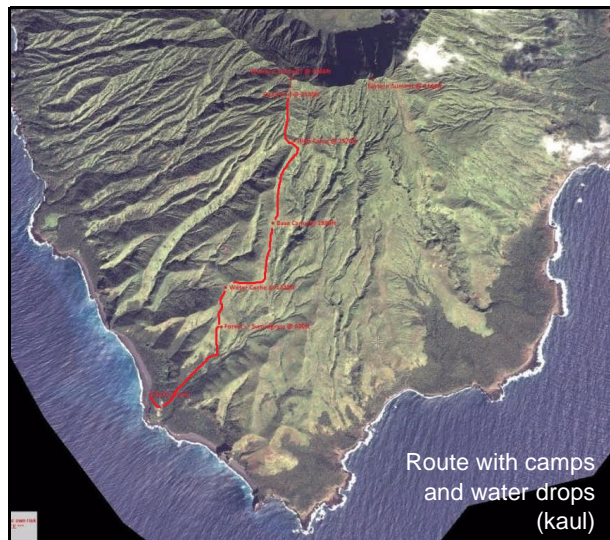
Now faced with the prospect of returning to the boat without ascending the final 26 feet, the calm and thoughtful **Jeremy Dixon** expressed it best, "Inside I am screaming!"



Clint Kaul, Roger Wendell, Roger Kaul, Morgan Batt, Jeremy Dixon, John Mitchler

Sword Grass grows tall at lower elevations and is knee-high near the crater rim.

(photos by kaul & wendell)



Route with camps and water drops (kaul)

RESOURCES

Email John M. for a copy of 2014 article or join a return expedition.

Clint's Trip Report - SummitPost.org/agrihan-2015-summit-attempt/971493

Clint's Mountain&Rock Report - SummitPost.org/agrihan/971416

Clint's blog - clintkaul.blogspot.com (search May 26 - June 10, 2015)

Peak Information - peakbagger.com/peak.aspx?pid=74397

Morgan's Mass - www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzt-jKl8pkl (first in 40 yrs!)

RogerW's text & photos - RogerWendell.com/cnmi.html

RogerW's video - www.youtube.com (search Agrihan)

FAQ

What size team is best? 3 to 8 climbers to spread costs, 4 or more cutters and porters

Are others going? clintkaul@gmail.com, jdmitchler@aol.com

What permits are needed? Access permit and POA from Northern Islands Mayor

What do we eat? Fresh fish&pork, no stoves allowed in grass

How far away is Guam? Japan 5hrs, Hawaii 7hrs

How far away is Agrihan? 22 hrs by boat from Saipan

What do I wear? No exposed skin due to the grass; wear shades and gloves, you'll be drenched in sweat and rain

What is the cost? Team cost is \$5k/day for boat & support (cutters & porters), individual cost is travel to Saipan and food

What dangers lurk? Remote in case of emergency, huge feral pigs & lizards, and leave the machete to the experts

When can I go? May to August (calm seas), rain in July

What's the weather? Hot. Humid. Night lows in the 70s

Where do I sleep? Hillside rain tarp on uneven ground

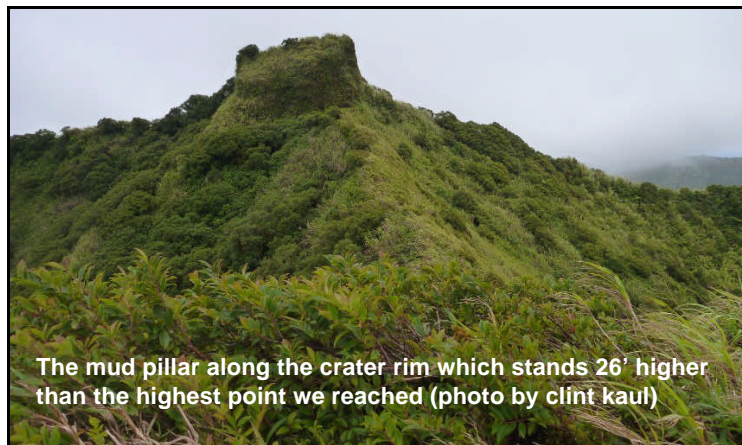
When will CNMI become an independent nation so I don't have to do this as a territory highpoint? Unlikely

If we had more water and food for the cutters, then we could have utilized our extra time to probe alternative routes to the summit pillar. Many Highpointers have experienced this problem. Or had we brought technical climbing gear suited for soft steep terrain (other than our 60' rope), we could have made a direct attack on the pillar. Either solution required porters to haul the weight of water and gear, day after day.

Perhaps the major earthquakes of July 2016 and February 2017 have toppled the mud pillar and our high ridge end point now serves as the island's apex. Wishful thinking.

But hey, our trip to CNMI was not a loss by any means. In addition to the singular and sublime adventure of Agrihan, we enjoyed wonderful interaction with the friendly locals (many who are Chamorro), including an amazing radio interview (www.CNMIradio.com). Plus we gained new informa-

The real heroes were our team of Saipan locals who cut the Sword Grass.



The mud pillar along the crater rim which stands 26' higher than the highest point we reached (photo by clint kaul)

tion about what is truly needed for a successful climb. On our return from Agrihan we visited other "northern islands" of Pagan and Alamagan, and as well, we did the highpoints of 3 of the 4 CNMI municipalities (county equivalents) - Tinian's Puntan Carolinas, Rota's Mt Manira, and Saipan's Mt Tapotchau (it is 37,752' from Tapotchau's summit to the depths of the Marianas Trench, across just 7.15 miles). Only Northern Islands municipality's Agrihan remains unclimbed.

But we are not sated. The real jewel is in our dreams; an ascent of Agrihan.