MOUNTAINEERING LEGENDS AND LORE

A COLLECTION OF EXCERPTS

FROM THE SERIES

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS

MOUNTAINEERS
BOOKS

Mountaineers Books is the publishing division of The Mountaineers, an organization founded in 1906 and dedicated to the exploration, preservation, and enjoyment of outdoor and wilderness areas.

1001 SW Klickitat Way, Suite 201 • Seattle, WA 98134
800.553.4453 • www.mountaineersbooks.org

Mountaineering Legends and Lore
Copyright © 2016 by Mountaineers Books.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, without the prior written permission of the publisher. All excerpts included in this book are the exclusive property-license of Mountaineers Books.
Minus 148° ©1969 by Art Davidson
A Life On The Edge © 1999 by Jim Whittaker
Freedom Climbers © 2013 by Bernadette McDonald
Extreme Eiger © 2015 by Peter and Leni Gillman
Through A Land of Extremes © 2008 by Elizabeth and Nicholas Clinch
That Untravelled World © 1969 by Eric Shipton
Everest: The West Ridge © 1965 by Tom Hornbein
Reinhold Messner: My Life at the Limit © 2014 by Reinhold Messner
The Last Step © 1980 by Rick Ridgeway
Mountain of My Fear and Deborah © 1968, 1970 by David Roberts
Sherpa translation © 2016 by Corinne McKay

Design and Layout: Mountaineers Books

Mountaineers Books titles may be purchased for corporate, educational, or other promotional sales, and our authors are available for a wide range of events. For information on special discounts or booking an author, contact our customer service at 800-553-4453 or mbooks@mountaineersbooks.org.

CONTENTS

Introductory Note

1. "Blizzard" from *Minus 148°*
   by Art Davidson
2. "Climbing with Kennedy" from *A Life On The Edge*
   by Jim Whittaker
3. "Mountains of Misery" from *Freedom Climbers*
   by Bernadette McDonald
4. "Parallel Lines" from *Extreme Eiger*
   by Peter and Leni Gillman
5. "Confrontation" from *Through A Land of Extremes*
   by Elizabeth and Nicholas Clinch
6. Excerpt from "Himalayan Hey-Day" in *That Untravelled World*
   by Eric Shipton
7. "Our Turn" from *Everest: The West Ridge*
   by Tom Hornbein
8. Excerpts from the Epilogue in *Reinhold Messner: My Life at the Limit*
   by Reinhold Messner
9. Excerpt from "The Snow Dome" in *The Last Step*
   by Rick Ridgeway
10. Chapters 11 and 12 from *Mountain of My Fear and Deborah*
    by David Roberts
11. "I Choose A Career As A Sherpa" from *Sherpa*
    by Ang Tharkay

THE LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES honors the lives and adventures of mountaineers and is made possible in part through the generosity of donors. Mountaineers Books, a nonprofit publisher, further contributes to this investment through book sales from more than 600 titles on outdoor recreation, sustainable lifestyle, and conservation.

We would like to thank the following for their charitable support of Legends and Lore:

FOUNDERS CIRCLE

- Anonymous
- Tina Bullitt
- Bill Buxton
- Tom and Kathy Hornbein*
- Hope and Dave Maltz
- Dianne Roberts and Jim Whittaker
- William Sumner
- Lawrence True and Linda Brown
- Doug and Maggie Walker

SUPPORTERS

- Byron Capps
- Roger Johnson
- Joshua Randow
- Jolene Unsoeld

**With special appreciation to Tom Hornbein, who donates to the series all royalties earned through the sale of his book,* Everest: The West Ridge.

You can help us preserve and promote mountaineering literature by making a donation to the Legends and Lore series. For more information, benefits of sponsorship, or how you can support future work, please contact us at mbooks@mountaineersbooks.org or visit us online at www.mountaineersbooks.org.

Introductory Note

The Legends and Lore series features both new stories and old—books by or about significant mountaineers and explorers, as well as some less well-known individuals whose histories are equally fascinating, but in danger of becoming lost.

Mountaineering Legends and Lore: A Collection of Excerpts from the Series features excerpts from eleven of the twenty-one (and counting!) volumes that currently make up the Legends and Lore series. In this ebook you'll find selections from classic mountaineering tales, such as Tom Hornbein's first-person account of the first ascent of Mount Everest via the West Ridge; Tom and Willi Unsoeld made that ascent in 1963 and it's a route that has been repeated by only fourteen individuals in the fifty-odd years since. You'll also likely discover some new names in this sampler: Ang Tharkay was the premier Sherpa of his day; he was invited to join Maurice Herzog's 1950 expedition and was a key member of that team that put the first men on the summit of an 8000-meter peak, but few Westerners know his story. Originally published as *Memoires d'un Sherpa*, his autobiography has never been published in English until now: *Sherpa: The Memoir of Ang Tharkay* is one of our most recent additions to the Legends and Lore series. Not all legendary

mountaineering feats happen in the Himalaya, of course, and you hold in your hands tastes of a couple of classic adventures in Alaska, as well as one on the Eiger's North Face.

Intrepid Victorian explorers, brash and ambitious climbers, presidential candidates, and the "greatest high-altitude mountaineer the world will ever know" stride through this sampler from the Legends and Lore series. We hope you'll enjoy their voices and want to read more of them—and maybe support this series, which is made possible by loyal readers, as well. This support ensures that these inspiring mountaineering histories and significant adventure stories are available to readers worldwide.

To learn more about the benefits of supporting this series, please contact us at mbooks@mountaineersbooks.org.

MOUNTAINEERS
BOOKS

Find us online at www.mountaineersbooks.org
or follow us:

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

"This finely crafted adventure tale runs on adrenaline but also something else: brutal honesty."

—THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

With an Introduction by DAVID ROBERTS

ART DAVIDSON

MINUS 148°

FIRST WINTER ASCENT OF MOUNT MCKINLEY

MINUS 148°

FIRST WINTER ASCENT OF MOUNT MCKINLEY

ART DAVIDSON

In 1967, eight men attempted North America's highest summit: Mount McKinley (now known as Denali). The mountain had been climbed before—but never in winter. Plagued by doubts and cold, group tension and a crevasse tragedy, the expedition members became trapped by monstrous storms in claustrophobic snow caves above 14,000 feet—languishing day after day in darkness as the temperature fell and fell to the impossibly low temperature of −148° F.

The following is excerpted from *Minus 148°*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

Blizzard

We woke to see a storm front sweeping in from the south. A high overcast already stretched to the north; dark purple and gray clouds, packed up against the mountains to the southwest, were rapidly forcing their way up the Kahiltna. The summits of McKinley and Foraker were obscured by lenticular caps. We spotted whirling clouds of snow being torn from the high ridges by a wind. Standing outside our tents, the air around us still, we knew the sky was about to crash down upon us.

Camp had to be moved because the tents were pitched under a slope that would avalanche if there were a heavy snowfall. There was little time to think of the previous day.

We should have secured ourselves in igloos before the storm struck, but even as we retreated down glacier, snow carried on a fifteen- to twenty-mile-per-hour wind flew into our faces. We reached Farine's body. Swallowing hard, I tasted again, this time in my memory rather than my mouth, that stale sweetness from Farine's

Base camp on the Kahiltna

crushed insides that had been smeared on my face. There was time only to mark the body with a bamboo pole which would help us locate him again if 20 to 30 inches of snow accumulated before we could return. Moving on, our emotions were caught between anguish for the corpse and apprehension for the storm and the campsite we hadn't found yet.

Although we had set out to find good igloo-building snow about a quarter of a mile below Farine, I felt we were wandering aimlessly. Snow obscured the peaks. We were walking in a near white-out. As it snowed

harder everything became white; the ground and the sky appeared the same. Contrast disappeared. We could see only about 15 feet ahead.

In ropes of two we groped and wandered in a desultory manner, looking for snow packed into the hard consistency needed for igloo blocks. Often we lost sight of the others; only by calling out could we rejoin them. For several horrible minutes we all just clustered together in the driving snow, no one speaking, no one knowing what to do.

Several voices, muffled by the storm, said we ought to pitch the tents. Someone growled that the tents might rip apart if the wind continued to grow stronger. Again, we set off in pairs to search out a patch of glacier where the snow was soft enough for our saws to cut and hard enough to hold when erected into an igloo wall.

We stumbled about. We poked the points of our axes hopefully at the frozen surface. We cursed the blizzard. Frantic visions of Farine's bloody face and the mushy sound inside his chest darted through my mind. At length we found snow that would make adequate blocks. Gregg and two others headed back to yesterday's camp for supplies; four of us started an igloo.

Not only did we not work efficiently as a team, but we each had a different idea of how the igloo should be constructed. George suggested we cut large thin slabs, as the Eskimos do. I insisted we ought to make the blocks thick and solid. Dave quite understandably wanted a high ceiling. Someone else wanted to simply dig a pit and block in a roof, never mind how high the ceiling.

Shiro took the key position in the center of the area we had scribed off for our igloo. We cut blocks and passed them to him. After the bottom row had been carefully set in a circle, George stepped up to help Shiro; he propped rough blocks in place while Shiro shaped them for a tight fit. I quarried the blocks several yards away. No sooner would I cut one from the packed snow than Dave's long arms would reach for it and pass it to George.

It had taken us more than a half hour to put up the first row, partly because the circumference of this foundation would be larger than that of succeeding layers, but mostly because we took special care to construct a

solid base—one weak or misplaced block in the bottom row could bring the entire structure crumbling down unexpectedly. As our building system improved and each higher row shrank in size, the structure gradually took the shape of a three-cornered hemisphere. The faster we worked, the less we thought of Farine, and the more we felt like a team.

Hours passed. It began to grow darker. The whiteout became thicker. Every few minutes we yelled, then listened for a reply from the three who had not returned from the previous campsite. At length, one of our cries was answered by a faint, high-pitched yodel. Shortly, three figures, their heads bent to shield faces from the wind, trudged out of the wall of grayness that surrounded us.

With all our efforts concentrated on the igloo, its main chamber was quickly completed. While Dave and I cut and laid blocks for the arched entrance, a tent was set up; stoves were started; food was unpacked; sleeping bags were thrown out. In a great shuffle of elbows, shoulders, and legs we sprawled about the floor of our new home to finally eat our first real meal of the day.

"Gentlemen," George stated with mock gravity, "it gives me great pleasure to announce the opening of the Kahiltna Hilton, built by the famous Eskimo architect Shiro. This premier banquet, prepared by chef Gregg, appears to be a smorgasbord of dehydrated pork chops, diced ham, rice, cheese, dried potatoes, applesauce, powdered milk, instant chicken noodle soup, turkey bouillon cubes, *au jus* gravy mix, and dried green peppers all cooked and served in one pot."

"It's a super glop!" Dave chimed in. "And well seasoned with bits of yesterday's Tang and oatmeal."

Leaning against Pirate's back and half buried under Dave's 7-foot sleeping bag, I stuffed myself with glop till I grew drowsy. As I drifted off, half daydreaming, only snatches of the conversation registered in my sleepy head.

Next page: Art and Dave

"This storm has helped us," I heard Shiro say to Gregg. "It's driven us together, by forcing us to act."

"Yaaa." Pirate's voice lifted above the others. "I like this weather!"

Eventually someone nudged me awake to get me to spread my foam sleeping pad and bag alongside Pirate's. Dave and Shiro had gone out to sleep in the tent. John and George appeared to be asleep already. The lantern was turned off; for a while, Gregg scribbled away at his journal by the light of a single candle; then it too was blown out. I was thankful that some humor had returned to us; it made me more confident that we could still take care of ourselves. Our igloo was cozy. The snow blocks muffled the sounds of the blizzard; I had difficulty picturing the wind and snow that were swirling across the glacier. Farine's image came to mind. It seemed to always be right at the edge of my thoughts. Often I'd see him standing in the doorway of Sheldon's hangar with those huge moose antlers balanced on his head. Whenever this image returned I felt a tenseness begin to mount somewhere inside me, as though I wanted to shout or begin running. Even during our most relaxed moments this evening I knew the others had felt this underlying tension in their own way. It was probably best that we hadn't tried to voice our emotions.

"Art," I heard Gregg whisper from the other side of the igloo, "are you talking in your sleep."

"No, I'm awake."

Gregg felt like talking a little. He told me that Shiro and Pirate had volunteered to hike 4 miles down the glacier, as soon as the storm eased off a bit, to call Sheldon with the radio we had left at the landing site. The rest of us would have to haul the body to an area where Sheldon could land.

"Until Farine is taken care of," Gregg said, "we can't very well continue the climb, or even know whether we will go on."

Gregg went on to tell me how alone and morbid he had felt the previous night. I told him we had all been confined in our thoughts. He said he thought that sense of separateness was giving way to the feeling of being part of a group. The expedition seemed to be reasserting its identity.

The sky wasn't clear the next day, but for brief moments the sun did manage to hit us directly. The wind was down, and snow fell in only light and occasional flurries. Shiro and Pirate set off down the glacier to the radio. It was possible that Sheldon might make it in for Farine before nightfall. Five of us went to haul the body.

We found it half buried in snow. Dave and Gregg hurried about the unpleasant task of binding ropes around arms and chest and legs. We attached three hauling lines.

Before we stepped into our traces, George took several pictures of the hole and the body; I filmed the scene with the movie camera. Our first steps were unsteady, but we found a rhythm and began to pull together. Head first, the body slid over the wind-swept ice, gouging into the surface only when we crossed areas of drifted snow. Always we leaned far forward. The ropes cut into our waists, forcing us to fashion a harness around our shoulders and chests. It was not a light load.

We aimed ourselves at the cache site Sheldon had chosen for a landing strip several days earlier. We quickened our pace when the glacier tilted downward, and strained to keep the body moving when we had to gain a slight rise.

The first time I asked whether I could leave my traces to film our procession, Dave shouted at me to hurry up. The second time I left the others to film from a dozen yards away, Dave, anger rising in his eyes and voice, asked me why I was filming this macabre scene. "You're sure irritable today," I told him. "We have to document this situation."

Dave grumbled and looked away from me. I didn't think he had accepted my answer. At the time, I didn't stop to really question why I had an obsession to photograph our efforts to drag the body across the glacier to the landing site. I simply obeyed a compulsion to film, to record our trek, to get it all down on celluloid.

Later I realized that my desire to photograph had been an attempt to escape and defend myself. Filming, I could occupy my mind with exposure readings and shooting angles. When I framed the scene through the lens, our horrifying task became an event; all I had to do was hide behind

the camera. I escaped, if only momentarily, from being a participant by becoming an observer. Besides seeking refuge from my confused emotions by considering our death march an event, I defended myself by treating it as a subject that I could grasp and define with the means of cinematography; this allowed me an elusive sense of control over the situation.

When we had reached the landing site there was nothing we could do but slide the body snugly up against the food boxes and plod on back to camp. It was dusk when we threw off our packs in front of the igloo. Shiro and Pirate hadn't returned. We tried to force out of our minds thoughts of their being caught in another crevasse. We ate. We waited. I often crawled out of the igloo to try spotting their headlamps. We discussed what we'd do after Sheldon took Farine out. We began to wonder what to do if Shiro and Pirate didn't return. It would be reckless to begin looking for them before morning.

We had all but resigned ourselves to setting out early the next morning to search for the missing two when we spotted the distant twinkles of their headlamps far down the glacier. In another hour they sat with us, drinking soup and digging into a rice glop thick with cheese and tuna fish. They said they had tinkered with the radio for four hours, stretching the wire antennae in several directions, warming the battery, but whatever they tried the obstinate box of tubes and wires hadn't encouraged them with even the slightest sputtering of static.

The radio failure meant we had no way of knowing when we would be able to establish contact with anyone. Our best bet seemed to be stamping a message in the snow in the hope that Sheldon would spot it if he happened to fly some tourists around the mountain in a few days or a week. It was unsettling to realize that if one of us were seriously injured in a crevasse fall or an avalanche there would be no way of calling for help. Had we hauled Farine out of the crevasse alive he probably would have become delirious because of his head injury, and since we would have been unable to get him to a hospital, he would have died in our hands.

Before we could continue toward the summit of McKinley we had to offer an explanation of the death to that remote place we had begun to

call the outside world. Pirate volunteered to escort the body to Anchorage whenever Sheldon reached us. Gregg tried to write a press release to relate the manner of death and communicate our reasons for wanting to complete the climb. It was a difficult explanation made all the more difficult by Gregg's mixed emotions and attitudes. None of us, for that matter, had fully resolved our conflicting reactions to the accident. Nevertheless, we tried to help Gregg write a statement that was straightforward.

Although we didn't feel free to climb upward until Sheldon took out Farine and Pirate, we expected that if we simply waited in the igloo with nothing but morose thoughts to occupy our minds, depression would make us jump at the opportunity to leave the mountain when Sheldon eventually arrived. We believed that we had decided to continue, but it was hardly a decision, for at that moment there was no way for us to return.

The following day we ferried loads in a perfunctory manner. We could muster little enthusiasm for our labor because we knew an adverse reaction to the accident by the outside world might necessitate our departure from McKinley. And it was difficult to work so close to the frozen lump that had been our friend.

By evening the low, dark clouds that had bullied their way among the peaks all day had settled down to the surface of the glacier. Under the cloud we lit all our lamps and a good many candles to brighten the igloo and the tent. This night may not have been much darker than previous ones, but the oppressive fog of minute ice crystals made us want light. I even suspected Gregg and John of hoarding more than their share of the candles in their corner of the igloo, and when Dave and Shiro left the igloo for their tent I regretted they had to take one of the lanterns with them.

I went to sleep expecting that a blizzard would have us shut into the igloo by morning. Hours later I woke blinking and rubbing the sleep from my eyes; the sound of John rustling through his pack for his camera had roused me. "Art," he whispered loudly, "it's the most beautiful sight man's ever witnessed! I think it's the dawn of creation!" With that he wheeled

around, scurried out the igloo entrance, and was gone in a flash. I sat up in my sleeping bag, still blinking my eyes.

Several minutes later I stood next to John, fumbling to mount my movie camera on a tripod. “By God,” he said, looking to the south, “we certainly live on a beautiful planet.”

A huge, soft, pink cloud was lifting over Foraker; the rock was lit with a yellowish glow where the sun struck it. Mist clung to the ridges of McKinley and Hunter and everywhere the clouds were pastel shades of pink, yellow, and silver. It seemed as if the sky were splitting apart where the sun broke through the mist and clouds.

I filmed until someone had cooked breakfast and only wished I’d been waked sooner so I could have begun filming the first stages of dawn. Since Dave had been awake at first light, I asked him why he hadn’t waked me up to film. He looked up from his journal to glare at me with a stony, faraway expression. “It’s your own damn fault that you slept too late,” he said, then turned back to his journal.

This didn’t seem like the old Dave I had climbed with before. Maybe there had been too much irritation in my voice when I had spoken to him. I wondered what he was taking so much time to write about in his journal.

Dave’s journal, February 4:

> *Dawn is beautiful. A cloud half-covering Foraker radiates warm pinkness from its bottom, causing the east—southeast rock buttress to glow warmly in the mist. When Art finally gets up he blasts me for not waking him. In a frenzy he photographs everything in sight. I’m envious of his camera gear, and p.o.ed at him too. I carry his 35-mm. camera, which he said I could use on the climb, but he reclaims it when he wants to take a picture.*
>
> *Today I am a proponent for the fast group, so the slow ones bug me… especially Art, who doesn’t seem to care how much he holds everyone else up while he photographs, but who nearly has a fit should anyone hold him up.*

After breakfast we split into groups of three and four; Gregg, George, and Pirate started across the glacier to shuttle loads from the air drop; Shiro, Dave, John, and I began setting the route to Kahiltna Pass and packing up the first supplies to stock the next campsite.

The irridescent colors of dawn had been replaced by bright sunlight and a mostly clear sky. Much of our gloom of the previous days was lifting with the weather; a few minutes of sunshine were doing more to inspire us to continue the ascent than had all our discussions and self-analysis. Several hundred yards out of camp Dave stopped to talk to me.

"I'm sorry about this morning, Art," he said. "Guess I just need to get out on the trail to pull my spirits up."

"Forget it," I answered. "I was a little grumpy myself."

The few clouds in the vicinity shifted about; usually we climbed in direct sunlight, but occasionally a shadow would cross our route. John and I poked along nearly a half-mile behind Dave and Shiro, who were breaking trail with lighter loads in their packs. The higher we climbed the more dramatically the Kahiltna flowed away behind us. Down below, our camp had become a cluster of dots; miles beyond the specks that were the tent and igloo the glacier turned behind Mount Hunter to disappear from our sight. I felt frustrated trying to film the drama of the landscape. Perhaps with careful editing my film could convey an impression of our gradual ascent by showing the ridges and the Kahiltna growing smaller behind us, but I knew I could never express on film the imperceptible but overpowering descent of the glacier itself. Among the filming speeds on my camera there wasn't a setting for geological time. It might be a thousand years before the ice we were climbing over would reach the great bend the Kahiltna makes near Mount Hunter. Another thousand years might pass before this snow and ice would reach the end of its journey on a gravel bar among willows and alders.

We were still two miles below Kahiltna Pass when I thought I heard the sound we had been listening for through the last three days.

"Hold up a sec, John. Hear anything?"

"No—Yes, I hear it now!"

A small plane was soon circling above us; it was red; it couldn't be Sheldon's. The plane banked gracefully several times before it sent down a little parcel. John and I threw off our packs to scramble after it. In a wadded-up paper bag was a note: "Do you guys need anything besides wine, women, and a sauna bath?"

Though we couldn't help laughing, the note was a reminder that the secret we had been quietly trying to forget was about to become public knowledge.

The plane swung down the glacier, over our camp, and evidently the pilot noticed the signal—LAND—which we had stamped in the snow, for he began circling as if looking for a place to touch down. A mile and a half below camp Pirate, Gregg, and George began hurrying back to the igloo.

John and I decided to return to camp also. By the time we had cached our loads and started down the slope, the pilot had landed. We watched him disappear into our igloo, then reappear again after he found no one at home. We were still a mile above camp when, to our horror, the pilot began walking in our direction. Between him and us lay the crevasse field. He was heading straight toward the crevasse that had claimed Farine. John and I tried calling to him, but we were still too far away. We began running.

When we finally came within shouting distance he was only a few yards from where the hidden crevasse intersected our marked trail.

"Stay where you are!" I yelled.

He stopped. I recognized him as an old friend, Jim Cassidy. Immediately, we tied him into the rope. Stammering for the best way to say it, I told him why we were so worried about his having walked unroped. Quietly, Cassidy offered to call Sheldon for us.

When Cassidy had landed, one of the supporting rods for his plane's skis had snapped. From odd corners of his plane he dug out bits of rope and wire. Calmly, he began lashing the ski back in place. I started to offer him some adhesive tape I had in the igloo, but I judged he was taking the damage too seriously to appreciate this suggestion.

When Cassidy ran out of wire and twine he did ask if we could spare a little nylon climbing rope. Sure, anything, we said, and ran to get him all the rope he wanted. After he'd spent most of an hour bandaging up his flying machine, the pilot stood up and affectionately patted the fuselage of his ailing friend. "She'll be OK till I can get her ski welded," he said, not too convincingly.

With a sigh Cassidy climbed into the cockpit, checked his instruments, fired the motor, then gunned the prop. Nothing happened. The plane's tail was stuck under a crust of wind-packed snow. Following his instructions, we positioned ourselves on the tail and under the wings. As Cassidy opened up the throttle we yanked upward on the tail and rocked and shoved forward on the wing struts. Suddenly, the plane lurched ahead and began racing away with a cloud of snow billowing out from the backwash of the prop. As the roaring vehicle bounced frantically down the uneven surface of the glacier it appeared for a moment that the wings were actually flapping. To our astonishment the plane eventually rose smoothly into the air. Cassidy circled us once, tipped his wings, and disappeared to the south. Less than two hours after Cassidy had left Sheldon arrived. Without ceremony, he and Pirate loaded Farine's body into the plane. The next moment they were gone. In his shirt pocket Pirate had our statement for the press. It read: "On January 31, 1967, Jacques 'Farine' Batkin, mountaineer from Paris, France, died in an unroped fall into a crevasse while attempting the first winter ascent of Mount McKinley. Jacques Batkin died in the pursuit of a winter ascent, in which he truly believed. We will continue the attempt with his spirit and presence very much in mind."

On Pirate's lap were the letters we had written to our families. More than the press release, and more than what we had told each other, the letters revealed our attempts to articulate our tangled emotions and our reasons for not quitting.

I wrote to my wife:

> *...Farine will be urging the seven of us up every pitch of ice and rock that lies ahead, and at the same time reminding us to look at the*

sun, the wind, the snow and stars that are all about us. And Mairiis, I hope his spirit will be with you and me whenever we walk in a forest to see if the catkins are out or to pick mushrooms, or when we hear the wind through spruce trees or watch clouds breaking away from a storm....

Gregg sent the first section of his journal out with Pirate. Written as a long letter to his wife, it reflected his day-to-day search for the courage to overcome his grief and lead us through whatever lay ahead.

February 1:

I don't know what to tell you, Honey. Everyone wants to go on, and now I agree with them. Certainly I couldn't desert them at this point. I cried, my God how I felt. I got quite carried away compared to the others. I said I didn't want to go on with the climb, probably for selfish reasons; I felt responsible.

His death is a terrible thing, but should it alter our purpose? I don't know. I know many people will condemn us for going on. I know many mountaineers will condemn with good reason this avoidable accident, but I can't really see how our quitting now would help. I hope you can understand. This accident will make us much more cautious and we will go slowly and carefully. I don't know if I want to go for the summit myself, but I must support those who do.... Farine was a mountain man who lived for the mountains. Compared to him, I don't belong.

February 2:

This climb is still a dream. I couldn't believe it prior to the climb and reality still hasn't hit.... The rest of the climb will be OK, if the

weather holds halfway decent. I'll hardly be a tiger from here on up, but at least I can be a help.

February 3:

. . . As you can see, the shock of Farine's death has worn off. I am glad because it was really hell for a while.

By evening clouds had appeared and it had begun to snow lightly.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
MINUS 148°

About the author

Art Davidson has authored a number of books about indigenous peoples and the environment including *In the Wake of the Exxon Valdez*, *Endangered Peoples*, *The Circle of Life,* and *The Vale of Kashmir*. He has also published a book of poetry, *Moonrise Over Denali*. He lives in the mountains near Anchorage with his wife, Anna, and their three children, Arthur, Joe, and Cung.

NEW FOREWORD by ED VIESTURS

A LIFE ON THE EDGE

MEMOIRS of EVEREST and BEYOND

ANNIVERSARY EDITION

A LIFE ON THE EDGE

MEMOIRS OF EVEREST AND BEYOND

JIM WHITTAKER

In May of 1963 Jim Whittaker became the first American to summit Mount Everest. More than fifty years later, he is still regarded as a seminal figure in North American mountaineering, as well as an astute businessman who helped create the outdoor recreation industry. Beyond the glory of the Everest summit and his other extraordinary climbing feats, Jim openly describes his personal, "everyman" experiences of an early divorce, family strife, a passionate new love later in life, near-bankruptcy, and business triumphs and losses. Jim tells it all with verve and honesty and, true to his nature, turns every setback into the stage for new adventure

The following is excerpted from *Jim Whittaker: A Life on the Edge*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

Barry Prather (left) and Robert Kennedy heading up Mount Kennedy from Base Camp (Whittaker family collection)

Climbing with Kennedy

Have you ever climbed a mountain before?" I asked the senator.

"No," said Bobby Kennedy, on the phone from Washington, D.C.

"What are you doing to get into shape for the climb?" I asked.

"Running up and down the stairs and practicing hollering 'Help!'" he replied.

"Great," I thought to myself.

A year after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, the Canadian government named their nation's highest unclimbed mountain after the slain president. The peak rises to just under 14,000 feet in the glacier-clad St. Elias Mountains, which form the border between the southwestern corner of the Yukon Territory and the panhandle of Alaska. The National Geographic Society and the Boston Museum of Science, along with the Canadian government, were co-sponsoring a surveying expedition. Bradford Washburn, the director of the museum, knew the mountain better than any man alive; in 1935, when this region had been nothing but a blank spot on the map of Canada, he had been the first to explore it. Brad had described the peak now called Mount Kennedy as "another giant that we judged to be 14,000 feet high. Unlike the rounded domes of its neighbors, this mountain had a sharp, almost Himalayan summit, flanked with staggering precipices of ice and granite."

Jim and Robert Kennedy in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, en route to Mount Kennedy, with Royal Canadian Air Force plane in background, 1965 (Whittaker family collection)

Because I had summited Everest less than two years earlier, the Society asked me to lead the climb. Then they told me I would be leading the former president's brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, to the top. (In fact, the Society had invited Bobby's younger brother, Teddy, as well, but he was recuperating from an airplane accident and couldn't make it.) The members of the team included another veteran of the 1963 Everest expedition, Barry Prather; *National Geographic* magazine photographer William Allard; a member of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club, James Craig; and three others, Dee Molenaar, William Prater, and George Senner.

I first met the senator on March 21, 1965, when he arrived in Seattle from Washington, D.C. I was relieved; though he had slept on the flight and looked rumpled and weary, he also looked—at a wiry five foot ten and about 165 pounds—to be in good physical condition. The next morning, he, Brad

Ice cave on Mount Kennedy: Jim Craig, Dee Molenaar, George Senner, Robert Kennedy, and Jim (Photo by William Albert Allard/National Geographic Society)

Washburn, and I flew to Juneau, Alaska, and from there chartered a plane to Whitehorse, in the Yukon, where our Canadian climber, James Craig, was waiting for us. The rest of the team had gone to the mountain earlier that week and had established Base Camp at 8,700 feet.

On the flights to Juneau and Whitehorse, Bobby and I sat together and talked. I found him somewhat shy but warm and personable, and intensely curious—about everything: me, our team, the mountain, and mountain climbing in general.

From Whitehorse, we had planned to charter a ski plane to Base Camp, but bad weather and deep snow canceled the flight. We stood around nonplused for a while, then learned that a big Royal Canadian Air Force helicopter had just set down to refuel. Casually, Brad asked the pilot if it could be made available to us—I was impressed that he had the nerve to ask. I was

doubly impressed when, after consultations with Ottawa and a check on the weather at the mountain, the pilot agreed.

We choppered to Base Camp atop Cathedral Glacier, roughly a vertical mile beneath our goal. We dumped our packs, jumped out, said goodbye to Brad Washburn, who would stay in Whitehorse, and ate powder snow as the helicopter blasted off. I felt like a pampered kid as I walked into the six-man tent that had been set up by our advance team members, where dinner was waiting. "Not bad," I thought.

The next morning I showed Bobby how to walk in the snowshoes we'd be using for the first day's climb and tied him in as the middle man on our rope, with Barry Prather roped in at the rear. At 10:00 AM we started up the snow-covered glacier. He seemed content to be guided rather than instructed; I got the feeling he was a "learn by doing" person. But his curiosity about mountaineering, and everything we had done as climbers, was insatiable. Each time we stopped for a rest break, he'd pepper me with questions about climbs I'd made, problems I'd encountered, and especially, the details of the Everest expedition. (He became so interested in the Sherpa and their problems that he sent the $10,000 check he received for writing a *Life* magazine article on his climb to a fund to improve living conditions for them in Nepal.)

Despite the fact that he'd never worn snowshoes before, and that we were climbing a pretty steep slope, he had no trouble keeping up—in fact, he kept asking me to go faster. I was setting my normal "guide pace," learned from many years of experience with clients on Mount Rainier. Typically, novices climb too fast and burn themselves out before they ever reach High Camp. I told him to slow down.

Before long, however, I felt the rope between us go slack and heard him moving close behind me again. I stopped and explained that if I fell through a snow bridge into a crevasse and too much slack had developed, it would mean a long fall for me and one hell of a jerk for him. He might even follow me into an icy tomb.

"Okay, Jim," he said, agreeably. "But could you pick up the pace a little?"

It had been a brilliant morning, with the temperature rising to 25 degrees above, but now it was beginning to snow. I began to move faster, convinced that any minute now I would feel the rope tighten as he began to poop out.

He never did. I felt great knowing he was in such good shape—by now I was certain that if we got a break in the weather, he would get the mountain.

Five hours later, when we had gained 3,000 vertical feet in deepening snow, a cardboard sign loomed ahead in the gathering twilight: "High Camp—Three Miles." Mountain humor; in fact, it was just over the rise. The advance team—Dee, George, and Bill Prater—had already set up two tents and dug a beautiful snow cave with "Senate Chamber—Members Only" spray-painted on the ice walls. Inside the cave, completely comfortable and out of the wind, Bill had dinner going: soup, Alaskan crabmeat, chicken stew, strawberries, coffee, and tea. The guys had done a great job. All through dinner, Bobby kept asking the other members of our team questions about their climbing experiences—where had they gone, what had happened, what had they done? Finally, we headed off to the tents to sleep. During the night, however, the snowstorm turned into a raging blizzard, and our tent shuddered and flapped badly. I tossed and turned, worried that I'd have to call off the climb. In the darkness, all my usual night demons came to visit. I couldn't sleep. Restless and uncomfortable, I yanked on the parka I was using as a pillow and tried to stuff the hood—with its wolverine fur ruff—further under my head.

"Ouch!"

I had grabbed Bobby's hair instead.

The wind howled on, and my old nighttime companions, my demons of doubt, cramponed into my consciousness. What a night.

By morning the wind still raged, and the temperature was close to zero. But when I peered through the tent flap the sky was clear! Though windy, it was a good summit day, and at 8:30 AM we were roped up and ready to go: Bobby, Barry, and me on the first rope; George, Bill Allard, and Dee on the second; and Bill Prater and Jim Craig on the third. We strapped on crampons and headed up the mountain in that order.

At one point I stepped over a fragile snow bridge and warned Bobby that there was a crevasse and to stay in my footprints. He did exactly as I'd told him. Suddenly my rope jerked, and Bobby yelled "Whoa!" as he dropped chest-deep into the crevasse, his feet dangling below in empty space. Pulling

Jim (right) and Bobby Kennedy on the summit of Mount Kennedy (Photo by William Albert Allard/National Geographic Society)

himself out, he looked down the hole and shook his head—he couldn't see the bottom.

On we went up the mountain until we reached the most difficult section, the sixty-five-degree ridge of the summit pyramid, one of the "staggering precipices of ice and granite" Brad Washburn had described thirty years earlier. On a small snow ledge, I coiled the rope as Bobby came up to me; then he brought in Barry. To my left was a drop of 6,000 feet; to the right, a somewhat gentler 1,000-foot slope. Ice crystals sparkled in the sunlight, and the wind had stopped. We stood there, breathing hard in the thin, cold air, staring up.

"Can that be climbed?" Bobby asked skeptically.

"I think so," I said, and got ready to tackle the last obstacle. Barry went into belay position, and I plunged my ax into the face and kick-stepped 60 feet up the ridge to where it began to slope off to the summit. I drove my ax into the snow, looped the rope around it, and shouted to Bobby, "On belay! Climb!"

"Climbing!" he shouted back, and started up.

I expected him to fall. The slope was very steep—loose snow on top of hard-pack—and exposed. Beginning climbers tend to lean into a steep slope, to cling to it. It's a mistake; the force of gravity pushes their feet out from under them and down they go. I knew this is what Bobby would do; I was positive he would fall. But he didn't. I had forgotten Bobby was a good skier and knew about snow. He didn't lean into the slope. He just kick-stepped up to me, hauled himself over the lip of the ridge, and sat down, breathing hard, while I belayed Barry up.

We were now only a few hundred feet from the summit. I broke trail through soft snow and then stopped about a hundred feet from the summit. I coiled rope again, and Bobby came up, followed by Barry.

"It's all yours, Bobby," I said.

"Can I go the rest of the way now?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, and Barry echoed, "It's okay now."

The two of us stood quietly while he trudged up the ridge, laying the first human tracks on the virgin summit. When the rope was fully uncoiled and he was 60 feet ahead of us, we followed. He stopped for a minute, catching his breath, and then walked to the highest point of Mount Kennedy, becoming the first human being to stand on the summit of the mountain named after his brother. He stood alone, head bowed, and made the sign of the cross. Tears rolled down my cheeks and froze on my parka. From his pack he pulled out a pole and flag with the Kennedy crest, knelt down, and drove it into the snow. After a few moments, I joined him, knelt on one knee, put my arm around his shoulder, and congratulated him.

"This can never be taken away," I said. "There'll never be another who will be first on Mount Kennedy."

"Yes," he said quietly.

It was March 24, 1965. As the rest of the team reached the summit, we added the flags of the United States, Canada, and the National Geographic Society, along with an 8-foot-high surveying marker, and took pictures. The Canadian Yukon—poet Robert W. Service's country, "where the ice worms wriggle their purple heads in the crust of the pale blue snow"—shone white and silent below us. For Bobby, it was the top of the world. He dug a little depression in the summit ice and left behind a copy of JFK's inaugural address, an inauguration medallion, and a couple of PT-109 tie clasps. Then we headed down.

Senator Robert Kennedy on the summit of Mount Kennedy (Whittaker family collection)

Later, when the photos appeared, *Life* magazine was deluged with letters from Kennedy haters outraged that Senator Robert Kennedy's banner was bigger than the American flag. I had to write a response explaining that Bobby had not known the size of my flag in advance, and I had not known the size of his—the kind of adolescent detail I hadn't worried about since puberty. In addition, gossipmongers claimed Bobby was hauled up the mountain by the experienced climbers on the team. They couldn't have been more wrong. In fact, even though he was carrying a heavy pack, he seemed in better shape and moved better than some other members of the team. In the years to come, I would never cease to be amazed at the way the Kennedys brought out people's passions—both the best and the worst.

Later Bobby would write in *National Geographic* magazine:

> *President Kennedy loved the outdoors. He loved adventure. He admired courage more than any other human quality, and he was President of the United States, which is frequently and accurately called the loneliest job in the world. So I am sure he would be pleased that this lonely, beautiful mountain in the Yukon bears his name, and that in this way, at least, he has joined the fraternity of those who live outdoors, battle the elements, and climb mountains.*

The climb of Mount Kennedy had done more than give me a new peak to add to my list; it had given me a new and dear friend. As often happens to people who face extreme conditions in the mountains, in only a matter of days Bobby and I had formed a deep and lasting friendship.

Despite his wealth and fame, I found Bobby to be a gentle, modest, informal man. He had a quick, wry sense of humor and seemed to me to be completely without ego, pretense, or cant. As shy as he was, he nonetheless wore his heart on his sleeve: he loved children and thought it obscene that they could go hungry in a country as rich as ours. He hurt for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised—and they knew it. He had an intense curiosity, absorbed information like a sponge, was passionate about fairness, and worked dog-

Returning from Mount Kennedy, April 1965: Blanche Whittaker, Jim, Brad Washburn, Carl, Scott, Hortense, and C.B. Whittaker (Photo by Phil Webber)

gedly on the issues that mattered to him. He had the courage, rare among politicians, to seek the truth and stand up for it. People who didn't know him well sometimes took his passion and honesty as ruthlessness. It was a description that could hardly have been less appropriate and, to me, said much more about the people who used it than it did about Bobby himself. Those who knew him well—and I became one of them—adored him.

Since I had to help write the *National Geographic* article on the climb, Bobby and I returned to Washington, D.C., together, and he invited me to stay at his home. There were two cars waiting for us at National Airport—a convertible full to overflowing with Bobby's wife, Ethel, and their mob of children, and a second car for all our luggage and gear. I started toward the

second car, but Bobby and Ethel wouldn't hear of it. So I piled into the convertible with all of them, and away we went, packed in like circus clowns.

Bobby and Ethel's home, Hickory Hill, was one of the grand old houses of McLean, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from D.C. It had rolling lawns, a tennis court, a swimming pool, and a cabana. The house was crammed full of antiques and art. Countless silver-framed family photographs filled nearly every available surface. I never did figure out how many dogs and other animals lived there as well.

I went to the National Geographic Society's offices to work for a few hours each day, then returned to Hickory Hill to swim, play tennis (usually losing), or join in a game of touch football (barely holding my own). I began to understand why Bobby did so well on the mountain; Kennedy sports, like much else in their lives, were legendarily competitive, even for the littlest Kennedy in any game.

When I left for Seattle after that first of what would become many visits, *Sports Illustrated* wrote: "Mount Everest climber Jim Whittaker, upon leaving Senator Robert Kennedy's Hickory Hill home and limping onto the airplane, said, 'It will be nice to get back home so I can rest up and recover from all that exercise.'"

The following winter, our families spent Christmas vacation together skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho. I knew how competitive the Kennedys were from the tennis and touch football games at Hickory Hill, and I expected they would ski the same way. But I was confident. Now they were on my turf—after all, I had been a ski instructor for years and was a member of the National Ski Patrol.

For our first run, Bobby and I took the chair lift to the top of Mount Baldy. I was enjoying the sunshine and the glittering snow diamonds in the air at the top when Bobby abruptly said, "I'll see you at the bottom," and took off straight down the fall line, going like a bat out of hell. I lunged after him, careening down Ridge Run; flying off moguls, gaining speed until I finally passed him, I barely reached the bottom first. We stood there panting.

"Jeez," I said, "where'd you learn to go so fast?"

Bobby answered, "I love to ski fast. It takes your mind off other things, makes you focus. You have to concentrate on the here and now."

Ski bums at the Roundhouse, Sun Valley, Idaho 1967: Willi Schaeffler, Ted Kennedy, John Glenn, Jim, Bobby Kennedy (Whittaker family collection)

We skied with Bobby's family and their entourage for several winters in Sun Valley. You never knew who was going to turn up on these forays. On any given day I would find myself riding up a chair lift with Ethel or Jackie or Joan or Teddy Kennedy; John Glenn or his wife, Annie; the singer Andy Williams or his wife, Claudine; or Henry Mancini. I taught little John-John how to do a snowplow turn, and one New Year's Eve I danced with Jackie in Sun Valley's Boiler Room. It was, in a sense, an outdoor extension of Camelot.

Summers were much the same. We alternated between Hyannisport and Seattle. One summer, Ethel and her children stayed with Blanche and me and our boys at our Lake Sammamish home for a week. We water-skied on the lake and went up into the San Juan Islands to the summer cabin we had

Jim teaching John-John the snowplow, in front of the Roundhouse at Sun Valley; Jacqueline, Caroline, and John Kennedy, Jr., circa 1966 (Whittaker family collection/LOOK magazine Photograph Collection)

on John's Island. I took Ethel to Mount Rainier, and we hiked up to Camp Muir. I had arranged for Louie to hire and train her son Joe as a Mount

Rainier guide, and she seemed to love the mountain wilderness as much as Joe did.

After she went back east, she sent a wry thank-you note:

> *Thank you for introducing me to the incredible beauty of Rainier—looming silently in the moonlight and radiating dazzling brilliance in the bright sun of high noon, a constant eloquent reminder of creation and the Creator. Now that I am back in the land of running water, light switches and blessed, beautiful, marvelous, wonderful plumbing, even John's Island looks pretty good. Hyannisport is no fun at all with all that clean, white, sandy beach and warm water. I sure do long for the sharp stones, slimy kelp and icy blast of the San Juans.*

In July 1967 I helped organize a float trip down the Colorado River for our two families and a crowd of Bobby and Ethel's friends. In all, there were forty-two of us, including columnist Art Buchwald and his wife, Otis Chandler (the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*), writer George Plimpton, Andy Williams, and many others, along with some fourteen children.

Guided by Hatch River Expeditions in Utah, we plummeted through foaming rapids, floated lazily through slack water, swam in pools and eddies, had gooey, sticky mud fights, and basked in the hot sun. River running was a new experience for me. At times the river would roar and other times be almost soundless. Above us, multicolored rock cliffs soared thousands of feet toward the sky. The warm, turbulent river was a brown, moving highway; we drifted through a canyon paradise. At lunchtime and at the end of the day, we'd pull up at a sandbar and Ted and Don Hatch would lay out a sumptuous spread for us. We'd stuff ourselves and just take in the scenery. One evening, though he hated to sing unaccompanied, we got Andy to do "Moon River" for us.

At the end of the trip, we had to climb up from the river to the rim of the canyon. It was a seven-mile hike and the temperature was 119 degrees, but I was raring to go, eager for the exercise after days in the raft. During the trip, I had especially enjoyed Art Buchwald, a man who had turned a

Ethel Kennedy (seated on right) and children visit with the Whittakers in Seattle.

childhood of physical limitations and desperate poverty into an adulthood as a charming raconteur through the power of his sharp but endearing wit. But Art was having none of the hike. He later wrote:

> *Bobby chose to climb up the seven miles, as did the Kennedy children, and when Ethel, mother of ten, said she would climb out too, the other members of the party were too embarrassed to say they would rather go by helicopter. Fearful that they would cancel the helicopter, I stopped breathing when Bobby and Jim Whittaker came up to me to see if they could persuade me to change my mind.*
>
> *"Why don't you want to climb the mountain?" Bobby asked.*
>
> *I just smiled weakly and replied, "Because it's there."*

I have to admit it was a hell of a lot of fun hobnobbing with folks like these, not to mention good for the ego of a scrawny kid from West Seattle.

I remember one particularly shining moment when John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, stood up and proposed a toast: "To Jim Whittaker," he said, "the first American to summit Everest. And a chimpanzee didn't do it before him!" I was breathing rarified air of an entirely different sort than what I was used to.

But whenever I needed to be brought back down to earth, nothing did it more abruptly than dinner on any given night at Hickory Hill. It always seemed to me that the main course at dinner was political discourse. These were nonstop, free-flowing debates on history and current affairs, in which the children participated as avidly—and often as competently—as whichever network news broadcaster, head of state, or other luminary happened to be at the table.

All too often I felt I was in over my head. The Kennedy children already knew far more about national and world affairs than I did. The arguments and discussion would ebb and flow around me, and I often felt marooned. The children were expected to field questions from their parents—or, just as often, from Defense Secretary Robert McNamara or news anchor Tom Brokaw—and if one couldn't, the questions would be passed on to whomever was next. When that was me, I was often as not humbled to find I had little to add. I would joke and say, "Next question!" but inside I felt like a dumb hick, naïve and inadequate as hell. I guess I hadn't really paid a lot of attention to what was going on in the world beyond the details of my own life. Now I did.

Those evenings around the Kennedy dinner table were the beginning of my political education. It wasn't long before my limited but growing political skills were put to the test.

It was the spring of 1968 and raining hard as Bobby and I rode through the center of Portland, Oregon, on a campaign swing during his run for the presidency. The sidewalks were lined with people who had come out to see him. We were in a convertible.

"Let's put the top down, Jim," Bobby said suddenly.

"Jeez, Bobby, it's pouring," I said.

"They're getting wet," he answered, pointing to the crowds.

Down the top went. Forty minutes later, the procession over and the top still down, we drove out of town. Soaking wet and utterly bedraggled, we picked at a chocolate cake an admirer had thrust into the car as we passed. Lunch. Bobby, drenched, gave me his trademark sheepish grin.

"Name something you have done," he challenged me, "that was more fun than this!"

Deciding to run for the presidency had been a painful process for Bobby and the Democratic Party. All through the winter of 1967 and early spring of 1968, arguments raged around the dinner table at Hickory Hill about the Vietnam War. Appalled by the terrible effects of the war and by the violent social divisions the war was creating, Bobby had become convinced that the United States had to get out. But as only the junior senator from New York, he was virtually powerless to do anything about it. He knew that the decision-making authority lay in the Office of the President but, though there was no love lost between them, he felt it wrong to challenge Lyndon Johnson, a fellow Democrat. In any event, the election was less than a year away.

In February, Eugene McCarthy, the soft-spoken senator from Wisconsin and peace candidate, defied the experts by defeating President Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Bobby didn't think McCarthy could win the election even if he did get the party's nomination. At the end of March, Johnson stunned the nation by bowing out of the campaign entirely. The party was in turmoil. Vice President Hubert Humphrey was the favorite of old-line Democrats, but Bobby felt he was out of touch with the times. Then, on April 4, only a few days after Johnson's announcement, Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and the nation was, once again, in shock. A pragmatist as well as an idealist, Bobby thought a Kennedy might have a better chance of reuniting the country, and so after weeks of agonizing, he finally made the decision to run.

I made a decision of my own. Even though I had no previous political experience, I would try to help Bobby climb this mountain by organizing the Washington State campaign. On Saturday, March 16, I stood in the Senate Caucus Room, where his brother had declared for the presidency only eight years before, as Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced his candidacy.

The night before, a great celebration had taken place at Hickory Hill. Although everyone knew it would be an uphill battle, there was a heady euphoria, a rising sense of hope. There was also anxiety. At one point I took him aside.

"Do you understand," I said, "that what you're doing is a hell of a lot more dangerous than climbing mountains?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "I know."

But there was no time to lose; we had a campaign to organize. The next afternoon, I flew back to Seattle. Waiting for me at the airport was Congressman Brock Adams. Check in hand, he made the first donation to the Washington State Kennedy for President campaign. We used the money to rent space for the campaign headquarters in an office between Fifth and Sixth Avenue on Union Street in Seattle, one block away from the original REI site. Volunteers poured in, and the place exploded with activity. I asked Dave Lester, an old friend with a political science degree, to run the office. He had witnessed the riots that had erupted in the nation's capital the summer before, after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, and felt that Bobby was our best hope to pull the country back together again.

And that was the odd thing about Bobby: although he came from a privileged background, he appealed most to the have-nots in society. Even during the riots, he would wade into solidly black neighborhoods in major cities and just visit with folks, talking and listening. He was safe because they knew he was genuine. His record on fighting poverty and hunger in the South and his support of the civil rights movement spoke for him. Those he talked to, or who listened to what he had to say, believed him and told their friends. For the same reason, Bobby also began to gain support among young people, who had been expected to support Eugene McCarthy. With a speed that amazed me and shocked the so-called experts, the campaign gained momentum.

I had my work cut out for me in the Washington State campaign. We opened additional offices in Tacoma and Spokane, raised money, printed issue papers, recruited volunteers, established phone lists, tried to woo older Democrats who favored Hubert Humphrey, got supporters elected to precinct committees, distributed buttons, posters, and other paraphernalia, and coordinated all this with national campaign headquarters.

On the Columbia River during the campaign in Portland, Oregon, 1968: unidentified man, Jim, Blanche Whittaker, Bobby Kennedy, Ethel Kennedy, and unidentified woman (Whittaker family collection)

Then one day Bobby's brother-in-law, Steven Smith, called and said, "Jim, we need help in Oregon. We'd like you to hit every town under five thousand population and get out their vote for Bobby." Oregon's primary came before Washington's, and the campaign needed a win in the Northwest.

I thought about being away from my family and my job managing REI, and then recalled something Bobby had said: "This is a hard, hard road I am looking down. I don't know where it will lead. It will be a difficult effort. Not just for me, but for a whole lot of people, all kinds of people. Think what it will do to them. It will tear some of them apart. They have to make a choice, often a very painful choice. . . . " And so I made mine and headed for Oregon.

Using a chartered plane, I stumped for Bobby throughout rural Oregon and soon learned why the campaign staff had warned me, "In Oregon you're on another planet." In town after town, I would step into the local Grange Hall, where twenty or thirty people had assembled, introduce myself, give a short pitch for the senator, and ask for questions. The first one was always the same:

"Why is he trying to take our guns away?"

It was difficult to get to any other issue. Oregonians had little experience with, and seemed to have little understanding of, the kind of deep social and racial rifts that were tearing the country apart. I felt like a salmon swimming upstream when I tried to get them to grasp the issues on which Bobby was running. What's more, Oregon was a big union state, and the Teamsters—the union Bobby had taken on a few years earlier—was the largest union in the state. The mayor of Portland had also been indicted during those investigations (which could have explained why I always seemed to get stuck in traffic jams without police help whenever I was there). Finally, the competition was stiff; Senator McCarthy was spending a lot of time in the state. I felt Oregon slipping away.

While I was wrestling with Oregon and Washington, though, Bobby was focused on California. He knew he had to win the California primary. If he could win there, he stood a better chance of winning New York and capturing the Northeast. Though naturally shy, Bobby was a physical campaigner. He threw himself into the crowds and tried to reach as many people as possible. They responded with frightening enthusiasm.

Once in April and once again in May, I joined Rafer Johnson, the poised and graceful Olympic decathlon winner, and Rosey Grier, the 300-pound defensive linebacker, who was one-quarter of the Los Angeles Rams' "fearsome foursome," to give Bobby support in California—in particular, physical support. The crowds terrified me. At rally after rally, the three of us literally had to battle to get Bobby to the speaking platform, then do it all over again to get him back to the car. Traffic would slow to a standstill as people tried to reach his convertible to touch him. There were crazies at the rallies too, waving vicious, often bizarre signs full of hate. In one crowd I saw a sign in a tree that said, "Bobby killed President Kennedy." I pointed it out

to Rafer Johnson. He muscled through the crowd to the tree, jumped high, yanked it down, and tore it up.

In mid-May Ethel called: "Jim, he's getting more and more death threats, and I'm worried," she said.

With my campaign responsibilities in Washington and Oregon, not to mention my responsibilities to my family and job, I couldn't think of anything more I could do. I had to trust Rafer, Rosey, and Bobby's head of security, Bill Barry, to protect Bobby.

On June 4, the night of the California primary, I reserved the Presidential Suite in Seattle's Olympic Hotel for the Washington State delegates, our campaign workers, and supporters. I knew that if Bobby took California, it would really galvanize our campaign in the Northwest. I had four television sets and a loudspeaker system set up and arranged for Bobby to call us from the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. We had wine and appetizers and awaited his call. It was close to eleven o'clock when the results came in. Kennedy had won. The room went wild.

The telephone rang, and it was Ethel. I shouted out my thanks and congratulations over the noise in our suite, and then she said, "Here's Bobby." Over the loudspeakers we'd set up, he thanked the delegates for being there and encouraged them to support his candidacy, and then he thanked the volunteers and all those who had supported him this far. Finally, he said, "Thanks, Jim, for helping to pull me up."

"Thanks, Bobby. We love you," I said.

He hung up and went down to the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel to acknowledge his win and thank the people of California. I left our party and was driving home when I heard over the radio that Bobby had been shot. I turned around and drove directly to the airport. The staff at United Airlines put me in the Red Carpet room, and then whisked me into a first-class seat on their next flight to Los Angeles. I took a cab to the hospital. The Kennedy staff had the police let me in.

In the early hours of the morning of June 5, doctors operated to remove the bullet fragments from Bobby's neck and skull, but they were not optimistic; Bobby had shown no brain activity from the moment he'd been admitted. He never really had a chance. Throughout the day, members of

the family and friends arrived. We were all just numb. Alone with Ethel and Teddy in the hospital room that night, I held Bobby's hand and wept. At 1:44 AM, as Ethel and I held him, he turned gray and cold. Ethel fainted. I gathered her up and, while Teddy held the door, carried her to a room they had reserved for her. I held her until she regained consciousness. A day later, Bobby's coffin was loaded into a hearse to be taken to Air Force One, which President Johnson generously had dispatched for him, and we flew to New York. The funeral was held at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Ethel asked me to be one of the eight pallbearers. As we stood by the coffin, thousands upon thousands of people filed slowly past, many sobbing uncontrollably. Outside, thousands more lined the street. During the service itself, at Ethel's request, Andy Williams sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." He sang it without accompaniment, his gentle, clear voice rising up through the still air. Gradually, others in the cathedral began singing too, filling the church with the song. Then the people out in the streets began singing as well.

Normally, the train trip from New York to Washington, D.C., takes four hours. But thousands of people crowded along the tracks all the way through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, and the trip took eight hours. (Tragically, two people died under the wheels of an express coming the other way.) As the train passed, people held hand-lettered signs: "RFK We Love You," "God Bless You Bobby," "Robert, John, Martin," "Bobby, You Were Our Hope." And all along the way, people sang the "Battle Hymn."

On board, Ethel and Rose Kennedy, Bobby's mother, kept passing through the twenty-one cars, being gracious hostesses and encouraging us to wave back at the people lining the tracks. "Come on now," Rose would say, "these people have been standing for hours and we must show them our appreciation." It was an astonishing demonstration of strength and courage.

I wasn't that strong. I cried for Bobby. I cried for Ethel and the children, especially for the unborn baby Ethel was carrying, who would never know him. She had lost a wonderful husband. The children had lost a wonderful father. And the world had lost a leader who possessed the courage, sensitivity, and ability to improve life on the planet.

Pallbearers Dave Hackett, Steve Smith, Robert McNamara, Lord Harlech, Lem Billings, John Glenn, Jim, and Averell Harriman carry the coffin of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York. (Whittaker family collection)

Bobby was to be buried next to his brother at Arlington Cemetery, just across the Potomac River from the capital. By the time we got there, it was ten at night, pitch black except for candles held by the crowd. We moved slowly, carrying the coffin through a sea of people. I was toward the rear of the coffin on the right-hand side. Steve Smith was in front. As we worked our way up the grassy slope, we were blinded by television camera lights, and it was impossible to see where the grave site was located.

"Can anybody see where the hell we're going?" Steve asked softly.

"No!" several of us whispered back.

We moved a bit farther, and Steve turned his head sideways again: "Bobby is up there right now saying, 'What a bunch of assholes; you guys can't even find the path to where you are supposed to bury me!'"

That did it. I almost strangled trying to stifle my laughter, and I could hear the others struggling too. The weight of Bobby's coffin was nothing compared to the weight of grief we had all been carrying, and now, if only for a moment, it lifted a bit. We found the grave and said goodbye to our hero and champion. He had always brought out the best in all of us—even now, at the very last.

The following months were incredibly difficult. I kept going over and over the scene in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel. What if I had been there? Could I have done anything? Could I have prevented it? I couldn't get over the simple, stupid way he was killed. I couldn't shake the sense of loss, of waste, of the possibilities that were so easily, suddenly, pointlessly erased.

I also ached for Ethel and the children. Every few weeks I flew back to Hickory Hill for a long weekend to do what I could. We all did, all of Bobby and Ethel's friends. But trying to fill even a little bit of the cavernous void that Bobby left behind seemed impossible.

Sometimes it was downright comical. Ethel's baby was due two months after Bobby's death. We were all nervous about the delivery, wanting to make sure nothing would go awry. Rafer and I were at Hickory Hill one day close to the due date. We had just finished a set of tennis when one of the children ran to the court:

"Mummy wants to see both of you right away!"

We sprinted to the house and found Ethel in the midst of labor pains.

Rafer and I panicked. We half-walked, half-carried her down the steps to her convertible and hurriedly stuffed her into the back seat. Rafer jumped in with her. I jumped into the front seat and took command of the wheel, fumbling around with the keys trying to start the damned car.

"What's the matter? Don't they drive cars out there in Seattle? Hurry up! *Hurry up!*" Ethel commanded.

I finally got the car started, and we roared out the gate and onto the highway in what I hoped was the direction of Georgetown Hospital. Ethel was not comfortable and was letting us know it in no uncertain terms as we tore through Georgetown, a charming Washington neighborhood of eighteenth-century townhouses and not-so-charming narrow, one-way streets. I had no idea how to get through the maze. The closer we got to the hospital,

the worse Ethel's labor pains grew and the more confused her directions were from the back seat. At last I found the emergency entrance of the hospital. Rafer and I jumped out and got Ethel inside. Nurses and orderlies rushed up and took her away. I was a wreck; Rafer was sweating like he had just won another decathlon.

In a few hours we were on our way back to Hickory Hill—all three of us. It had been a false alarm. Two weeks later, Rory—Ethel and Bobby's fourth daughter and eleventh child—was born.

Luckily for both of them, neither Rafer nor I were in town at the time.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
JIM WHITTAKER: A LIFE ON THE EDGE

About the author

Jim Whittaker was born in Seattle in 1929. His accomplishments are wide and varied: In addition to being the first American to summit Everest, Whittaker was the first full-time employee of Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) and was the company's president and CEO for twenty-five years. He led the team that put the first Americans on K2's summit, and he organized and led the International Peace Climb on Everest in 1990. In 2012, at the age of 83, Whittaker trekked to nearly 17,000 feet in Nepal, just a few hundred feet below Everest Base Camp. He and his wife, Dianne Roberts, live in Port Townsend, Washington. Find him online at www.jimwhittaker.com.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

"One of the most important mountaineering books to be written for many years."

—Boardman Tasker Prize

BERNADETTE McDONALD

FREEDOM CLIMBERS

THE GOLDEN AGE OF POLISH CLIMBING

FREEDOM CLIMBERS

THE GOLDEN AGE OF POLISH CLIMBING

Bernadette McDonald

Polish mountaineers made an indelible mark on the history of Himalayan climbing, being the first to tackle the world's highest mountains during winter. Despite the economic and social baggage of their struggling country, they made the first winter ascents on seven of the world's fourteen 8000-meter peaks. Such successes, however, came at a serious cost: 80 percent of Poland's finest high-altitude climbers died on the high mountains during the period they were pursuing these first ascents. *Freedom Climbers* is the story of their inspiring passion.

The following is excerpted from *Freedom Climbers*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

Mountain of Misery

Landscapes are culture before they are nature, constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.

—Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

Everyone I know
Goes away in the end

—Trent Reznor, "Hurt"

The year 1986 was a highly unusual one on K2. Pakistan had recently discovered the economic potential of the mountain and had issued an unprecedented nine expedition permits. There were climbers crawling all over the peak: a Polish team on the South Pillar known as the Magic Line; an international team that eventually moved to the Abruzzi Ridge; a South Korean team on the Abruzzi Ridge; a British team on the Northwest Ridge; and more. Wanda's three climbing partners from Nanga Parbat were all there with the Polish team led by Janusz Majer. Wanda was not among them.

She had returned to Poland from Nanga Parbat victorious, full of confidence and financially secure thanks to the success of her recent films. An unpleasant surprise awaited her when the Polish Alpine Association accused her of embezzling expedition funds. She eventually

cleared up the matter, but she declared she had never been so unjustly treated in her life. She immediately bought a spot on a French K2 expedition, where she would compete against, not join, her compatriots.

The three Polish women on the Magic Line team were convinced that Wanda's decision to climb with the French was strategic: the latter were scheduled to be on the mountain before the Poles, giving Wanda a distinct advantage in becoming the first woman on top. Anna Czerwińska felt that Wanda had completely abandoned the idea of Polish women's mountaineering. "She simply stopped. She had the perspective of climbing K2, and she adopted the tactics of trying to be the first."

Base camp soon blossomed into a village of brightly coloured tents, with climbers from around the world, all with a single objective: to reach the 8611-metre summit of K2. The South Korean effort was the richest, with miles of fixed lines, an army of high-altitude porters and lots of bottled oxygen. With 16 different types of Korean tea on the menu and a wide selection of films, their mess tent quickly became a popular hub.

Wanda felt comfortable at K2 base camp. She described the feeling in a postcard to her friend Ewa.

> Dear Ewa,
> My best wishes and kisses through this card. We are at the head of the Baltoro Glacier…everyone is getting along well although I do feel a little isolated because I don't speak French. There are lots of expeditions and lots of friends here. I feel like I'm at home. The porters recognize me and greet me like a local. They always shout "abi Wanda good." I don't really know what it means but I think it's something good. Don't forget about me. Kisses and best wishes for my closest friends and family. Wanda.

Despite their original plans, climbers moved around the mountain, changing routes at will, depending on conditions, weather, their acclimatization, and their skills. This was all illegal, of course, since climbers who apply for and are allotted a specific route are expected to stick to it. But it

seemed that nobody was enforcing the rules, and this soon added to the confusion—and crowding—on certain parts of the mountain.

Wanda's team of four consisted of herself, Michel Parmentier and the French climbing couple Liliane and Maurice Barrard. The tall, powerfully built, and mustachioed Maurice, with his long grey hair, and his bewitchingly petite, dark-haired wife, made a charming pair. Wanda admired and even envied the Barrards, referring to them as a perfect couple.

She was less enamoured of Michel. Everything about him irritated Wanda: his unruly brown curls, his hazel eyes and strong cigarettes, his habit of excluding her by speaking French with the Barrards, his arrogant self-confidence. Michel wasn't all that fond of Wanda, either. As a French journalist, he harboured plans to write the story of the first woman up K2, and that woman was meant to be a French woman—Liliane—not Wanda. The close quarters of their shared tent only magnified the differences between Wanda and Michel.

Since this was Wanda's third attempt at the peak, she was already familiar with the route up to 7350 metres. But they were the first climbers on the mountain this season, so they didn't have the benefit of any camps, broken trail, or trustworthy fixed ropes from other expeditions. Their objective was the Abruzzi Ridge, using lightweight tactics with no supplemental oxygen. They also planned to do it in record time: five days round trip. Their strategy was bold. They decided not to equip the traditional high-altitude camp locations with tents and sleeping bags. Instead, they would set up food and fuel caches along the way. They would carry ultralight tents and sleeping bags so they could bivouac wherever they needed to, depending on the weather, their energy, and the time of day. This would give them more flexibility as they moved upward, but it also left them vulnerable to the mountain's notorious storms. They could easily become stranded far from their caches. This style of climbing was new to Wanda, and she found it interesting. Although she understood the risks, she was not apprehensive; rather, she was confident that what Liliane could do, she could do too.

Kurt Diemberger, who was at base camp with his British climbing partner Julie Tullis, recognized, perhaps more clearly than Wanda, the boldness of the French team's approach, particularly since they were first on the

mountain. In his book *The Endless Knot*, he wrote: "Nobody attempting a 'lightning dash' later in the season should compare his climbing time with that of earlier ascents when the route is in a very different state." His comments may have been a veiled reference to French climber Benoît Chamoux, who later that summer would race up the mountain in just 23 hours. Or perhaps it was just an indisputable statement of fact that the nature of the mountain, with its fixed ropes and established camps, was fundamentally different for those who came later in the season.

> Dear Ewa,
> Maurice and Liliane are okay…they are an example of a truly rare climbing marriage. At the same time they are very closed and they function best when they are together.…She is always with Maurice, where I am always stuck with Michel. He is the biggest egotist and egocentric person that I've met…a complete narcissist only interested in his own pleasure. He always gives himself the freedom of choice and decisions. This means that it curbs my own freedom. Yesterday he told me 'why are you even here with us French and not with your friends the Poles over there? I don't need you at all. But you need me and you're worse for that'. After that I sort of started to get ready for a solo attempt of K2. Wanda.

While her partners moved up the mountain, Wanda stayed in base camp, suffering from a bout of high fever and tonsillitis. After several days of rest she finally felt ready to join them, and just three weeks after arriving in base camp they began their summit attempt. It was June 18. Climbing steadily up the Abruzzi Ridge, they spent the first night at Camp I. They skipped Camp II and chose instead to bivouac at 7100 metres on the ridge of the Black Pyramid. Here they cached some of their climbing equipment in order to lighten their packs. They continued up, skipped the usual Camp III situated at 7350 metres and moved higher to bivouac at 7700 metres. Wanda described the site: "It was under the big barrier of the overhanging séracs in a conveniently level patch of snow, which was only a little dangerous."36

It was then that their lightweight strategy caught up with them. When Wanda and the Barrards reached a collapsed snow bridge across a crevasse not far above their bivouac site, they decided it was time to rope up. But Michel had forged on ahead with the rope still stowed in his pack because the snow bridge had been intact when he crossed it. In fact, it was his weight that had broken it just as he leapt to safer ground. The three remaining climbers were forced to take a dangerous and exhausting detour to bypass the slot. The top of their detour ended in a difficult overhang about three metres high. They got up it, but not without an enormous outlay of time and energy. Technical climbing becomes an entirely different experience at just under 8000 metres, and their efforts utterly depleted them.

That day they reached only 7900 metres before they were forced to bivouac again. The time-consuming detour around the snow bridge had forced one more bivouac at extreme altitude—a fatal error, as it would turn out.

By this time, the tension between Wanda and Michel was so toxic that she had resorted to using a small borrowed tent to avoid sleeping next to the Frenchman. She couldn't stand the sight of him or the smell of his smoker's breath. "Three tents for four people sounds a bit much," she admitted, "but the extra weight in my sack was the price of independence."37

They eventually abandoned the rope altogether. This exemplified, perhaps more than anything, the superb condition and skill level of the four climbers. To approach the steep and often icy upper slopes of K2 without a rope required unwavering confidence. Wanda later commented, "It would have been wonderful to find some fixed ropes up there, but who's going to drag ropes up to that sort of altitude?"38 She could not have imagined the scene more than 20 years later when, despite a spider's web of fixed ropes, 11 people died on the upper reaches of K2.

Wanda and her teammates were now in the "death zone," where the body steadily deteriorates. Their biggest problem was snow, very deep snow. Placing one foot in front of the other on wind-firm, drifted snow is hard enough at altitude, but lifting one's leg out of each snowy hole only to plunge even deeper into the next, leaning on one's ice axe and gasping for breath, is agonizing work. The enormous effort shatters the climber out front breaking trail, and the ones behind become progressively colder as the pace inevitably

bogs down. They took turns at first, but Michel proved strongest, so he eventually took over the arduous job.

He found a small rock platform at 8300 metres where they could bivouac one last time. They now had just one stove, one two-person tent and no sleeping bags. It was their third night above 7500 metres.

Below them stretched the full expanse of the mountain: the overhanging wall of ice under which they had climbed (known as the Bottleneck), the Shoulder, the Black Pyramid, House's Chimney, and the lower slopes leading to the Godwin Austen Glacier. The technical difficulties were below them, and they were now very close to the summit.

Wanda was pressed up against Michel as they were forced to spoon in the tiny tent. She recoiled at his touch, despite his warmth. Her mind raced, reviewing again and again what might happen the next day—summit day. She felt strong—maybe not as strong as Michel, but she still had some reserve.

They awoke early on the morning of June 23. The day was splendid: sunny, cloudless, and still. Wanda, who was last to leave the tent, caught up with the others just as they were stopping for a short soup break. She was surprised at this unusual behaviour, this lounging about, cooking so near the summit. Could she be hallucinating? But she wasn't; the three French climbers had settled in for a hot lunch. Wanda smiled at the Gallic obsession with food, declined the invitation, and continued on alone. The others seemed not to notice.

At age 43 she was as strong and confident as she had ever been on a high mountain, physically at the peak of her powers. By 10:15 a.m. she was on the top, becoming the first Pole and the first woman to climb K2. She laughed. She cried. She knelt and prayed. "At that moment I felt I had a gift of infinite time....I felt no triumph, but I did feel that God was near me...."39

Then she wrote her name, along with Liliane Barrard's, on a piece of paper that claimed the first women's ascent. She wrapped it up in a plastic bag and placed it under a stone a short distance below the main summit. Liliane had still not arrived, so it might have been a little premature, and

perhaps overly generous. But she was very clear about noting her own arrival time—10:15 a.m.—and after Liliane's name she left a blank.

Wanda sat down on the summit and waited. And waited. The sparkling clear day was extremely cold, so, in order to stay warm, she climbed a short way down the northeast side and collected a few stones as souvenirs. Back to the top and more waiting. She began a mental list of the friends she might give her precious K2 stones to; there were lots of possibilities, but number one on her list was Charlie Houston, the American who had tried so hard in 1938 and 1953. She liked Charlie and felt that he had deserved the first ascent, not the Italians. He had certainly earned a rock from the summit.

As the cold began creeping into her extremities she realized she would have to start descending. No sooner had she started down the South Face than she saw her partners labouring up in her tracks, so she went back up. They finally joined her on the summit at around 11 a.m. for an emotional round of hugs.

At noon, cold and tired, the four began their descent, the most dangerous part of any climb. Pressing ahead, Wanda reached their bivouac site at 8300 metres and stopped for a brief rest. When the flagging Maurice Barrard arrived, he stated they would have to spend the night. Wanda uncharacteristically agreed, although she knew another night that high on the mountain would mean further deterioration of their bodies. She may have wanted to stay with her team, or maybe it was the gauze of altitude that was clouding her judgement. She later wrote about this critical moment: "I was surprised, but not unhappy. 'I don't need to go down today', I thought. I was tired, but not exhausted.... I was not worried. But I should have been.... I didn't know in the sunshine that death was following us down."[40]

Once again they crammed into the two-person tent with no sleeping bags. After a restless, cold and uncomfortable night, they awoke even more fatigued. Wanda had taken two and a half sleeping tablets and was still dizzy the next morning. Michel was impatient to head down. The Barrards were very quiet.

Still climbing without a rope, each of them now had to make their way down two of the most dangerous sections of the mountain. They inched

their way across the icy, downward-sloping, 50-degree traverse, knowing the consequences of a fall would be fatal. Wanda concentrated on keeping her balance as she tried to fight off the lingering effects of the pills. Michel was moving faster and was first to reach the top of the Bottleneck, a narrow gully of even steeper ice, loose rock, and unconsolidated snow.

At that moment, out of the corner of her eye, Wanda saw Michel falling, tumbling faster and faster down the chute, only to emerge unscathed from a snowdrift near the bottom. He didn't look back, just dusted himself off and kept going. After the shock and adrenaline had subsided, Wanda refocused and went back to the task at hand. She cautioned herself with each placement of her boot: "Careful, Wanda, careful! No one can help you here, no one can get you down…you are alone."

Her concentration was so intense that she forgot about the Barrards. But she knew they had each other, whereas she was on her own. When she neared the bottom of the gully, she stopped to catch her breath and looked back to see the couple moving slowly near the top of the Bottleneck. Maurice was above Liliane, and Wanda was relieved because, although the Bottleneck was steep, it wasn't icy; there was plenty of soft snow.

As she continued down, a bank of clouds moved in, surrounding the mountain and obscuring the crevasse-riddled snowfield in front of her. Navigating this minefield of slots was dangerous in good visibility; now it was almost suicidal. Yet she felt strangely calm and euphoric: "My sense of invulnerability was a danger, but it was also allowing me to function without physical inhibition and preserving me from panic. It saved my life by letting me climb to the utmost of my skills and permitting my luck to hold."[41] Wanda was in fact—perhaps unconsciously—drawing on her many years of experience in conditions such as these. Despite her addled mind, her muscle memory was strong, her instincts reliable. It was her cumulative knowledge—not just luck—that got her through that day, high on K2, without a rope.

She caught up with Michel at 7700 metres. That night, buffeted by the wind and snow lashing at their tent, the two got very little rest. The next morning he told her he would wait for the Barrards, but since they were

running out of gas, he urged Wanda to continue down with some Basque and Italian climbers camped nearby. She agreed and set out.

Snow began to fall. Thick fog enveloped them. Worn out from the climb and too many nights above 8000 metres, Wanda couldn't keep up with the others and was soon left alone on the mountain. She struggled to see their tracks, but the wind quickly drifted them in with fresh snow. By this time she had lost her gloves and was using her reserve pair, which were too thin for the frigid temperatures.

Then, in the distance, she spied two strokes of darkness against the white—ski poles! And just below them, the fixed ropes. In her intense relief at reaching the security of the fixed lines, and in a befuddled state of mind, she thought the Basques must have left the poles for her. She took them and slogged on down, clinging to the ropes in order to avoid being blown off the mountain by the storm, which had whipped itself into a raging gale. She stopped. A terrible possibility had occurred to her.

What if the poles had not been left for her use but to signal the beginning of the fixed lines for those descending above her? They would now be in a much more dangerous situation. Yet she knew she was too far gone to retrace her steps and undo the damage; she had to go down to survive. She concentrated on the repetitious yet life-saving movements of clipping her carabiner into the fixed rope, sliding the carabiner down, reclipping at the next rope, never losing her concentration. She later described that desperate descent as her worst day on K2.

It was evening before Wanda reached her tent at the foot of the Black Pyramid. She collapsed in a heap and slept. There she waited, another day and another night. She forced herself to heat some water and eat a little. Each small movement hurt. Her frostbitten hands struggled with the most basic tasks: zipping her jacket, lighting the stove, opening the soup packets, balancing the precious liquid. Still her teammates did not arrive.

She strained to recall her last glimpse of Maurice and Liliane, inching their way down the Bottleneck. Was there some clue in their position on the slope? Had she missed something? And where was Michel? She was sure they had spoken at 7700 metres, but maybe not. She was no longer certain. She felt terribly alone. Would she be the only one of her team to make it

down alive? Drifting in and out of consciousness, Wanda lost track of who was on the mountain and where. Everything that was still alive inside of her screamed *get off this mountain while you still can!*

She stuffed the pathetic remains of her climb into the pack: her stove, the empty fuel bottle, the pot encrusted with soup remnants and finally her soggy sleeping bag. She crawled out of the tent to continue the interminable descent and saw a figure below her. It was Benoît Chamoux on his way up to help Michel, who had radioed that he was on the fixed lines but in desperate need of assistance. Benoît explained that in the whiteout conditions, Michel had had a difficult time locating the fixed lines, and it was Benoît who had talked him down the upper part of the mountain, metre by metre. She wondered about those ski poles: would they have made a difference?

Still no word from the Barrards.

At this point two Polish climbers on their way up to help her appeared. Wanda's stoicism finally crumbled and she gave in to her emotions, weeping quietly as she clung to them. After all the loneliness and bitterness and competitiveness, someone cared about her.

By now Wanda's face was frozen, as were her hands and feet. When British filmmaker Jim Curran watched her hobble into base camp, he was horrified at the change in her appearance. Radiant before the climb, she seemed to have aged 10 years in 10 days. "Her face seemed to have caved in," he said.

• • • • •

While the drama with Wanda's team was unfolding, the rest of the mountain hummed with activity, too. The Polish team led by Janusz Majer was on the Magic Line, a route that many called K2's "last great problem." Another team on the Sickle Couloir route on the South Face included Jurek and Tadek Piotrowski. It was a sign of the strength and depth of the Polish climbing community that they had put three separate teams simultaneously on three different routes on what was widely considered to be the hardest high-altitude mountain on Earth.[42] Regardless of whether they summited, the Poles dominated K2 that year.

It was Tadek, one of Poland's most accomplished climbers, famous for his icy-river training swims, who had secured a couple of spots for himself and Jurek on the international K2 expedition led by Karl Herrligkoffer.

This was the first international expedition Jurek had joined, and the contrast in economics was painful. Unplanned expenses popped up frequently: tips, special favours, forgotten tariffs. Although this was not a problem for the Europeans, the Poles were close to panic. They were proven masters at spending inordinate amounts of time in the Himalaya, but one of their secrets was frugality.

When Karl handed out brand new Adidas shoes and soft woolly socks to the porters, Jurek looked on in envy. The entire atmosphere was mildly irritating, including the attitude that he sensed from some of the team members. There were a number of Swiss guides along. Jurek scoffed about one of them, describing him as "thin as a racehound, who all his life does nothing but run about in the Alps." There was nothing basically wrong with Jurek's body shape, but when one of the guides stared pointedly at his slightly paunchy belly and commented that he didn't look much like a mountaineer, Jurek was insulted. "We can have a chat at 8000 metres," he muttered to himself, and walked away.

The Western European climbers became agitated when Karl threw his support behind the Poles' wish to try a new route on the South Face of the mountain. "You two will be playing the first violin here…Whatever you need, you will get," he declared, much to the horror of the rest of the team. The Swiss and German climbers had no interest in anything but the normal route up either K2 or Broad Peak. A dangerous new route was not on their agenda, for they had their professions and a comfortable life back home. For Jurek and Tadek, there was nothing more important in the world than to climb this mountain by a new and difficult route. Their obvious differences prompted Jurek to observe that Western climbers were much like Western cars: better on good roads, but the old Polish models keep going, even when the road gets rough.

Karl wasn't planning to be on the mountain at all, as this, his 24th expedition, was merely a celebration of his 70th birthday. His health was questionable, so before long he called in a helicopter to whisk him away from base camp to lower, more comfortable ground. At that point, the team split up and the less ambitious members headed off to what they thought was easier terrain.

Jurek and Tadek began working their way up the South Face, some of which was familiar ground to Jurek, since he had been up to 6400 metres on the face in 1982 with Voytek. At the first camp they had four climbers with them. At the next camp, two. Finally, only Tadek and Jurek remained on the route. They fixed lines as high as they could and then retreated to base camp to wait out a snowstorm. They were acclimatized and ready to try for the summit. Everything depended on the weather.

They waited 10 days. At the end of June the sun reappeared. They waited another two days for the masses of new snow to settle on the icy skin of the South Face, and then they were off. Day one: 6400 metres. Day two: 6950 metres. Day three: 7400 metres. Day four: 7800 metres. Day five: 8200 metres.

The next morning they left their tent with just two 30-metre lengths of rope, three pitons, one ice screw and their ice axes, planning to reach the summit and return to their camp at 8200 metres. But in front of them rose a hundred-metre barrier of almost vertical rock covered in loose unconsolidated snow. The entire day slipped by before they were able to surmount that difficult stretch of technical ground, on which every move was agonizingly difficult. They gained height one centimetre at a time, fighting for every step. Jurek admitted that it was the hardest climbing he had ever done at this altitude. It was their many years of climbing mixed rock and snow in the cold Tatras winters that undoubtedly got them through this crux on K2. By the time they reached the top of the most difficult section, it was too late to continue. It began to snow.

They rappelled back to their bivouac site for the night. No sooner had they begun to cook than they dropped their last spare gas cylinder thousands of metres below them. Now they were in trouble. No gas meant no cooked food and, more worryingly, no fluid. They had just spent a physically and psychologically demanding day at over 8000 metres, and now they were facing a bivouac with no water. Parched with thirst, they survived the night but realized they would have to revise their plan. Instead of climbing to the summit and descending their South Face route, they would have to descend as quickly as possible from the summit down the normal route on the Abruzzi Ridge, where they would hopefully find a fully equipped camp. This was

their only option, but it was risky because neither of them knew this other route.

By 2 p.m. the next day they had surmounted the barrier and were on easier ground along the ridge. As the day wore on, the snowfall intensified and visibility decreased. But there were occasional footsteps discernible in the snow from previous ascents up the normal route; they were confident they were in the right place. They continued, feeling their way up the ridge. At 6 p.m. it began to get dark. Jurek was sure they must be near the summit.

He reached a sérac and stopped briefly, leaning heavily on his ice axe to catch his breath. As he stared mindlessly down at the snow, he almost fell over from shock: there were two French instant-soup wrappers abandoned from some previous climbers. He guessed that they must have belonged to Wanda's team, and he knew from her description that they had bivouacked just below a sérac at around 8300 metres. These soup wrappers had to be from that bivouac. He almost threw up in disappointment. If that was the case, they were still a long way from the summit. As he stared down at the wretched wrappers, Tadek arrived.

"Look at these stupid wrappers. I think we are at Wanda's bivouac site. It's lower than I thought—only 8300 metres."

"Who knows," Tadek replied in a weary dejected voice. "It's so foggy it's impossible to know where we are. We could just stop here and go on tomorrow."

"No no, we can't do that. If we stop here we won't have the energy to go up tomorrow." Jurek was forceful now.

"Well, what should we do, then?"

"Go up. Let's keep going. I'll just go beyond that sérac and see what there is. Maybe I'll recognize something."

"Okay," Tadek mumbled.

They continued on and a short time later Jurek turned and screamed. He could see the summit. It was very near. The soup wrappers were from Wanda's French companions' pre-summit lunch stop, *not* their bivouac spot. Relieved, he took a few more steps to the top then slumped down to the ground, gasping and wheezing. He rummaged in his pack, found his cam-

era and began taking photographs. Shortly after, Tadek appeared, lurching upward through the gloom.

The two hugged, wheezed and coughed, and thumped each other's backs, savouring their hard-won victory at the summit of K2, up the hardest route climbed so far on the mountain. After 15 minutes they realized it would all be meaningless if they perished on the top, so they started down. They downclimbed to a spot where they had stashed some equipment and then settled in for another cold, snowy, high-altitude bivouac—this one at 8300 metres.

It snowed all night. With no wind, the mountain was eerily quiet while the soft, deadly blanket grew steadily thicker. The snow continued the next morning, making it even more difficult to find the way down. Everything looked the same. Although they were descending by an easier route, it was all new ground to them. They searched for signs of the people who had gone before them and found occasional bits of old rope, signalling that they were on a well-travelled route. But they frequently wandered off-route in an exhausted state of confusion, forcing them to retrace their steps again and again.

By nightfall they were nowhere near the Austrian camp, where they had hoped to sleep. Instead, it was another bivouac for Tadek and Jurek—another night of physiological decay. It was their fourth night at extreme altitude, and they no longer had the will to dig out a suitable cave. Instead, they made do with just a slight depression that barely sheltered them from the wind. Even the indestructible Jurek suffered that night. "I could feel and see that we were at our physical limits," he later wrote. "Our bivouac was even worse than the night before. For two days we had not even had a drop of water and our bivouac sacs were worn and full of holes. The night was absolute torture as we shivered in the frigid cold, and snow penetrated every nook and cranny. We got only snatches of sleep."43

The snowstorm ended at dawn. They emerged from their sacks slowly, thick with lethargy. Through the murk, it appeared to them that they were on a shoulder just above the Austrian camp; Jurek thought he could see the tents. He went ahead a bit, called back to Tadek that the route was clear and,

in a moment of clarity, reminded him to bring the rope on which he had sat throughout the night.

"Yes, yes, go on!" Tadek yelled.

Jurek continued down. He looked up and saw that Tadek was barely moving; his coordination seemed shaky. Jurek stopped to wait and immediately dozed off, leaning on his ice axe. When he awoke, Tadek was just above him. Below them was a short steep slope, and then the way was clear to the tents.

"Let's use the rope for this steep section," Jurek said.

"No, we don't need it. Besides, I left it up there."

Jurek rose from his slumped position, repositioned himself on the slope and continued kicking steps. His thoughts wandered to the warmth and safety of the camp; it was so near he could almost feel it. The slope steepened and the snow hardened to ice. He had to be careful now. Place each axe firmly. Kick each foot confidently. The rope would have been good to have here. No problem. It's a short distance. Concentrate.

He glanced up to see that Tadek was following well now, using the same placements as his. Just then Jurek saw a flash: Tadek's crampon flying off his foot. Jurek shouted a warning. Then the impossible happened: the other crampon flew off. Jurek yelled again. "Hold on!"

Tadek tried. His axe was firmly embedded in the ice, but with his entire weight suddenly on his arms, his boots scraping uselessly on the icy slope, he couldn't hold on. He flew off with lightning speed, screaming.

Jurek was directly below Tadek. Instinctively, he gripped his axes as hard as he could and pressed his body against the slope. One moment before impact was the last he could recall before all reality changed for Jurek. He felt a massive blow to his back as Tadek slammed into him. After a couple of seconds he realized that, by some miracle, he was still attached to the mountain. He lifted his head and looked around. All that was left on the icy face were a few nondescript skid marks and small, pathetic pieces of ice skittering down the slope. After that there was nothing.

In a daze, Jurek downclimbed the slope, which ended in a cliff, searching for any sign of Tadek. "Tadek. Tadek. Answer me. Where are you?" Of course he wasn't there. Jurek leaned over his axes once again and promptly

fell asleep. Thousands of metres yawned below him. He awoke with a start and realized he had to move away from this dangerous position. For five and a half hours he inched across the remaining 200-metre traverse to the Austrian tents.

He crawled into one of them and rummaged around in a shocked state, looking for anything to eat or drink. He found a can of fruit and slurped it down. Next he found a stove and some fuel and began melting snow. He drank and slept intermittently and then noticed a radio, which he used to call base camp to inform them of the accident. It didn't seem to be working well, but he thought he heard a garbled response, so he slumped sideways and fell asleep again with the radio pressed to his ear. In a delusional state of denial, he crawled into a sleeping bag on one side of the tent, leaving room for Tadek, who would soon be arriving. He had to be. He had a wife and daughter waiting at home.

Over and over, he saw Tadek flying. Did he know that he was about to die? Jurek would have given anything to go back in time, slow things down, press the reset button.

Twenty hours later Jurek woke with a start. It was now 2 p.m. of the following day. He tried to radio base camp again, but he couldn't reach them. In fact, he had never spoken to them, for there were no batteries in the radio. Jurek had only imagined the voices of response.

• • • • •

Meanwhile, Janusz Majer was on the Magic Line route with his team of seven, which included Wanda's previous climbing partners Anna Czerwińska, Krystyna Palmowska, and Mrówka Miodowicz-Wolf. Aside from Janusz's team, there were three other expeditions with permission to try the route: an American team, the Italian Quota 8000 Expedition, and famous Italian solo climber Renato Casarotto. The American and Italian expeditions reached only 6800 metres before John Smolich and Alan Pennington were killed in an avalanche on June 21 at the foot of the slope below the Negrotto Col. The Americans gave up their attempt, and the Italians soon abandoned the pillar, too, turning instead to the Abruzzi Ridge, where Wanda and her team were climbing. Renato twice reached 8200 metres on the pillar, but after his third attempt he, too, retreated.

Now it was just the Poles, working in two teams; one consisted of four men, the other of three women. They fixed ropes and established camps up the pillar, and, after two bivouacs above 8000 metres, three of the four men—Wojciech Wróż, Przemek Piasecki, and Petr Bozik, a Slovak—reached the summit on August 3. Because their route was so difficult, like Jurek and Tadek they decided to descend the Abruzzi Ridge.

It was 1:30 a.m. when Wojciech Wróż fell to his death. Przemek had rappelled the last 50 metres of fixed lines and Petr had followed him. They had waited for Wojciech in order to descend the rest of the way to Camp IV, for this section was without fixed ropes. Suddenly they heard a horrible metallic noise. They feared the worst, but they waited. An hour and a half later, a descending Korean climber appeared and reported that Wojciech was nowhere to be seen. Certain that their partner had fallen to his death, they felt their only option was to carry on to the sad huddle of tents at Camp IV, where they collapsed into British climber Alan Rouse's small tent, which he and Mrówka shared with them. They weren't sure what had happened but thought it likely that Wojciech had fallen while downclimbing a small gap between two sections of fixed ropes. They later learned that the gap had inadvertently been caused by one of the Korean climbers, who had cut the rope in order to bridge another missing section of fixed line.

Janusz, Krystyna, and Anna had also started up their route, but their nerves were rattled. "It felt like an unhealthy atmosphere," Anna remembered. "You come back and you learn that somebody has died. A bit later, you learn that somebody else is dead. We were beginning to lose our minds."[44] Although they were fighting a losing battle of emotional trench warfare, they weren't yet ready to give in.

The three had moved up steadily in good weather; each day, one camp higher. "The mountain was luring us—into a trap," Anna recalled. They were bivouacked at 8200 metres, ready to go for the summit the next day. Early on the morning of August 4, they received the shocking news of Wojciech's fall. Janusz sat down on the snow, put his head in his hands and wailed, "I've had it, this is too fucking much."

Their decision was unanimous. They packed up and started down. Almost immediately the mist moved in. Snow began to fall. This sudden

change in weather occurred on the very same day that a large group of Abruzzi Ridge climbers started their summit attempts. The following day the weather deteriorated in earnest, with hurricane winds so strong they forced the old fixed ropes to stand out horizontally, covered with two-centimetre-long icicles. Janusz and the women fled the mountain, fighting for their lives in the storm and evacuating all their camps on the way down to base camp.

The mountain took no notice of them, preoccupied with those on the Abruzzi Ridge, where the struggle was just beginning. "The mountain released us," Anna said. "I remember the click of my [headlamp] light.... So many people had died. And still the stupid battery worked. I was really shaken by that realization."45 For the first 24 hours at base camp they rehydrated, ate, and dried out. Then it dawned on them—where was the team on the Abruzzi Ridge? Why hadn't they heard anything? Their partner, Mrówka, was there, having abandoned the pillar after declaring it too dangerous. She had instead moved over to the Abruzzi Ridge, to climb with Alan Rouse on a route she thought would be safer.

• • • • •

Jurek crawled out of the Austrian tent and, over the next two days, dropped down the fixed lines to base camp. Tadek had become the fifth victim on K2 that year. Wanda had always said Jurek could live for days on a diet of Himalayan rocks and come out fit at the other end. But not Tadek. This was Jurek's fourth consecutive expedition on which he had lost a partner.

Their new route on K2 was exceptional, climbed in a style that brought an entirely new dimension to Himalayan climbing. But Jurek felt no joy at having climbed the magnificent face. His experiences on the mountain were too tragic and the price of success too high. Janusz's Magic Line was another landmark for the mountain, yet he too felt that their loss of life had nullified the joy of their success. Both climbs were overlooked for years, overshadowed by all the tragedies on K2 that year.

• • • • •

Everyone on the mountain was vulnerable to the weather, and the storm on K2 had intensified. The situation became desperate as one fatality followed another. Renato Casarotto fell into a crevasse on his way down alone

from the Magic Line. He was rescued, but he died shortly after. Now it was impossible to ignore another harsh reality: the Barrards were not coming back. Shortly after, Liliane's body emerged on the lower glacier, brought down by the continuous barrage of avalanches.

Then, at 7900 metres on the Abruzzi Ridge, the situation deteriorated into complete chaos as seven climbers converged at Camp IV, some on their way up, others on their way down. There weren't enough tents or sleeping bags for the climbers, all at the edge of their limits. There, amidst the wreckage of the camp and farther down the Abruzzi Ridge, five more perished: Julie Tullis, Hannes Wieser, Alfred Imitzer, Alan Rouse, and Mrówka. Only two survived: Kurt Diemberger and Willi Bauer. When Balti porter Mohammad Ali was killed by rockfall, the total number of dead on K2 topped out at an astonishing 13.

What went wrong? Who, if anyone, was responsible for the multiple tragedies on the mountain? The one common theme was that each climber, like Wanda and her little team, had stayed in the "death zone" too long, had not left any room for error. "It seems absolutely clear that, on no account, should you climb with the thought that all that matters is getting to the top, the rest be damned," Janusz later sadly commented.

For those few who were left, emotions ran high. Kurt was shattered at having lost Julie, his mountain soulmate. Michel felt responsible for the Barrards. Renato's widow was heartbroken. Jim Curran had been in base camp the entire time, trying to understand and absorb the unfolding tragedy, all the while filming the wasted survivors who wandered listlessly from tent to tent, quietly sharing their stories. The thin fabric walls could not hide the coughing and sobbing. Wanda turned inward, unwilling to reveal the depth of her sorrow. Grief merged with guilt, which led to remorse. There seemed little reason to celebrate.

To the astonishment of those left at base camp, despite her frostbite, weariness, and sadness, Wanda began preparing for an immediate ascent of nearby Broad Peak. Considering what was going on and what she had just endured, she seemed completely out of touch with reality. She bordered on irrational and would speak only of 8000-metre peaks. She confessed she felt no pleasure about reaching the summit of K2; she had lost

too many friends on the mountain. Yet here she was, preparing for another epic on Broad Peak. Her strength and determination were admirable, but it was sad that she seemed incapable of savouring her success on K2. In fact, she seemed just like many other top-level, complex, and compulsive climbers, unable to remain fulfilled for long, always driven to seek out the next challenge.

This attempt was more likely a kind of self-medication, however. As she wrote in her journal: "Certain kinds of events only get to me much later…my reaction to aggression, disaster or tragedy is delayed. There are events that I have lived but still can't fully accept."

Battered and broken, Wanda headed to nearby Broad Peak to attempt a solo alpine-style ascent. She didn't even make it to the first high camp before turning back.

Prior to 1986, 12 people had died climbing K2. Now, within one season, the number had more than doubled. Wanda had been on enough mountains to recognize the strange atmosphere that had emerged on the Abruzzi Ridge. There were too many teams that were not really teams, just a hodgepodge collection of independent climbers, patched together in a last-ditch effort to get up the mountain. Even though twos and threes eventually formed within that larger group, there was very little loyalty when the situation fell apart. Many were on the Abruzzi Ridge because it was supposedly an easier alternative to their already failed attempts on more difficult lines. This led to a dangerous level of complacency about the route.

The Abruzzi Ridge climbers were not the only ones involved in this tragic sequence of events. Climbers who were descending the ridge after having climbed routes on other sides of the mountain also contributed to the crowding at Camp IV. Their arrivals were unplanned and likely added to the stress.

With dozens of climbers on the mountain, there were several series of decisions that were made, seemingly with good judgement yet without knowledge of what would come next. The apparently acceptable levels of danger and risk deteriorated into situations of extreme survival. But were those levels of risk truly acceptable? Acceptable to whom? Jurek had felt sure

that things were still under control until the moment Tadek hurtled into him. Janusz lost his taste for risk only upon hearing of his teammate's death. And even after the carnage, Wanda seemed willing to assume yet more risk on Broad Peak.

Wanda didn't venture onto the slippery slope of laying blame for the deaths on K2, but there was one element that nagged her: Kurt's slow climbing pace. She felt that, through a complicated series of events, his and Julie's slowness had ultimately created a domino effect on a number of the other climbers. And because Kurt had been unable or unwilling to save her close friend Mrówka on the descent, she couldn't let go of her feelings of resentment. Yet it's possible her anger with Kurt was fuelled more by a private admission that she might have acted in the same way. Or was due to misplaced blame because it was *she* who had suggested the change of route for Mrówka in the first place.

• • • • •

When Jurek returned to Poland after K2, Artur came to Warsaw to meet him. They greeted each other with restraint. Artur didn't ask Jurek about Tadek, and Jurek didn't say a word about the climb. As Artur manoeuvred the car onto the highway heading south toward Katowice, he mentioned that preparations were proceeding for their trip to Manaslu. Jurek nodded, staring straight ahead. "Are the barrels packed?" he asked.

"Yes," Artur replied. "We are leaving in three weeks." He waited for Jurek to respond.

Jurek was quiet for a bit and then nodded. "Good. I'll be ready."

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
FREEDOM CLIMBERS

About the author

Bernadette McDonald was the founding vice president of Mountain Culture at The Banff Centre and is the author of several books on international climbing including *Tomaž Humar*, *Brotherhood of the Rope: The Biography of Charles Houston*, *I'll Call You in Kathmandu: The Elizabeth Hawley Story*, and *Alpine Warriors*.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

PETER AND LENI GILLMAN

EXTREME EIGER

THE RACE TO CLIMB THE EIGER DIRECT

EXTREME EIGER

THE RACE TO CLIMB THE EIGER DIRECT

PETER AND LENI GILLMAN

The North Face of the Eiger was long renowned as the most dangerous climb in the Swiss Alps, one that cost the lives of numerous mountaineers. In February 1966, two teams—one German, the other British/American—aimed to climb it in a straight line from bottom to top. Astonishingly, the two teams knew almost nothing about each other's attempt until both arrived at the foot of the face. The race was on.

The following is excerpted from *Extreme Eiger*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

Chapter Ten

PARALLEL LINES

That night, Haston and Kor were in trouble. Soon after they settled into their bivouac sack at the foot of the First Band, it began to snow. Before long powder snow was billowing down around them, funnelled by an avalanche chute directly above the sloping ledge they were perched on. Their bivouac sack was too small to cover their heads and it gradually filled with snow. If one of them drifted off to sleep he would slide off the ledge, dragging the other with him. Their breath was condensing inside the sack, insidiously soaking into their clothes and equipment. The wind was intensifying, leaving them to cling on grimly and wait for dawn.

Down at Kleine Scheidegg, where gusts of wind up to 120 kph were buffeting the hotel, Harlin and Bonington were concerned for their colleagues' safety. Early on 21 February Bonington hired an emergency train – at a cost of 100 Swiss francs, around £8 – to take him and a local ski instructor to the Eigerwand station. When they peered out of the station window they were relieved to see tracks in the snow, showing that Haston and Kor had already set off to descend. Bonington returned to Kleine Scheidegg in time to greet them as they walked in out of the storm.

As Haston and Kor described their night, it was clear that the strategy of bivouacking on the face in the hope of continuing the next morning had been severely tested. And the contrast in conditions with the long-awaited ten-day clear spell bordered on the ridiculous. Haag, meanwhile, had seen the two climbers arrive at the hotel. He detected no sign that they had been unduly affected by their ordeal and concluded that their rivals were 'tough guys'.

The retreat by Haston and Kor marked the prelude to a three-day storm during which both teams were forced to bide their time in Kleine Scheidegg. That was followed by two weeks of intermittent progress as the climbers grabbed their chances between spells of poor weather. This phase saw the two teams in open competition on the face, each determined to establish an advantage. The Germans referred to themselves as the steamroller, and more often their relentless team approach took them into the lead, leaving Harlin's team to catch up and sometimes forge ahead with bursts of individual determination and skill. While the rivalry was intense, it was mitigated by moments of cooperation and friendship.

The storm raged until 25 February, smothering the face and piling snow knee-deep around Kleine Scheidegg. With climbing out of the question, the two teams kept their distance. The Germans holed up in the Stöckli while Harlin and his group passed much of the time in the Gaststube and at the hotel bar. Back in Britain, the prospects for climbing seemed so remote that I had joined John Cleare on a winter survival course based at Glenmore Lodge, an outdoor sports centre in the Cairngorms in the Scottish Highlands. Our assignment required us to spend two nights in a snow hole, which somehow felt appropriate at the time.

On the 25th, a Friday, the weather eased enough for the Germans to consider returning to the face. Haag was reluctant, feeling that the conditions were still too poor, with an angry sky

and a bitter west wind. In a testy conversation, Lehne insisted that they should make a start, and Haag gave in. As the eight Germans crossed the slopes below the face, Haag's misgivings appeared justified. Hupfauer was leading on skis, while the others – heavily laden – followed on foot. Slabs of snow broke away beneath Hupfauer's skis and slid down the slope, at one point even carrying him down for a few metres. These were classic avalanche warnings and Haag and Hupfauer exchanged glances as if to say they should turn back. Pride and the fear of losing face kept them going, and the party of eight reached the Vorbau without mishap.

Conditions at the Vorbau were savage, with violent updraughts bringing clouds of powder snow surging around them. The Germans had intended to collect the equipment they had stashed at mid-height and haul it to the top of the Vorbau but they modified their plans. Instead, they climbed with their rucksacks to an ice cave they had previously spotted near the Eigerwand station. They reached it by the evening and all eight squeezed in for the night.

At Kleine Scheidegg Harlin was watching the Germans with concern. He was impressed that they were prepared to return to the face in such challenging conditions and aware that they were gaining an advantage by doing so. In the morning of 26 February, although the weather was no better, he decided that his team should try to catch up. He, Haston and Kor set out for the face but were still some way short when they saw a massive avalanche sweep across their path ahead. Without further ado, they returned to Kleine Scheidegg, assuring themselves that the Germans would be unable to make any progress either.

In fact, the Germans spent the day enlarging their bivouac, hacking out a space that was ten metres long and two wide and high enough in places to stand up. They named it the *Eispalast*, the Ice Palace, and celebrated with two rounds of cognac. On

27 February the storms abated enough for the Germans to start up the First Band. Golikow led the first pitch, belayed by Haag, and found the rock smooth and compact, reminding them of the limestone walls of the Kaiser or Wetterstein, the popular rock-climbing areas along the German–Austrian border.

These were the same problems Kor and Haston had encountered. But whereas Kor had been able to take advantage of his Yosemite hardware, Golikow was using soft-steel pitons that bent as he attempted to hammer them into the narrow cracks. Golikow climbed fifteen metres and Haag took over, climbing a further fifteen metres before calling it a day. While Haag felt satisfied with what they had achieved, Strobel had been watching in frustration from below. He was impatient to climb, but Golikow and Haag had been occupied on the same pitch all day. In a disgruntled journal entry, he noted that this was not the speedy climbing he was accustomed to, and that he was feeling 'small and insignificant' at the foot of the face.

Meanwhile, the other five Germans descended to fetch the supplies that had been lodged halfway up the Vorbau and hauled them up to the Ice Palace. That night, in a significant shift of strategy for the Germans, all five returned to Kleine Scheidegg, leaving Haag, Strobel and Golikow on the face. Haag and Lehne recognised that it would take several more days to climb the First Band and decided it would be sensible for the support climbers to bide their time in comfort at the Stöckli instead of consuming valuable supplies on the face.

Although Harlin could see the Germans at work on the First Band that day, he still hesitated. He had been deterred by Haston and Kor's trials in their bivouac below the First Band and was reluctant to resume the climb until better weather returned. That afternoon there was a promising forecast and Harlin decided that they should return to the face the next day. From my point of view this was excellent timing, as I was on my way back to Kleine Scheidegg at

last. I had stayed in touch with Bonington from the Cairngorms and it was clear, with the two teams on the face, that the story was taking off. I caught the sleeper train to London, leaving John Cleare to cover the two-night stay in a snow hole by himself. I arrived in Kleine Scheidegg that afternoon and went to look for Bonington in his bedroom. I opened the door to see the prostrate forms of Haston and Kor on his bed. They stirred and told me they were attempting to sleep before departing for the face at midnight. Their loaded rucksacks were leaning against the bed and I withdrew.

Haston and Kor, accompanied by Bonington, left at 2.30 a.m. on 28 February. The tracks made by the Germans the day before had been obliterated and they had to break trail afresh, alternating in the lead and navigating by the slender beam from their head torches. Once at the Vorbau, Haston led up the fixed ropes on his Jumars, finding a rhythm after an ungainly start. Dawn broke as they reached the top and Bonington held back to take photographs. It was fully light by the time they reached the foot of the First Band.

A short distance away was the Ice Palace. It seemed churlish to ignore the Germans, so Haston and Kor walked over to the entrance, to be greeted by the enticing aroma of coffee. Haag offered them a cup while beside him Golikow and Strobel were preparing to resume climbing on the First Band. Behind them stretched the ice cave, with equipment neatly stacked along the walls. Kor remembered the size of the cave and how the Germans 'had all the goodies imaginable – they had special little shovels, they looked like little kiddies' shovels, to use on a sand pile'. He and Haston finished their coffee and returned to the foot of their route up the First Band, where Bonington was just arriving. They told him about the Ice Palace so Bonington took a look for himself, telling Haag: 'Wonderful, wonderful.'

Bonington returned to the First Band, where Haston and Kor were already at work. After taking more photographs, Bonington set to work digging out a snow hole that would provide an

improvement on the wretched bivouac Haston and Kor had endured. He did not have a shovel and spent half an hour hacking into a bank of compacted snow with his ice axe. He remembered the shovels in the German ice cave that Kor had seen and wondered whether he should ask to borrow one. He did not want to be in the Germans' debt, and he was uncertain how Harlin would react. But after another ten minutes' hard labour, common sense prevailed and he returned to the Germans' ice cave. (Harlin's team generally used the term 'snow hole' for their accommodation, the Germans used 'ice cave', and we have preserved that nomenclature.)

Golikow and Strobel had departed, leaving Haag there alone. When Bonington asked to borrow a shovel, the joker in Haag asserted itself. Haag affected surprise that Bonington's team had not thought of bringing a shovel, and insisted that he could not possibly lend him one without consulting his colleagues. 'I shall be talking to them on the walkie-talkie in an hour or so,' Bonington recalled him saying. 'I shall let you know.'

A discomfited Bonington withdrew. A few minutes later Haag arrived at the snow hole and handed Bonington a shovel, accompanied by a grin and an invitation to a coffee cognac when he had dug out his snow hole. They chatted for a while and Bonington returned to his task.

Thirty metres above him, Haston and Kor had returned to the high-point they had established eight days before. Kor was later to feel that somehow the Germans had obtained the better line up the First Band – but noted that whereas they eventually used eight bolts for direct aid, he used none. 'I just assumed they really weren't that good direct-aid climbers.'

It would in fact have been hard for any Alpine climbers to match Kor's skills, as he proved when he embarked on the next section of rock, a mosaic of shallow cracks that looked impassable. Haston watched in awe from a sling belay as Kor placed and moved his

pitons with a precision bordering on artistry. After three hours Kor secured his belay with a bolt – one of two he used for protection on the First Band – and waited in his slings as Haston followed. As the second, it was Haston's task to remove Kor's pitons as he climbed the pitch, returning them to Kor so that he could use them again – a procedure followed throughout the climb. Haston was so absorbed in his work that he barely noticed when it started to snow. Then, as night follows day, a sprindrift (powder snow) avalanche enveloped them, followed by another and another. Both men hunched up in a bid to protect themselves but it was to no avail, and when Haston tried to call up to Kor his mouth filled with snow.

It was time to descend. Somehow, as they juggled their climbing and abseil ropes, Haston got into a muddle. He was halfway down his abseil when his rope jammed and he flipped upside down. With fresh avalanches pouring over him, he spent ten minutes trying to free himself, then called to ask Bonington if the Germans would lend him a knife. Bonington returned with a knife which he tied to Haston's rope. Haston had a further struggle to untie the knife with his freezing fingers and sever the correct rope. When he finally touched down beside Bonington both of them knew it had been a narrow escape. Of the three climbers, Kor appeared the most shaken and announced that he was returning to Scheidegg. With notable resilience, Haston and Bonington stayed to enlarge their snow hole.

Meanwhile, the Germans were making good progress. Strobel, delighted to be released from his ennui, took the lead, seconded by Golikow, and climbed a further twenty-five metres. At first they did their best to ignore the snow but finally returned to the Ice Palace, where Golikow – displaying the same homing instinct as Kor – announced that he too was descending to Kleine Scheidegg. Haag had been watching both pairs of climbers and shared Haston's admiration for Kor, whom he described as a cheerful and modest

young man with a 'lanky charm'. But Haag remained alive to the competition between the teams, reckoning that whoever was first to the top of the First Band would have the choice of routes at the First Icefield.

Earlier in the day Harlin had hoped to carry a load of food to the foot of the First Band. He had a new partner for the trek: none other than Don Whillans, who had arrived from Leysin to assist Bonington in his photographic duties. Whillans had long been sceptical towards Harlin and his projects, considering him – in his typically forthright phrase – a bullshitter, but as he was being paid by the *Weekend Telegraph* he was able to put his doubts to one side. Harlin had hoped to tempt him into joining the climb, but Whillans did his best to restrict his help to a minimum. He did agree to assist Harlin that morning but when they encountered the powder snow pouring down the Vorbau they dumped their loads and headed back to Kleine Scheidegg. 'It wasn't really too good up there,' Harlin told me once he had returned.

I included Harlin's remark in a short report I wrote for the *Telegraph* that evening, beginning: 'Bad weather hampered the two attempts on the unclimbed "direct" route on the North Face of the Eiger today. Driving snow hit the face at two p.m. GMT …' It was my first report and brought me the experience of consigning my precious words to one of the copytakers who staffed Fleet Street, mostly men who would patiently type as I dictated to them from the hotel telephone cabin. The copytakers were gradually superseded by such hi-tech developments as telexes and fax machines; but the notion of keying your words on a laptop and pressing a button which transmitted it instantly to the newspaper was beyond imagination.

The next day, 1 March, climbing came to a halt. When Haston and Bonington peered out of their snow hole they were almost overwhelmed by spindrift avalanches. At Kleine Scheidegg, Harlin

reckoned they were the largest he had ever seen. Haston and Bonington continued to work on the snow hole until midday, when it was large enough for three people and high enough for anyone but Kor to stand up. Avalanches were still tumbling down the face and it was snowing as well, and they decided to return to Kleine Scheidegg. From the foot of the Vorbau, they descended directly to Alpiglen to avoid the avalanche risk on the slopes below the face.

In the German snow hole, Haag and Strobel stayed put, doing their best to block the entrance and retreating to the back of the cave. Haag wrote that Harlin urged him in a radio call – of which I was previously unaware – to descend 'for the sake of your life and your health'. Haag resisted, later writing that he was forming a relationship with the face and his anxiety was receding, to be replaced with 'a curiosity to see how it played out'.

The Germans were thus in position to make an early start when the next day, 2 March, dawned fair. Haag and Strobel were climbing at 7 a.m. Haag, who was leading, encountered the same difficulties as his colleagues: hard, compact rock and ice-filled cracks that he had to clear with his fingers. At the top of the pitch loomed an ice-plastered corner capped by a massive overhang. Below him, out of sight under more overhangs, Strobel was once again nurturing dark thoughts about how slowly they were progressing – about as fast, he reckoned, as the small hand on a clock face. Above him Haag was finding the climbing more and more testing. When he reached the overhang he hammered a piton a few millimetres into a crack. He inserted a second piton higher up and was attaching a karabiner when the first piton flew out. He fell twelve metres before being held on his rope. As he dangled free, he saw that his hand was bleeding and felt a searing pain across his buttocks.

Below him, even though he had effectively saved Haag's life, Strobel had noticed only a slight tug on the rope. When Haag

shouted that he had just taken a fall, Strobel – showing a distinct lack of sympathy – told him to hurry up and get on climbing as they still had an hour of daylight left. A shaken Haag ignored his advice and descended to the Ice Palace, to find that Lehne and Schnaidt had arrived from Kleine Scheidegg. The Germans had climbed another twenty-five metres in the day and reckoned they were forty metres from the top of the First Band.

While the Germans had made good progress, Harlin's team had not climbed at all. Harlin and Kor returned to the face at midday – Harlin's first visit of the climb, apart from the occasion when he had retreated because of the avalanche risk. Then Harlin decided on a change of strategy. Instead of climbing, he and Kor set about enlarging the snow hole at the foot of the First Band. Haston and Bonington had told Harlin about the Ice Palace and he had got the point. By remaining on the face the Germans were able to resume climbing as soon as the weather permitted, and Harlin – previously so disparaging about the German tactics – resolved to do likewise.

Harlin's new approach meant that he needed more bivouac equipment and he asked me to order this from an equipment store in Lucerne run by a Swiss Alpinist, Max Eiselin, who six years earlier had led the first ascent of Dhaulagiri, the seventh highest mountain. Harlin told me that he still intended to remain true to his original concept for the climb. If and when good weather arrived, he would revert to Alpine tactics 'and make a summit push from wherever our high-point is at that time'.

The change of tactics raised another problem. If Harlin's team was to emulate the Germans' approach, how could they do so with just three men? Here a transition was already under way. Bonington, officially the *Weekend Telegraph* photographer, had already been co-opted as a member of the climbing team when – at the cost to his self-esteem – he had borrowed the Germans' shovel and spent a day excavating a snow hole. Before long Bonington's

role as climber would expand further. Bonington also gave a clue to his true feelings during his conversations with Haag, who later recorded that Bonington had praised the German strategy as 'better than Harlin's' and had said that it was sensible for the two teams to work together because the climb was so dangerous.

Harlin told me about the new tactics in a radio conversation later that day. Like the Germans, Harlin had equipped his team with walkie-talkies so that they could communicate between Kleine Scheidegg and the face. Ours were large, clunky affairs with a metre-long antenna which only worked in line of sight. They were powered by batteries and proved frustratingly unreliable, and were supplemented with new and equally unreliable models several times – on one occasion Harlin purchased a set from someone he met on a train to Interlaken. But they enabled the climbers to liaise with each other and Harlin to provide information for my daily reports. Harlin set a schedule for four calls a day, to be made at 7.45 a.m., 11.45 a.m., 3.45 p.m. and 7.45 p.m. We also started recording the calls on a cumbersome reel-to-reel tape recorder that predated even cassette machines; Harlin was shooting 8mm movie film on the face and hoped to combine film and recordings in a documentary about the climb. That evening, after talking to Harlin, I led my report with Haag's fall. I predicted that he was unlikely to climb the following day, and noted (in the fourth paragraph) that the Germans were now fifteen metres higher on the First Band than Harlin's team, who had spent the day at work on their bivouac site.

By that time, my duties were beginning to expand. I remember that Harlin appeared guarded towards me at first, as if weighing me up. But once he felt I had passed muster, I presume, he accepted me not merely as a reporter but also as a member of his team. He would ask my opinion on how to deal with the *Telegraph*, how to handle the other journalists who were beginning to assemble at Kleine Scheidegg, and how to deal with the German group.

Eventually, I effectively became the base camp manager, coordinating communications and logistics, and was gratified that Harlin was willing to trust me in this way.

Another of my tasks was to ship Bonington's film to the *Daily Telegraph* in London. In the twenty-first century his images would be downloaded and dispatched by pressing the 'Send' button. In the 1960s, it meant driving with the film to Zürich airport – a three-hour journey – and freighting the film to London, just as Low had done. Harlin had recruited as courier a cheerful young Canadian woman, Joan Matthews, from Leysin. On 2 March, making her second trip to Zürich, she took the train to Grindelwald and picked up one of our hire cars. She stopped at Max Eiselin's store in Lucerne to collect the equipment I had ordered and continued to Zürich airport. On her way back she was overtaking another car at 60 mph when it pulled out and pushed her into a ditch. The hire car was a write-off but she emerged from the wreckage with nothing worse than a scratched finger. She told me all this in a telephone call at 7 p.m., adding that she hoped I had insured her to drive the car (I had).

My overriding reaction was relief that Joan had not been injured. Equally concerned was Haston, who had been taking what may be described as a romantic interest in Joan. She had telephoned me from Grindelwald and so, because the last train had departed, he skied down there in the dark to offer his consolation. Not long afterwards we decided to strengthen the courier team and Wendy Bonington arrived in Kleine Scheidegg, boosting her husband's morale and reducing the load on Joan, who came through her ordeal unscathed.

On 3 March, Harlin was able to put his new strategy to good use. He and Kor emerged from the enlarged snow hole to good weather and they started climbing at 7.30 a.m. Just fifteen metres of the First Band remained to be climbed and by 10 a.m. Kor was at the top.

The next obstacle, seventy-five metres above them, was the Second Band. It looked less problematic than the First Band and a gully system appeared to offer a route through it. Harlin took over the lead and started up a steep ice gully immediately above the First Band. He found the ice worryingly thin and after climbing twenty metres fixed his rope in place and abseiled back down. He told Kor that, rather than climb any more that day, they should safeguard the 100-metre length of 7mm Perlon rope that stretched down the First Band. It hung clear of the rock for much of the way and was already showing signs of wear. They fixed a second length of 7mm alongside it to provide a double rope for climbers who would be ascending with their loads.

The Germans, climbing fifty metres to the right, reached the top of the First Band that day too. Following their principle of rotating their climbers, Lehne and Schnaidt had taken over the lead and by 8.30 a.m. Lehne had climbed the overhang where Haag had fallen. The remaining forty metres to the top of the First Band took him another nine hours of climbing. Lehne ignored the plan whereby the team that reached the top of the First Band first would drop the other a rope: he had been less inclined than Haag to cooperate with the Americans and was not about to ask for their help. Above the First Band, at the far side of a twenty-metre sheet of ice, Lehne spotted a recess that could provide a bivouac site. But he did not have his crampons and had to turn back. He and Schnaidt returned to the Ice Palace where Haag and Strobel had been waiting all day.

Having climbed alongside each other, intermittently, for the past twelve days, the two teams had reached the top of the First Band on the same day. If this was a race, honours were roughly even. In 2014, this was an important point, which addressed the question of whether the American team had better climbers. Hupfauer considered the two teams equals and Rosenzopf added: ‘The best indication that we were similar in ability was that on the First Band

we went up parallel lines and arrived on top at approximately the same time.' In 1966, however, the statistics confronting the teams were hardly encouraging. They had climbed just over one hundred metres in twelve days – against Harlin's estimate that, given good weather, the entire ascent could be done in ten days. Above them, a further one thousand metres waited to be climbed.

Both teams were keen to push on. The next morning – 4 March – the Germans were in a position to do so but Harlin's team was not, as the result of a series of misunderstandings the previous day. While Harlin and Kor were climbing, Bonington, Whillans and Haston – who had safely returned from Grindelwald – had carried loads to the foot of the Vorbau. Whillans headed back to Kleine Scheidegg, leaving Bonington and Haston to replace Harlin and Kor on the face. At least, that was the plan. But Harlin and Kor were out of earshot and Bonington somehow presumed that they would prefer to stay in the snow hole that night and resume in the lead the next morning. So he and Haston followed Whillans back to Kleine Scheidegg.

Above them, as dusk approached, Harlin finished fixing the ropes on the First Band and returned to the snow hole. Kor had gone ahead of him and was already packing his rucksack, clearly intent on returning to Kleine Scheidegg, irrespective of whether Bonington and Haston were going to take over on the face. Kor, it was evident, was developing a liking for the ambience of Kleine Scheidegg, which included courting the demure young postmistress at the railway post office. Harlin judged it futile to stand in his way and the two descended together. Once back at Kleine Scheidegg Harlin told me they had come down because there was 'a certain amount of high cirrus about' – a reliable sign of impending bad weather, he explained.

Meanwhile, the Germans had been watching the American comings and goings with some surprise. Haag had reported his meeting

with Harlin on 20 February, relating how Harlin had claimed the moral high ground by saying that he intended to climb with a team of just three. 'And then, "Hoopla",' said Votteler in 2014. 'We see Harlin, Haston, Kor – then Bonington and Whillans.' Only later did they learn that Bonington and Whillans were supposedly there as a photographic team – and even then they were not fully convinced.

Now, on 4 March, there were further mishaps. So while there were four Germans on the face who were ready to climb (Golikow had returned to Kleine Scheidegg), there were none from Harlin's team. Burdened with guilt over their failure to replace Harlin and Kor, Bonington and Haston left Kleine Scheidegg with heavy rucksacks at 2.30 a.m. At 9 a.m. Haston reached the top of the First Band intent on climbing the ice gully where Harlin had turned back. He lowered a 100-metre rope and slid down a pair of Jumars for Bonington to use. But Bonington had neglected to secure the end of the rope and the clamps bounded past him, coming to rest halfway down the Vorbau. Then Haston dropped a camera he had borrowed from Wendy Bonington. Disheartened, he abseiled back to the foot of the First Band where Bonington had retrieved the Jumars and they retired to the snow cave to brew a drink.

Bonington and Haston decided to cut their losses and spend the rest of the day consolidating the team's position at the First Band. They were joined by Harlin and Kor and all four ferried the equipment stashed at the foot of the Vorbau to the ice cave. Then Kor hauled four rucksacks to the top of the First Band. That night they settled into the snow cave, ready to push on towards the Second Band in the morning. Kor particularly remembered Harlin's meticulous approach to snow-hole living. 'He was very organised as far as how you get in the cave, you take off your boots, brush them off, take your parka off and brush it off. Everything had a spot it had to go – he had all these things thought out.'

The Germans had mixed fortunes that day too. They hauled supplies to the top of the First Band and Strobel crossed the sheet of ice to the bivouac site Lehne had spotted. He and Haag hacked out enough space for them to lie down, while Lehne and Schnaidt returned to the Ice Palace. The Germans had difficulty communicating with each other as their radios had stopped working altogether, and they made themselves hoarse shouting to each other. Strobel, keen as ever to push ahead, lamented that he climbed just twenty metres horizontally during the day. But they now had an important lead. They had established their second bivouac site, the Villa Hammerschmidt, named after the residence of the German *Bundespräsident* in Bonn, then the West German capital (it also evoked the hammering required to carve out the cave). Harlin's team were still in their snow cave below the First Band, and Haag looked forward to consolidating the Germans' lead the next day.

Harlin's team had a miserable night. It snowed heavily, driving spindrift through gaps around the entrance, and they had to keep getting up to brush it off their clothes and equipment. In the morning fresh avalanches were pouring down. I radioed at 7.45 a.m. on 5 March to report that the snow was likely to continue for the next two days. Harlin proposed that Bonington and Kor should return to Kleine Scheidegg while he and Haston remained in the snow hole, ready – like the Germans – to continue as soon as the weather improved. Kor needed no second asking and was back at Kleine Scheidegg by midday, followed an hour later by Bonington. Haston and Harlin spent the rest of the day trying to block the entrance with the mail bags they had used to carry food and equipment.

In three days, Harlin's team had done no climbing at all – and the Germans took advantage. While Kor and Bonington were descending on 5 March, Golikow, Rosenzopf, Votteler and Hupfauer

were carrying more loads from Kleine Scheidegg. They reached the foot of the First Band at lunchtime, pausing to greet Harlin and Haston in their snow hole – Rosenzopf, the last in line, doing so with the broadest grin. Above them their four colleagues – Haag, Lehne, Strobel and Schnaidt – had been enlarging the Villa Hammerschmidt, while Haag found time to savour the avalanches pouring past: 'It was like sitting behind the Niagara Falls.' He and his three colleagues stayed in the Villa Hammerschmidt that night while the other four remained in the Ice Palace. The two groups amused themselves by exchanging messages tied to a nylon cord. The Villa Hammerschmidt four felt sufficiently buoyed to join Haag in singing an American song from his repertoire: 'You Are My Sunshine.'

That night, Haag wrote a letter to Barbara on a dismantled cigarette pack that reflected his elation. He said he wanted to reassure her about the climb. 'The face is not black and gruesome, but glows in all colours in the evening sun. I like it very much here. Apart from the occasional frostnip on my toes, I am doing very well. We are marching up the wall … and are getting along very well with the Americans. It is very good that they are here because otherwise we would be considered mad in mountaineering circles because we are taking so long. But believe me, this is one of the most difficult and beautiful things there is.'

Haag told Barbara that he and Strobel had climbed well the previous day and that they were 'halfway to the Spider … The end is in sight and we will come through for sure.' He ended by saying he was looking forward to a pullover she was knitting for him, 'and to Danny, and to seeing you soon'. Danny was the name they had given to their unborn child, who was due in three months' time.

As usual when writing to Barbara, Haag signed himself: '*Dein Pierrot*' – 'Your Pierrot'. The letter reached Barbara at home about a week later – having been taken to Kleine Scheidegg by Golikow,

who descended on 9 March, and posted to her by Frey.

For the Germans, their progress on 5 March demonstrated the effectiveness of the plan Haag had described to Harlin in the Kleine Scheidegg meeting, even if it did not fulfil all the criteria he had set out. He told Harlin that the German team was composed of equals who would share the leading and support work in equal measure. But some were proving more equal than others, as the team began to divide into the climbers and the carriers. 'We were finding out who was leading and who was bringing up the rear,' Hupfauer said in 2013. 'Some were hogging the lead and said they wanted to stay in front.'

Hupfauer was winning renown as the expert in creating bivouac sites and was acquiring some spectacular blisters from carving out ice caves. Lehne later praised his doggedness in chopping out water ice and even the underlying rock – 'we are altar boys by comparison'. Schnaidt, when not assisting Hupfauer, became the load master, usually supported by Rosenzopf and Votteler, who became collectively known as Transport Command.

The Germans clearly had an advantage over Harlin's team in numbers, which helped to shape their strategy in another way. Harlin's original plan overwhelmingly depended on his belief that a ten-day spell of clear weather would arrive, enabling him to make his Alpine-style ascent. The German attempt, in stark contrast, was not predicated on the weather. Hupfauer recalled that they had started out in bad weather and did not allow the forecasts to determine their decisions. Although Harri Frey was relaying them to the face – Hupfauer recalled 'a couple of forecasts from Zürich' – they were not a dominant factor. If the weather was good, they climbed: if it was poor, they didn't. In any case, the bivouac and transport teams were able to continue their work, even if the lead climbers couldn't, which meant that the steamroller kept on going.

On 6 March, Haston emerged from the snow hole to find that the weather forecast I had given – which had induced Bonington and Kor to return to Kleine Scheidegg – was wrong. It was a scintillating morning, with a flawless blue sky and wraiths of mist lingering over the Alpiglen meadows. Haston and Harlin ascended the rope to the top of the First Band and Haston started up the gully in which Harlin had turned back. The climbing was precarious and he found himself balancing on ice-plated slabs with the front points of his crampons and having to contend with the drag of his rope as well. He was relieved to find a stance where he could belay and bring Harlin up.

A short distance to his right the German team was hauling equipment up to the Villa Hammerschmidt. This time Golikow was acting as gangmaster, calling out to his team-mates so that they pulled in rhythm. Haston shouted a greeting and Golikow responded, 'It's a hard life' – four words in English that became his catchphrase. Haston pressed on, leading another fifteen metres over steep, thin ice with minimal protection, finally reaching a fifty-degree snow slope where he could relax. He called up Harlin who led through for another 140 feet, taking him close to the foot of the Second Band. Harlin plunged his axe into a bank of snow below an overhang and found a cave offering a perfect bivouac site. Ahead, the route through the Second Band looked easier than they had expected. Below them, Kor had returned to the face and bivouacked in the snow hole at the foot of the First Band.

The Germans were moving fast too. In two hours Haag and Strobel climbed eighty metres above the Villa Hammerschmidt, taking them to the foot of the Second Band. There they had to stop as they did not have any more ropes to fix in place. The support team spent the day hauling the equipment bombs up the First Band and from there towards the Villa Hammerschmidt. In the end, Haag and Strobel gave up waiting for the fixed ropes

and descended to help with the hauling. That evening there was some complaining with six climbers squeezed into the Villa Hammerschmidt, while Votteler and Schnaidt descended to the Ice Palace and spent the night there.

Thanks largely to Haston's skill on the ice pitches, Harlin's team had all but caught up with the Germans. As the good weather continued, the two teams spent the next day, 7 March, climbing neck and neck. Haston led off again, climbing a crisp, firm snow slope that enabled him to savour the wild landscape of the face and the landmarks he knew from his previous visits. He reached the foot of the Second Band and saw that Golikow had started up a predominantly rock line to the right of the gully system that Harlin's team preferred. Haston was setting up his belay stance when Golikow, who had just called out 'It's a hard life', took a fall, slithering down the rock into a snow bank at the foot of the pitch. He stood up with a grin. After a discussion, he and Lehne crossed to the gully system where Harlin was about to set off.

The two teams were now climbing alongside each other, at times almost within touching distance. Then the two routes converged to the point where the four climbers jostled for space on the same stance. As Harlin led up a snow-filled chimney on the left, Lehne aid-climbed brittle overhanging rock to the right; Haag wrote later that he was impressed at Harlin's 'mastery' in overcoming the chimney. Meanwhile Haston and Golikow joshed over the race taking place above them. When Harlin arrived at the top of the pitch a few minutes ahead of Lehne, Haston told Golikow that he owed him a beer. They both followed up their respective pitches and when Haston arrived Lehne pushed a piece of chocolate into his mouth – a gesture of friendship that caught Haston unawares, particularly as it came from the customarily impassive Lehne.

I had been watching these events from Kleine Scheidegg and reckoned I had seen enough to compile my report for the *Daily Telegraph*. I noted that Harlin and Haston had advanced a few metres beyond Lehne and Golikow and wrote: 'British-American team takes 15-foot lead in Eiger climb', deploying an irony that may have been lost on some *Telegraph* readers. I was premature in writing my report, as Haston was not finished. While Lehne and Golikow abseiled back to the Villa Hammerschmidt, Haston was not ready to stop. He led another pitch and reached the top of the Second Band in the gathering darkness, to be rewarded with the breathtaking vision of a crimson sun sinking into a cloud inversion that filled the valley. Harlin joined him and they had a long and frustrating search for somewhere to bivouac, finally scratching a ledge into the ice and pulling their bivouac tent around them. They had no food and instead brewed a succession of hot drinks, more than content with what they had achieved and still savouring memories of the Eiger sunset. They were ahead of the Germans.

On the morning of 8 March, Haston and Harlin looked forward to extending their lead. Below them, Haag and Strobel were determined to catch up. They had bivouacked in a small additional ice cave, eighty metres above the Villa Hammerschmidt, which they named the Wilhelm-Tell-Höhle – the William Tell Cave. After an early start they reached the rope that Haston and Harlin had left on their last pitch the previous night. As Haag saw it, the two teams had a tacit agreement to use each other's fixed ropes. Although this had not been voiced at the Kleine Scheidegg meeting on 20 February, Haag felt that it was in the spirit of the occasion – and, anyway, the Americans had used the Germans' ropes on their first day on the Vorbau. Haag and Strobel now invoked that agreement, tacit or otherwise, and set off up the Americans' rope.

Haston and Harlin were still sorting out their equipment when Strobel bid them 'Good morning' and headed for a gully they had

intended to follow themselves. To their further dismay, Golikow arrived, plunged his ice axe into a bank of snow and discovered an ice cave that they had missed during their search for a bivouac site the previous night.

Rather than follow Strobel, Harlin and Haston examined an alternative route up a chimney to the left of the gully but it was clogged with snow. As the morning slipped away, they took stock. They still had no food, their equipment was in chaos and several important items were still in the snow hole below the First Band with Kor and Bonington, who had returned to the face the previous day. They decided to spend the rest of the day consolidating their position and their supplies. Bonington and Kor brought up loads from the First Band and joined them in hacking out a new snow hole at the top of the Second Band. By the evening they had divided their supplies into five loads, but found that they were still short of several important items, and Kor needed no second invitation to fetch them from Kleine Scheidegg.

Meanwhile, Strobel and Haag had made a crucial advance. The first pitch above the Americans' bivouac site looked daunting, to say the least. Forty-eight years on it was engrained in Strobel's memory. 'It was a steep rock wall, covered with water ice, in places hollow, leading in one pitch to the coveted Second Icefield. Peter Haag said that we had to risk this pitch. We exchanged a long, hard look. We decided to draw matchsticks to decide who was to lead it.' In fact, they tossed a karabiner, which had a number on one side and a letter on the other. Strobel lost.

'I had a terrible fear to lead but I had to do it,' Strobel recalled. Although he placed some pitons he felt they had only 'moral value'– a phrase climbers use when their protection is poor and illusory – and instead relied on 'iron will and fighting spirit' to claw his way to the top.

They were now on the easier ground of the Second Icefield. With

the Flatiron to their left, they made rapid progress before halting at a steep buttress below the Flatiron's crest. Once again Haag and Strobel were ahead of their supply team and they prepared for an open bivouac, without sleeping bags, on a tiny platform with only a low ridge of rock to provide shelter from the wind. Haag, delighting in the canopy of stars that sparkled above them, reckoned the Germans were now a full day ahead of the Americans.

Two hundred metres below, the men of Transport Command were feeling elated too. They had been hauling supplies all day, doing their best to contain their anger when the bombs became stuck. As Hupfauer later wrote, those pulling from above blamed the ones below for not attaching the bombs properly, while those below thought the ones above should be pulling harder. 'I was the one who cursed the most because I spent so long waiting – and the bombs dislodged stones that it was hard to dodge.' Meanwhile, a digging team – this time excluding Hupfauer – had created a new snow hole in the location found by Golikow which they named the *Kristallsalon*, the Crystal Saloon. After the final load had been safely hauled, Hupfauer joined his team-mates there and was greeted with the news that Haag and Strobel were near the top of the Flatiron. His anger dissipated, Hupfauer fired a signal rocket in celebration. It soared away from the face in a cascade of sparks that momentarily outshone the stars.

On 9 March Harlin's team awoke to a sense of crisis. The Germans were now two hundred metres ahead and there was no time to be lost. The Germans had left a rope on Stroebel's ice-pitch above their bivouac site which – in accordance with Haag's tacit agreement, and the fact that the Germans had used their rope the previous day – they felt licensed to use. Kor, who had left Kleine Scheidegg at 2 a.m., had joined them and the four were soon at the foot of the Second Icefield. Here they had originally considered following the line to the left of the Flatiron which Harlin had

favoured, but the obvious route to the Death Bivouac, the one the Germans had taken, stretched up invitingly to the right. Haston led up it, front-pointing up the firm frozen snow, fixing ropes with Harlin as he went. He was now on the classic 1938 route and Haston relished using the battered pitons that had been hammered into the rock by climbers over the years. He and Harlin swapped leads until, late in the afternoon, they came level with Haag and Strobel near the crest of the Flatiron. Shortly afterwards Golikow and Lehne joined them there, too.

After climbing eighty metres, the two Germans had another frustrating day, as they had once again outstripped their supply line and run out of rope. While Golikow descended to deliver Haag's film – and his letter to Barbara – to Harri Frey at the Stöckli, Haag, Lehne and Strobel started excavating yet another ice cave to the right of the top of the Flatiron. Haag named it the Rulaman Bivouac, after a caveman in a popular nineteenth-century novel written following the first Neanderthal finds and Darwin's exposition of the theory of evolution. Their clothes were saturated with sweat from the day's exertions and then froze as the temperature plummeted inside the cave. Alongside them, Lehne did not even have a sleeping bag but, as Haag observed, he was at least dry.

Harlin's team was not finished. It was almost dark and had started to snow. But Haston was determined to reach the site of the Death Bivouac, where he thought they could dig out a snow hole. He removed his rucksack and set off across a 100-metre stretch of steep crusted snow, cutting steps with his ice axe in his left hand and his ice dagger in the right, and placing just two pitons for protection – one sound chromoly piton and one weak ice screw. As soon as he reached the Death Bivouac he started hacking into a bank of snow. Harlin, Bonington and Kor followed him across and joined him in his efforts, illuminated by the two head torches they had among them. The wires of one had come loose and they

took it in turns to hold them against the terminal with their bare hands. Kor remembered 'powder avalanches coming down, it was a bizarre place, it was wild'. Only at midnight was the snow hole large enough for all four to squeeze inside.

Their trials were not over. So far they had brought over two rucksacks, which meant that two were at the far end of the 100-metre traverse. The missing equipment included their stove. Neither Bonington nor Kor appeared keen to fetch it. Bonington pointed out that he was there to take photographs; Kor said his feet were cold and he was worried about frostbite. Without saying a word, Haston departed into the snowstorm with the one functioning head torch. He clipped into the rope but it dipped alarmingly and he was unable to follow the footsteps across the snow. Then he lost his footing and slid on his back towards the drop above the Second Icefield, only too aware how insecure the rope anchors were. The rope held. Haston climbed back up on a Hiebler clamp, used his ice dagger to replace the ice screw that had held his fall, and tightened the rope.

Once at the end of the traverse, Haston peered into the Germans' ice cave. Lehne, hunched over a stove, greeted him with a terse: '*Salut, Dougal*.' Haag – a smoker – gave him some cigarettes for Kor, the only member of Harlin's team who also smoked. Haston retrieved the rucksack containing the stove and set off on the return journey, feeling more confident now that the rope was secured. As he approached the snow hole he heard Harlin anxiously calling out to him. He had been gone for more than an hour and his colleagues' relief was clear when he arrived. He later described the traverse as the wildest he had ever done, all the more memorable for taking place on the North Face of the Eiger in darkness and a storm. 'As an experience it was total.'

Reassured by Haston that the traverse was safe, Harlin set off to fetch the second rucksack and returned an hour later, having

paused to pay a social call on the Germans. The four settled into the snow hole to enjoy their hard-won drinks by the light of a candle. The legs of the stove were missing and so Haston held it between his knees; he, Harlin and Bonington sat with their backs against the wall while Kor curled into the remaining space.

There was more drama to come. When Haston unscrewed a gas cylinder in the belief that it was empty, a jet of escaping gas caught alight in the flame of the candle. Haston threw the blazing canister at the entrance but missed. Bonington dived for the entrance, then remembered that they were on the edge of a 3000-foot drop. Harlin grabbed the canister and hurled it out of the cave. He scowled at Bonington, muttering darkly about 'inappropriate behaviour'. Haston merely assumed that Bonington's tank-training had kicked in. They fell asleep somewhere between 3 and 4 a.m.

On 10 March both teams awoke to another fine morning. In the Harlin team's snow hole, light was gleaming through the walls. Harlin prodded a hole with his ice axe so that the team could urinate without leaving the cave and discovered that he could see the roofs of Grindelwald, more than two thousand metres below. They also realised that they were perched in the lip of a cornice on the crest of the Flatiron – probably the very location of the 1935 Death Bivouac. At 8.45 a.m. I radioed a promising forecast: a spell of snow followed by at least another day of good weather. Harlin was determined not to fall behind the Germans, but first the climbers needed to tidy the chaos in the snow hole, rehydrate themselves with brews, and redistribute the equipment in the four rucksacks.

Soon after 9 a.m., Strobel and Haag set off up a line of chimneys above and to the right of the Flatiron that led to a small, rounded pillar head below a 100-metre rock obelisk known as the Central Pillar, which was the next prominent feature on the face. Strobel,

delighted to be climbing at full throttle again, predicted they would bivouac in the Spider that night. But the climbing became harder as the day wore on, and it was afternoon before they reached the foot of the Central Pillar.

Harlin opted for a different route to the foot of the Central Pillar. He had always intended to climb to the left of the Flatiron, perhaps crossing the Third Icefield to follow the Ramp for a pitch before traversing back into a line of gullies that led to the foot of the pillar. Now that they could see the route up close, they reckoned they could climb directly up the Third Icefield alongside the Flatiron and reach the foot of the Central Pillar from there. It was a good call. Haston led up two long but straightforward pitches, his calves straining at the repeated front-pointing, which took him to the top of the Third Icefield. Kor took over up a pitch of steep mixed ground, arriving at the foot of the Central Pillar shortly after Haag and Strobel. Haag observed that Kor looked dishevelled, his anorak and shirt having pulled away from his trousers, exposing the skin of his back. Irrespective of any violations of the climbers' dress code, Kor and Haston had caught the Germans up.

Above the four climbers loomed the Central Pillar – the key to reaching the Spider, now just 250 metres above them. As they stood on the platform at the foot of the pillar, Haston asked Haag what route he intended to take. Haag pointed to a crack system to the right of the pillar which looked straightforward at the start but culminated in an overhanging chimney that was blocked at the top by snow. Haston nodded non-committally. He and Kor abseiled back to the Death Bivouac, fixing ropes as they did so. They arrived to find the snow hole in good order and Harlin already cooking.

Haston delivered his opinion of the German line. 'It looks way out,' he said. 'I wouldn't touch it.' Kor weighed in with a contribution of his own: while Haston was talking to the Germans, he had scrutinised the foot of the Central Pillar and reckoned there was

a traverse line across its foot. On the far side, it looked as though a long ice chimney would lead to the top of the pillar. Harlin agreed to his proposal and reckoned it could open the way to a full summit push. It was in an optimistic mood that they tucked into their food.

By then, Bonington was back in Kleine Scheidegg. He reckoned he had taken enough photographs and was keen to dispatch them to the *Telegraph*. He wanted to resist being drawn any further into the role of climber and did not want to be distracted from taking the best photographs he could. He also reasoned that more than three climbers risked becoming a crowd, given the cramped conditions in the snow hole. He took some final shots of Haston and Kor setting off up the Third Icefield. He presumed that the next time he photographed the climbers would be as they approached the summit, maybe in just four days' time. On the way down he stopped to greet the German load-hauling team on the Second Icefield. Votteler persuaded him to help pull up one of the bombs, instructing him in Swabian: '*Komm' und ziag amol*' – 'Come and pull'. Since Bonington did so, Votteler liked to say afterwards that it proved that Swabian was an international language.

Otherwise it was the Germans who were feeling deflated. Strobel swiftly climbed forty metres up the crack system that Haag had pointed out to Haston, and then returned to the platform at the foot of the Central Pillar. From that moment, things began to go wrong. Strobel carved out a bivouac site while Haag hauled a bomb with Lehne, who had joined them. They had started to cook when it began to snow. They had no bivouac sacks and huddled together as the wind buffeted them with increasing force. At 10 p.m. Lehne declared that he had had enough and abseiled down into the night, promising that he would attach a bomb to their rope so that they could haul

up their bivouac equipment. But when he signalled to Haag and Strobel to pull the rope, it became tangled and stuck. Haag and Strobel gave up and reached for a bag containing their sleeping bags and several days' ration of food. A clumsy movement by Strobel dislodged the bag and it disappeared into the void.

There was nothing for it but to descend. Haag was looking forward to joining his colleagues in the relative comfort of the Rulaman Bivouac. He was quickly disillusioned. Votteler and Rosenzopf, clearly not best pleased at being woken, indicated a cramped place by the entrance where Haag could sleep. Strobel departed to join Schnaidt and Hupfauer in a second ice cave which they had excavated near the Harlin team's cave at the Death Bivouac. It was Schnaidt's turn to be surprised when at some time after midnight Strobel arrived, covered in ice and with his clothing torn. There was no spare sleeping bag, so Schnaidt said that Strobel could share his. 'We were rather cramped but we managed to sleep,' Schnaidt said in 2013.

The morning of 11 March brought disappointment to both teams. Haag awoke to find he was covered in snow and his clothes frozen solid. In a rare moment of discord, Votteler complained that his colleagues had spent all day in the snow hole but had failed to secure the entrance against the snow. In addition, despite all their best efforts, the Germans were running out of food. They were reluctant to abandon their position but in the end decided that Lehne and Rosenzopf should descend to Kleine Scheidegg to fetch more supplies. Golikow was still there, which left five of the German team on the face.

In their snow hole a short distance away, Harlin, Haston and Kor were engaged in similar deliberations. Although it had stopped snowing, the sky was heavily overcast, confirming a gloomy forecast I had given them at 7.45 a.m. They decided that Kor should go down to Kleine Scheidegg to await the good weather from there.

Harlin and Haston would stay in the snow hole, like the Germans, ready to resume climbing as soon as the bad weather ended. They were still in an upbeat mood and reckoned that once good weather returned, they could be at the summit in four days.

It was a forlorn hope. A storm that hit the Eiger proved to be one of the worst of the winter, pinning the eight climbers on the face, unable to move up and unwilling to come down. Both teams ran out of food and Harlin and Haag fell ill. The key question was which team would have the resilience to resume the climb once the bad weather passed.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
EXTREME EIGER

About the authors

Peter and Leni Gillman are the authors of the award-winning biography of George Mallory, *The Wildest Dream*. Peter has been a professional journalist for more than fifty years and was on staff at the *Weekend Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* (London). He is the author or co-author of a dozen books. Leni has been Peter's co-writer for the last twenty-five years.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

ELIZABETH AND NICHOLAS CLINCH

THROUGH A LAND OF EXTREMES

THE LITTLEDALES OF CENTRAL ASIA

THROUGH A LAND OF EXTREMES

THE LITTLEDALES OF CENTRAL ASIA

ELIZABETH AND NICHOLAS CLINCH

Teresa and St. John Littlejohn were not an average Victorian couple. They traveled together through remote regions by horseback and on foot, bringing back plants and animal specimens for museums and conservatories, as well as, very likely, intelligence for the British Foreign Office. Their journeys took them to within forty-nine miles of he Forbidden City of Lhasa, closer than any Europeans had been since the city was closed to foreigners. More than once they put their lives at risk. But the intrepid couple were all but forgotten until Nick and Betsy Clinch stumbled across some old papers.

The following is excerpted from *Through A Land of Extremes*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

Confrontation

What will tomorrow bring?

–W. A. L. Fletcher

The day of discovery: 16 July 1895. The party got up by candlelight and the caravan was on its way by half past five. Dropping down the nullah, they saw two flocks of sheep above them on the hill. One of the herders thought they were merchants and called them to come to him. They ignored him, continued down onto the plain, and headed south. They could not find a nullah in which to hide, so they had to cross the plain in full view of the Tibetans and look for a secluded nullah on a more distant ridge. They passed between sheep on their right and yaks on their left, both herds about a mile away. A man from the yak camp watched the parade from a low hill but no one else paid attention. When they came within a quarter mile of a tent with a yak, the Littledales and Willie hid among the packhorses. They skirted a small swamp as more Tibetans watched from another hill.

That afternoon three men with a gun appeared on a hill before them but the party kept going, passing another flock of sheep and an old woman and a boy sitting in front of a tent. The woman wore her hair in plaits and had a sheepskin coat. Razak Akhun went over to buy a sheep or, failing that, to give her a rupee as a gift. She said her master up the valley would sell them a sheep. She insisted on giving them fresh goat milk in a yak horn, and Teresa found it very good. A

short distance beyond, they bought a sheep from her master for two rupees. Now they had meat for the men. The party turned up a nullah and marched straight to the top of the pass through a large herd of yaks and sheep. The caravan stopped and pitched camp at an estimated altitude of 17,800 feet. They had travelled sixteen miles.

The Littledales hoped they had been taken for traders. As a precaution, they did not set up their European tents until after dark. In the morning they took down the tents before dawn and gave the animals two sacks of grain. As they were starting out, four mounted Tibetans arrived carrying guns and swords. They were the shepherds for the nearby herds. The Tibetans accompanied the caravan up the nullah and over the pass. One man rode up, stared intently into the faces of the Littledales and Willie, and then rode on. Soon more Tibetans arrived. Akhun told them they were merchants travelling to Shigatze and on to India. He showed them a passport and asked for sheep. One of the Tibetans, a local headman, said if they stopped, he would give them as many sheep as they wanted, but the caravan kept going. Descending a nullah, they came to a narrow passage jammed with boulders. It took more than an hour to get the animals through. Meanwhile, the four Tibetans watched them and then went ahead by a different route.

At the bottom of the nullah the Tibetans were waiting for them. St. George had Akhun offer them five rupees to tell him the best route. The headman replied that if they were all Ladakhis, he would do whatever they wanted, but if any were foreigners he would not help them because he would lose his head if he did. It was the standard response of local Tibetan officials and it was no exaggeration. The Tibetans were loathe to use violence against foreigners but reacted severely toward any of their own people who knowingly or even unknowingly helped foreigners penetrate their country.*[1]

After reaching the plain, the caravan proceeded south toward an opening in the hills. They were marching under a hot sun punctuated by intermittent thunder and hailstorms. One of the mules displayed an abundance of

---

* Foreigners must have believed that if they reached Lhasa, the worst punishment they faced was expulsion.

restored energy. Halfway across the plain it kicked a donkey in the head, killing it instantly.

They pitched camp in a large nullah. St. George and Willie estimated that Tengri Nor was about twenty-one miles away. Twelve armed Tibetans rode past. The men were filthy. They wore their hair in a pigtail with a white hat perched on top. They were armed with ancient matchlocks and each man carried a long two-pronged fork to support the gun while firing. Despite their fierce appearance, they were friendly. One man even offered to lead Teresa's horse through a stream. Nevertheless, the forces were gathering and the Littledales began to have serious doubts about reaching Lhasa.

The next morning ten Tibetans arrived in camp, including a lama. St. George and Willie were happy to show them their rifles. They learned from the lama that the Tibetans were not going to stop them that day but had sent to Lhasa for a high official. Razak Akhun overheard them say the official might not arrive for two days, so they still had a little time. Meanwhile, armed Tibetans were pouring in from all directions. Just after they started, sixty men appeared, mounted on small shabby ponies, and soon the number increased to eighty. The men wore long sheepskin coats tucked up at the waist, giving the appearance of kilts. Some wore coats trimmed with leopard skin or brightly colored cloth. They slipped their coat off the right arm, leaving the arm and shoulder bare. At night they would let down the coat to cover their legs. Their boots were multi-colored stockings that came to the knee with soles of yak hide stitched to the bottom. They were armed with a variety of weapons but they all had matchlocks and wore swords inserted diagonally through their clothes. Some carried long spears, and one man even had a bow and arrow. One imposing-looking Tibetan carried a matchlock, a spear, and three swords, one stuck in his belt and two strapped to his saddle, one under each leg.

The party crossed a small pass out of the nullah and descended to another plain toward a small lake. Tibetans rode on both sides of the caravan. Everyone was in good spirits except for some local headmen who kept remarking that they would lose their heads if the party continued, but when the Littledales laughed, they laughed back. They set up camp in a nullah in the midst of sheep and yaks, pitching their tents during a heavy thunderstorm. Next to

the Littledales' camp, the lama and the local headman put up a small white cotton tent with a blue border. When a local shepherd promised to sell them some sheep, their Tibetan "escort" stopped the transaction.

Everyone was up at four o'clock. The lama asked them to stop packing the animals as the headman was coming. They refused, telling him they had a passport for the whole of China and no one except the amban from Lhasa had the authority to stop them. Escorted by their eighty Tibetans, they crossed the pass before them and saw Tengri Nor for the first time. Teresa wrote, "It is a beautiful lake, the water intensely blue and surrounded by a high range of snow mountains. One peak is magnificent with snow 24,500 feet, the summit a sharp point. I am certainly the only European woman who has overlooked upon Tengri-Nor and I fancy nobody has ever been as near to Lhasa since Manning was there." She was referring to Thomas Manning, an eccentric Englishman who drifted into Lhasa in 1811. There is no question that she was the first European woman to see Tengri Nor, but she was wrong about Lhasa after Manning. Teresa undoubtedly knew that the French priests Everiste Huc and Joseph Gabet had reached Lhasa in 1846, after which Tibet had closed to foreigners. However, her long months of effort and suffering earned her the right to forget some history in her brief moment of satisfaction. Such pleasures were all too rare on this journey.

The party turned south and marched up a large valley toward Tengri Nor. As they were moving along, they met a lama who said the party should turn up a nullah on their right as it would lead to a ford across a river. The lama's advice was good but not disinterested. He wanted them to avoid a monastery directly ahead of them. They went up the nullah, crossed a pass decorated with cairns and mani stones, and went down the other side. As they descended, they saw their Tibetan escorts bowing and scraping in front of two white tents on the plain below. The Littledales assumed the high official from Lhasa had arrived and they expected trouble at any time, but it was only the local tax collector, a position worthy of proper respect but not sufficiently exalted to stop the caravan.

Their hopes of reaching Lhasa rose and fell with the latest rumor. First they heard that the high official would not leave Lhasa for another three days. Perhaps they could make a dash for it. Then they heard that a high

lama had arrived from Lhasa with twenty men. If so, it meant trouble tomorrow. They began to harbor hopes that they would be expelled by way of Sikkim, the shortest way out of Tibet.

The Lhasa official arrived the next morning and asked the party to stop for a day. They adamantly refused and started out. They were braced for two serious obstacles, a difficult river crossing about which they had been warned and the increasing opposition of the Tibetans. The river crossing was surprisingly easy, and they headed straight for the high snow mountains of the Ninchen Tangla, the range they had seen the day before. A large nullah ran up into the range but it was "a most impossible looking place for a pass." On the plain they could see the campfires of their Tibetan escort awaiting their arrival. A second river turned out to be the difficult one. While the Tibetans watched from afar, they rode up and down the riverbank looking for a ford. Two miles downriver St. George found a place where laden horses could cross. The donkey loads would have to be taken over separately. At that moment 120 Tibetans rode up and ordered them to stop. Again they refused. A rough-looking Tibetan attempted to grab the bridle of St. George's horse. St. George whipped out his revolver and the man quickly let go. They said they would lose their heads if they allowed the party to cross the river. The Littledales refused to stop and started across. While the animals were crossing, St. George and Willie fraternized with the Tibetans and showed them their rifles. The Tibetans were quite friendly despite everything.

By late afternoon the last of the donkeys had crossed. The animals were reloaded and the caravan moved on. All of the Tibetans forded the river, continued along the plain, and camped. Meanwhile, Omar Shak observed laden yaks descending a nullah so the party turned in that direction, thinking it must lead to a pass. It began to rain and soon they encountered a bog. Willie stayed back to get the donkeys across. A big bay horse collapsed and had to be left behind.

The Littledales stopped at half past seven and pitched camp in the dark in a driving rainstorm on bumpy, swampy ground. Willie and the donkeys straggled in later. Everyone was worn out, and not just from the exertions of a hard march. It was the accumulation of a series of long, hard marches

under the stress of the constant Tibetan presence and the need to press on all day and guard the animals all night. Willie wrote, “Razak Akhun thinks we are on the right track as all the grass is eaten off. What will tomorrow bring?”

Willie was prescient in his foreboding. At midnight Razak Akhun and Omar Shak went out to locate a route, checking different nullahs for cairns or tracks for the caravan to follow in the dark. Willie told Rassul Galwan to have the watch feed the horses at quarter past three in the morning and to call him at four o’clock. He awoke at quarter past four to find the horses unfed, not even tied up, and Galwan starting to light the fire. Nothing was ready. Because of this delay, they were not able to leave camp until just before daylight. Akhun had found cairns so they decided to follow his route.

The next day they climbed up the nullah on a well-used track and emerged on top of a ridge. They could see only a few Tibetans below on the plain. St. George was uneasy. Either they were on the wrong trail or the Tibetans had gone ahead to confront them in some strong position. They continued winding around the side of the hill and entered another nullah. Snowcapped peaks rose above them and glaciers topped all the nullahs, but the track with its marking cairns went on so they followed it. Through his telescope Willie saw men ahead. Soon they saw red flags, a lama in yellow robes, and on both sides of the narrow nullah row upon row of Tibetans behind rocks with just their heads visible. There were also men on a low ridge that ran straight across the nullah up which they were climbing. The lama rode forward to meet them, but 100 yards from the caravan he turned around and went on ahead of them. As the party continued, the track entered a small basin where armed Tibetans were hiding behind the rocks on three sides of them.

St. George was afraid that if they stopped it would be fatal to their hopes, so he told the men to load their rifles. The three Pathan sepoys were carrying Colt lightning repeaters, three Ladakhis and Willie had express rifles, and St. George had his Mannlicher. The rest of the party was armed with the theodolite and camera legs stuffed inside gun covers. Teresa was ordered to stay back with the baggage animals and was upset that she was not given a rifle. When St. George checked on her, she was pointing the covered theodolite at the Tibetans as if it was a powerful weapon. As for the sepoys, “There

were the three Pathans, nursing their rifles, with murder in their eyes, impatiently awaiting the signal to begin." This was what they had come for. The pleasure and pastime of the Pathans is war, and in the face of overwhelming odds, it was all St. George could do to restrain his three sepoys.

A lone Tibetan came near and ordered them to stop. They ignored him. Some officials and unarmed Tibetans approached, or as Willie described it, "Then came the Big Bugs [officials], The Youthful Bug, The Yesterday Bug, and a new one of about the same standard. They were accompanied by about 8 others.... They told us to stop as if we went on, it would be heads off, etc. We refused flatly."

The Tibetans threatened to shoot. It was a highly dangerous moment. Neither side wanted a fight and would rather retreat. Both parties knew that a fight would be disastrous for everyone. Even with their modern weapons, the thirteen caravan members would be no match for 150 Tibetans in a strong defensive position even if the Tibetans carried only matchlocks. The Tibetan officials had reason to be afraid as well. Razak Akhun and Kalam Rassul had told them, "If we die, the full justice of English Government... will take Lhasa under our government. But without your people's fault, our government cannot take the Tibet country. You people must kill us."[2] As events would prove in 1904 when the British army marched through Tibet to Lhasa, this was plausible. No intelligent Tibetan official would want to give the British such an excuse, but both sides were bluffing to the maximum of their ability and it would take just one itchy trigger finger, Tibetan or Pathan, to set off a disaster.

As the lama approached the Littledales, he yelled back to his men not to shoot until after the parties talked. St. George told him there must have been some mistake and explained that they had come all the way from England to pay their *salaams* to the Deva Jung.* He pulled out his Chinese passport and said it had been given to him by a greater man than any at Lhasa, and no one less powerful than the head Chinese amban at Lhasa could stop them. The Tibetans were frightened by the passport, which fortunately they could not read. It specifically excluded Tibet. St. George added that if anyone inter-

* Governing council in Lhasa.

fered with his party when carrying this Chinese passport, that person would lose his head even if it were the headman at Lhasa. When the Tibetans asked who they were, St. George replied that they were English and were very great men. Later Razak Akhun embellished this, telling the Tibetans the Littledales were personal friends of the Emperor of China and dined with him when they were in Peking.

The Tibetans still refused them permission to go on. St. George then said he would go first with the Chinese passport on his chest, and if he was hit, the Ladakhis would take the bloody passport with the bullet holes in it to Lhasa and there would be the devil to pay. The slightly garbled account by Galwan, the interpreter, was, "If you people shoot, then shoot on this passport. We have come here, by this passport order. But we have not come for a battle. If you people wanted to make war with us, does not matter. Here we have thirteen men only, but our Kingdom of India is a great place. You people must consider over this matter."[3]

Galwan's words rattled the Tibetans a little. They would also have rattled the government of India had they known about it. They had banned travel to Tibet from India just to avoid this kind of situation. Despite what the Tibetans were told, the British were not waiting for an excuse to take over Tibet. They were controlling India by divide and rule, and by bluff. India was large and populous, and the British Indian government was heavily dependent upon just a few British regiments and the loyalty of the native soldiers of the Indian Army. As the Indian Mutiny of 1857 had shown, this was a slender reed. The last thing the Indian government wanted was an incident involving an Englishman in distant Tibet to which they would feel the need to respond in order to appear strong. To the Tibetans, however, it was a plausible threat.

The Littledale party ostentatiously loaded their rifles and the caravan started to move forward, the Tibetan officials begging them to stop. The Tibetans behind the rocks began whooping and shouting. A lama ordered them to keep their places. Galwan told the officials that now St. George was angry that the Tibetans were getting ready to fight and he was determined to go straight to Lhasa. The Tibetans replied that if the caravan would remain

in place for three or four days, they would provide sheep, milk, butter, and anything else the Littledales might need.

The top-ranking Tibetan official asked for a chit acknowledging that he had done his best to stop them but that it was impossible because the Littledales had too many rifles. St. George offered to stop on the other side of the Goring La after they had reached wood and good grass, and there they would await the arrival of the amban from Lhasa. He added that if the Tibetans made trouble, his party would fight. He agreed on the chit but said that as his pen and ink were packed, he must stop the caravan, which he could not do in this bad stony place. They would have to reach grass first.

The caravan proceeded to the top of the ridge, where they found about 150 men hiding in the rocks. St. George gave them a written bond in English that his party would stay for a day waiting for the amban. Although the Tibetans wanted it written in Tibetan, St. George persuaded them to accept Ladakhi language, and Galwan wrote it in broken Ladakhi. The Tibetans laughed when they read it but they accepted it. Meanwhile, the Littledales and Willie were showing them telescopes, knives, and other articles. Teresa stole the show by demonstrating how her waterproof coat repelled moisture. She poured water down the front and the Tibetans were suitably impressed. The Littledales also showed the Tibetans pictures taken of themselves when they were younger, "both much beautiful" according to Galwan. They started off again at noon after having become the best of friends with the Tibetan officials.

The Tibetans told the Littledales the pass was too difficult to cross so late in the day, but the party insisted on pushing on to get as close as possible to Lhasa before coming to a halt. They started south up a nullah and then the track suddenly turned up another ravine with a great glacier looming ahead of them. It was terrible going through boulders and loose rocks. The donkeys could barely move along, falling over the rocks at nearly every step, and once again the animals began losing their shoes. A steep, narrow path led around a red sandstone hill by the side of the glacier. It started to snow and the Littledales reached the summit of the Goring La, 19,587 feet, at four o'clock in a storm. A sharp rock draped with prayer flags marked

the top. Two mules collapsed, including the one carrying the tents. Razak Akhun went back with two horses to bring up their loads.

For several hours the little party waited on top in the storm for the other horses and mules to arrive. Finally St. George sent a message back to the donkey party telling them to spend the night where they were. The rest of the group began to descend the far side of the pass. The first part was down a steep glacier. It was still snowing hard and all previous tracks were obliterated. Night had fallen, and St. George led the way in the dark through knee-deep snow, using an alpenstock to probe at each step for hidden crevasses. The angle lessened but the deep snow and the crevasse danger remained. St. George thought the glacier was more dangerous than the Tibetan matchlocks. He was right. The Tibetans did not want to harm him. The glacier did not care.

After a mile of ploughing through soft snow, they reached the snout of the glacier and got off. Teresa wrote, "We camped in very rough sloping ground in heavy snow and rain after nearly 14 hours going, tired out. We had some of Silver's self-boiling soups which were excellent and most useful a tinned tongue. The donkeys had nearly all our provisions." The men had to make do with cream biscuits that Razak Akhun happened to have brought. Willie wrote, "We are the first to cross the pass which is the highest and the worst we have had anything to do with.... How TL has stood these long marches I don't know. It is hard work up at four and not getting to camp till 7.30."

The morning was too wet for a fire, and breakfast consisted of leftover biscuits and honey. As they were starting out, eight Tibetans arrived, including a headman who told them his group had passed the donkeys on the glacier and one had died. The gorge remained rocky for another mile. It continued to rain and everyone was wet and cold. Their sheepskin coats were back with the donkeys. They halted briefly even though there was no firewood and the yak dung fuel was soaked. Galwan built a fire for tea by tearing apart an old abandoned donkey saddle and burning the grass from which it was made. The Tibetans wanted them to camp but there was not enough grass.

At noon they stopped in a drenching rain. The eight Tibetans camped near them. They were still in a gorge between high snowcapped mountains. St. George asked for sheep but the Tibetans told him they were too far away. St. George said they could not wait without meat and if sheep were not forthcoming that day, they would have to march farther the next day. The sheep were promised for that night. The donkeys finally straggled in, having lost most of their shoes. They were in bad shape but at least the party had its food supply again and the warm coats.

It snowed all night and at dawn the snow turned to steady rain. Everything was sopping wet. The mule carrying the tents was left behind below the pass and Purdil went after it while the rest of the men did their best to shoe the animals. It was difficult to nail the shoes on because their hooves were worn so thin. Teresa rested in bed trying to regain her strength. The Tibetans visited them and brought *ghi,* butter, and milk of dubious quality. They promised sheep for the next day as well as the high official from Lhasa. Purdil returned that afternoon with the tent mule. It had been such a gruelling week for the men that St. George told them he would pay them an extra week's wages for their efforts. He added that if they reached Lhasa, he would pay everyone an additional month's wages.

The next day Teresa wrote, "Got off at 6.45, the Tibetans entreating us not to go, saying their heads would be cut off by the Lhasa people. We all like these Tibetans better than any natives we have ever seen. They told us the big man would arrive in two hours...." He came just as they were leaving. "Such a funny little round-about creature, very good-natured. He is in command of this district and said we must not go on."

The Tibetan official was a jovial man with a round cheery face, and he wore a broad-brimmed straw hat covered with silk. Despite his efforts to stop them, St. George liked him, but he told the man he was dissatisfied with his rank, they would not discuss their plans with such a lowly official, and they would not stop for anyone less than the Chinese amban. He also said they needed a better campsite with grass and firewood. As the party started, the Tibetans went out ahead of them.

St. George and Willie stopped to speak with a Ladakhi lama. He told them Lhasa was a ten-day march away. Then he reduced the number to two

but added that with a fast horse, a rider could get there in one day. The lama described the route ahead as a one-day march through a narrow gorge with no grass, then a large river with a bridge over it, and many tents and men beyond that. This was believable. They said goodbye and rode off to catch up with the expedition.

Just then Teresa began waving frantically. They raced over and saw that about 100 Tibetans had stopped the caravan. St. George gave the order to march. When the Tibetans tried to stop them, he and Willie whipped out their revolvers and the Tibetans stepped back. The headman kept begging them to stop, saying he would be executed if he let them continue. As they neared a narrow place in the gorge, the headman said he might as well be killed by their bullets as have his head cut off. St. George realized the Tibetans would fight if he went on and they could stop him. He decided to halt. He then made a great show of explaining that only because they did not want heads cut off or fines levied, they would camp where they were. By doing this, he took credit for the inevitable. Relations between the Tibetans and the Littledales improved instantly. It was Wednesday, 24 July 1895, the seventy-sixth camp since Cherchen, at latitude 30 degrees 12' 12", about forty-eight or forty-nine miles from Lhasa according to St. George's calculations, closer than any other foreigners since Huc and Gabet in 1846.

They were at 16,600 feet in a large nullah with glacier-covered mountains on both sides. Despite the scenery, it was "a miserable place to camp and wait indefinitely. Very high, cold and wet." The relieved Tibetans brought them firewood and two sheep that they bought for two rupees each. The friendly headman came by their tent, presented them with another sheep, and gave them information. A message had been sent to Lhasa, where five high-ranking officials were consulting about the Littledales. One of them would arrive in two days. The Goring La, over which they had just come, was open only two to three months of the year and even then it was frequently closed by storms. It had closed since the Littledales had crossed and might remain closed indefinitely if the weather did not improve. The Tibetan said no other foreigner had been over the pass. He also volunteered the information that a road to Shigatze lay before them and Darjeeling was

seventeen to twenty-five days away. He added that the nullah where they were setting up camp would be full of snow in a month.

All they could do was wait for the Lhasa officials. Willie inspected the animals. This time the mules were in the worst shape. Their backs were in horrendous condition as a result of going downhill with inadequate, dilapidated saddles made at Cherchen with the wrong kind of grass. Willie put the men to work repairing them.

The Tibetans brought them milk, ghi, and *pima,* a sort of curdled milk or soured clotted cream. The headman tasted each item in front of the Littledales, a local custom because of the Tibetans' fear of poisoning. The pima had hair and dirt in it. Teresa could not bring herself to eat it but Willie did. They gave a tea party for the local headman. It was not a success from the Littledales' point of view. They had hoped he would come alone so they could pump him privately for information. Instead he brought three friends. The headman had little information though many questions. Was the great heat of Calcutta caused by a big tree that sent heat out of all its branches? Could the Littledales see through mountains with their telescope?

The next day St. George and Willie prepared to meet the officials from Lhasa. They cut each other's hair "in the latest style so as not to appear like beggars" and donned their best suits. Soon three Tibetan lamas arrived at the Littledales' tent. The head lama, about thirty-five years old, was dressed in a yellow silk gown with a sage-green lining and a scarlet sash. Number two lama, a much older man, and number three each wore a plain yellow gown and a brown silk shirt. All three wore Chinese hats and boots. Number two lama had a bad chest cold and was so hoarse he could hardly speak. The lamas began the conversation by asking who the Littledales were, where they had come from, and what they wanted. St. George replied that they had come to pay their salaams to the Dalai Lama, who they had heard was a very good man, and then the party was going on to India and Darjeeling by way of the Sikkim road. The lamas said that because the Littledales' religion was different, they were not allowed in Lhasa, that no one of a different religion ever went to Lhasa, and that the Littledales must do what all the others had done, turn back. Teresa wrote, "We utterly refuse to go back an inch. They said their heads would be cut off if they did not send us back. I at

once told St. George to say that if it was a question of my dying going over the pass or their heads being cut off, I preferred the latter."

St. George emphatically passed on Teresa's message to the Tibetans. He asked why the Chinese amban had not come to see them as the Littledales were carrying a Chinese passport. The lamas replied that he never came out, and moreover, the Tibetans had nothing to do with the Chinese or their passport. At that time the Chinese wanted everyone to believe they controlled Tibet. The Tibetans went along with it when it suited their convenience, but in reality they were making the decisions and the regent for the underaged Dalai Lama was the ultimate authority.

The Tibetans said they were sent by the Deva Jung and repeated their problem with the Littledales' religion. St. George replied that his party had come on a nine-month journey to pay its respects to the Dalai Lama and was not going back. He asked them what they thought would happen if news reached India that the Littledales, bearing Chinese and English passports, had been shot while passing peaceably through their country. The Tibetans quickly replied that there would be no fighting. The discussion lasted for hours but went nowhere.

The Tibetans presented fifty pounds of flour to the Littledales, who decided to accept this most welcome gift but told the Tibetans they had months of provisions and were not dependent upon the Tibetans for supplies. They added that it would please them to buy sheep, pima, and ghi. The Tibetans said they would provide everything the Littledales wanted as well as two sheep every three days. The Littledales tried to help the sick lama but he was so fearful that he hesitated to take any medicine. However, he accepted a linseed leaf from Teresa and throat lozenges from St. George. After hours of mutual indignation, the Tibetans departed as friends and returned to their camp, now a village of fourteen tents, 150 people, and 200 horses. Some young Tibetans who were servants to the officials joined the Ladakhis at their tent. They would not accept any food but they participated in the communal singing.

The pattern had been set. The lamas were not going to agree to anything except for the Littledales to turn back. St. George and Willie adopted the strategy of holding out for Lhasa until the lamas recommended another

road. They had to be cautious. St. George was afraid to suggest a specific return road because the Tibetans might insist on a different route that was unacceptable. The first move had to come from the Tibetans.

The safest and quickest way home was by way of Darjeeling, but the lamas' opposition to that route was almost as strong as their opposition to the Littledales entering Lhasa. At the very least, the Littledales had to be allowed to return by way of Ladakh. St. George said they would rather die fighting than try to return over the Chang Tang and the Akka Tagh to Cherchen. He was not exaggerating. It would mean certain death for Teresa, if not for all of them. A road to China through northeastern Tibet and Amdo was also out of the question because of danger from winter storms and bandits, and in addition, China was on the verge of another revolution.

The Littledales hoped for an opportunity to use the "Golden Key," as they referred to bribery. The difficulty was in getting a private conversation with a high enough official. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Tibetans came in groups. Bribery was a standard practice. According to Rassul Galwan, there was an earlier encounter near Tengri Nor during which a local lama offered a bribe of 3,000 rupees to the Ladakhi servants to stop the Littledales. Most were tempted to accept, and when Galwan hesitated, the lama offered even more. Galwan somehow persuaded the other Ladakhis not to take the money. He made the right choice. His own career was to prosper because of his reputation for honesty.

It was four days before they met again with the Lhasa officials. During that time there was no news from the capital. While they were waiting, they collected specimens for the museums. Willie chased butterflies. There were hundreds and he wished he had brought a net, but he did the best he could with his hat. He also inspected the animals. One lame mule had hooves so worn down that when its shoes came off, blood oozed from the nail holes. Many of the animals had sores on their backs, and despite a rest, they were not improving. Willie began to suspect the local grass was bad.

Teresa's health continued to decline. On 30 July she wrote, "[St. George] got a lot of plants which I have pressed. Very seedy all night—a fine day." It was the last entry in her diary. Her dysentery worsened and there was no medicine for it. The altitude was affecting her as well as the constant damp-

ness and cold. She was not eating and could not sleep at night. She started taking Chlorodyne to help her sleep but showed no improvement in the morning. Her morale grew weaker as her strength seeped away.

The one ray of light in all this was the local headman. He had a backhanded way of passing on information, such as "Suppose Lhasa was close he would lose his head if he said so." He also had an extraordinary range of facial grimaces and gestures while talking. Willie thought he would have made a first-rate comic actor. Everyone was fond of him.

The three lamas finally returned bringing an interpreter, a Muslim trader named Wohabjew who spoke Hindustani. He had spent several years in Ladakh and knew the fathers of the Ladakhis, who invited him to dinner. The discussion was like a broken record with the same themes being played over and over again. After a while the Tibetans said that if the Littledales crossed back over the pass and kept to the north of the mountains, they could go anywhere they wanted. St. George responded that since Teresa was ill they would give up Lhasa. They wanted only to go through Shigatze to Darjeeling to get her to a doctor as soon as possible. The lamas kept insisting the expedition had to leave the Lhasa district and go back. St. George offered to travel at night if the lamas did not want them to see any more of the country, and he added they would not go back and would rather die fighting their way out instead. The arguments continued. He concluded the meeting by saying that if they had nothing else to offer, his party would have to start a fight.

The Tibetans returned with two new high officials from Lhasa, resplendent in their yellow silk gowns. St. George heard that one was the Governor of Lhasa and the other one head of the army. Everyone crowded into Willie's small tent because Teresa was ill in the Littledales' larger one. The debate went on for two hours. It was futile. St. George and Willie were becoming more and more afraid they would have to take the long road to Ladakh and trust to luck. Afterward, still hoping to change the Tibetans' minds, they decided that the next day they would prepare to leave looking as if they intended to fight their way out.

Early the next morning they saddled the animals. After breakfast Teresa announced that she wanted to see the head Tibetan personally and if pos-

sible alone. The head of the three original Lhasa officials came to her tent but she refused to speak with him and turned him away. He came back with the two high officials. Teresa was sitting in bed propped up with pillows. A group of Tibetan onlookers stood outside the tent peering in at them. Teresa told the Tibetan chiefs she wanted only to get quickly to medical help and she would die if she went back. She then asked the local headman to agree with her that she was getting worse daily. The headman replied that he would be killed if they went on.

Suddenly Teresa asked Willie to give her the Mannlicher. The number two Tibetan lama tried to dash out of the tent but St. George collared him and hauled him back. Teresa handed the rifle to the Tibetan chief, and with tears streaming down her face she ordered him to shoot her, saying she would rather die than go back the way they had come. Again the second lama tried to bolt. Again St. George hauled him back. The stunned chief lama repeated that they would be killed if the Littledales went on.

St. George replied that if the Tibetans did not care for the Chinese passport, they would have to account for his English one, and he pulled it out. He said they were big people and such a passport was given only to big people and if Teresa died or any of them were hurt, 3,000 sepoys would take Lhasa in three months. The Tibetans reiterated that they would lose their heads. St. George suggested they be allowed to go two marches down the Lhasa road where the ground was much lower, and camp there because Teresa could not stay where she was. He asked the Tibetans to write to the Deva Jung that the Littledales were big people, Teresa was dying, and if they were not allowed to go on the Sikkim road to get to a doctor quickly, the Littledale party would fight. He then sent the Tibetans away to think it over. Meanwhile, the sepoys were growing impatient. They asked Willie for more cartridges, saying that if there was any fighting, they wanted to be sure they were included.

Wohabjew, the merchant-interpreter, brought a message from the lamas to St. George, and while he was there, he imparted a wealth of information on Tibet, its people, and its customs, which St. George dutifully recorded. He described the process of selecting a Dalai Lama and mentioned that the current one would come of age in November. The two previous Dalai Lamas

had died between the ages of eighteen and twenty and the current regent had held office for forty years. St. George could not help noticing that one's twenty-first birthday was a peculiarly fatal period in the life of a Dalai Lama.

The following day the lamas sent word that they would send the letter to the Deva Jung in Lhasa if the Littledales would stay in place, and that they would have to wait at least four days for a reply. St. George replied that they would leave immediately but Teresa was too ill to move without a *palki* (sedan chair). The Tibetans promised to ask for one.

Teresa felt a little better the next morning. She had slept through the night and even drank some milk. Although she had taken a little Chlorodyne in the evening, Willie thought it was her dramatic performance that had made the difference. It had exhausted her, enabling her to sleep. At lunch she talked about the future and what they should do on the way to Ladakh.

St. George and Willie went with a local Tibetan to look at a sick mule. The man told them the animals were being poisoned by a grass that grows under a shrub. He showed them a plant about eighteen inches high with fingery leaves and a purple flower. It was an added incentive to move to another location.

A week went by with no word from Lhasa. Later St. George learned that the letter had to be circulated to all the lamaseries and each one had to hold a meeting of its lamas. Meanwhile, the Tibetan community around them continued to grow. There were now forty tents surrounding them and more up the valley. Willie counted ten campfires above them. Every day yaks coming down from the Goring La were passing them on their way to Lhasa.

The twelfth of August was Teresa's fifty-sixth birthday but it was not an occasion to celebrate. She was feeling worse again. Furthermore, the negotiations were not working. By 15 August the expedition had been stationary for three weeks. St. George asked the Tibetans to send another letter to the Deva Jung but they refused and said they would seize any messenger the Littledales sent. They meant it. Razak Akhun was sent off with a letter and was promptly stopped. St. George threatened the Tibetans with the full wrath of the Indian government but still they did not budge. Meanwhile,

Teresa had stopped drinking milk and the daily rain showers were turning to snow.

It was becoming more and more apparent they would have to return to India by way of Ladakh and Kashmir, 1,200 miles away. It would take two and a half months just to get to Leh. Moreover, the need for supplies would delay their start. They calculated that 10 November was the earliest they could get over the Zoji La, the pass between Ladakh and Srinagar, Kashmir, but the pass could close before then and they would have to spend the winter in Ladakh.

That night it snowed heavily. Willie was awakened by a sharp crack he thought was a rifle shot and found himself pinned to his bed. His first thought was that the Tibetans had attacked, but after a few heart-stopping moments he realized the heavy snowfall had collapsed his tent and snapped the tent pole. The jagged end had cut through the bedding by his head. He took refuge with the Ladakhis for the rest of the night.

The next day the Tibetans gave Lhasa's answer. The expedition would have to go back to Cherchen. St. George and Willie refused. After more arguing, the Tibetans told the Littledales they could go to Ladakh but only by a route far to the north. This was impossible as there would be no grass and a critical pass would be closed in about ten days. Both sides agreed it was a difficult situation for all of them.

It was more than difficult for the Littledales. It was desperate. They could not make it back to Cherchen alive and they could not stay much longer in their camp. Animals were dying and Teresa's health was rapidly sinking. Early the next morning St. George and Willie went to see the Tibetans. After a long discussion it was agreed that they would go back over the Goring La and then go south of the Garing Tso (lake) and head west for Ladakh. They needed a palki for Teresa. There were two in Lhasa, one belonging to the Dalai Lama and the other to the Chinese amban. St. George sent polite messages to both men asking to buy one of the palkis but neither would sell. The Tibetans told him a palki could be made at the camp and they were bringing men with wood, leather, iron, and other materials to make it. St. George gave them 400 rupees as an installment on food and supplies to be bought in Lhasa.

Later, Wohabjew brought a letter saying they were not to go in Lhasa territory. As the Ladakh road was in Lhasa territory, this was unacceptable. St. George then dictated a letter to Wohabjew stating their understanding, but Wohabjew did not write what he was told and inserted a statement about not entering Lhasa territory. St. George and Willie learned of his treachery only because Rassul Galwan was able to read Tibetan.

They stormed into the Tibetans' tent the next morning to make them keep their original promise. The Tibetans now insisted that the party go back beyond Tengri Nor and around the north side of the Garing Tso. They also said the Littledales must stay outside of Lhasa territory, which meant they could not use the main road to Ladakh. The two parties argued over the route for hours. Finally St. George agreed to go around the north side of the Garing Tso in exchange for an order to the local Tibetans along the route to supply the caravan with horses and grain at regular prices. The officials refused to give such an order to St. George but said they would give it to Razak Akhun and Rassul Galwan. With that understanding an agreement was reached. The Tibetans said they would furnish yaks to help cross the pass and the materials for the palki would arrive the next day.

The Littledales had not reached Lhasa. They had not even been able to get out by way of the Darjeeling road. Even so, they had made an extraordinary march and had come closer to that Forbidden City than many more famous explorers. But fame was the last thing on their minds. Two more animals died, a horse and a donkey. All of their attention was now focused on getting out alive. They knew it was going to be close, especially for Teresa. It was going to be so close that by the end of the day neither St. George nor Willie had summoned up the courage to tell Teresa they would have to go all the way back to the north side of the Garing Tso before turning west.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
THROUGH A LAND OF EXTREMES

About the authors

Elizabeth Clinch is a graduate of Wellesley College with a major in history. She did library research for *Encyclopedia Britannica* followed by editorial research for *National Geographic*. She is an amateur cellist and chamber musician. **Nicholas Clinch** graduated from Stanford, majoring in political science, followed by a degree from Stanford Law School. He has led various mountaineering expeditions in Central Asia including the two highest first ascents made by Americans, Gasherbrum I (26,470 feet) and Masherbrum (25,660 feet). He also led the expedition that made the first ascents of the highest peaks in Antarctica. He is a former executive director of the Sierra Club Foundation and is a past president of the American Alpine Club. His prior book, *A Walk in the Sky: Climbing Hidden Peak*, was published by The Mountaineers Books in 1982.

The Clinches have travelled together in Central Asia, including areas visited by the Littledales. In Kashgar they saw Chini Bagh, where the Littledales stayed during two expeditions.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

Foreword by Katie Ives
Illustrations by Val Biro

ERIC SHIPTON

THAT UNTRAVELLED WORLD

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THAT UNTRAVELLED WORLD

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Eric Shipton

One of the greatest adventurers of the twentieth century, Eric Shipton explored places for which no maps existed, scaled mountains whose heights were uncalculated, and encountered people whom no westerner had ever met before. *That Untravelled World*, originally published in 1969, is his autobiography, written near the end of his career, when the passing of time had deepened his reflections on his many accomplishments, his colorful companions, and the places he had explored.

The following is excerpted from *That Untravelled World*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

From Chapter 4: Himalayan Hey-Day

There was no difficulty about choosing my first objective. Nanda Devi (25,660 feet), the highest peak in the Garhwal Himalaya, was surrounded by a mountain barrier which had never been penetrated. The only breach in this remarkable wall was on its western side, where the Rishi Ganga river had carved a gigantic canyon, twenty miles long, to the Dhaoli Valley. We had passed its entrance on the way to Kamet in 1931. Since 1883, when Graham and his two Swiss guides had tried to force their way up this gorge, repeated attempts had been made, from every angle of approach, to reach the inner basin surrounding the great peak. Among those who had tackled the problem was Dr. T. G. Longstaff.

Tom Longstaff was a doyen among mountain explorers, and as such he had long been one of my heroes. In spite of his small stature and generous nature, he was an intimidating character, forthright and uncompromising. I had seen him at La Bérarde in 1926, but had been far too diffident to approach him. Early in 1933 I had met him at the Royal Geographical Society, where several of the younger members of the expedition had gathered to hear his advice. He had concluded his remarks, with outstretched fin-

ger and flashing eyes: "The man who collapses above the North Col is a scoundrel; a scoundrel, sir!" Thus, when he kindly invited me to spend a week-end at his home to discuss my Nanda Devi plan I accepted with a good deal of trepidation. This was in no way lessened by the fact that the great man's family was composed of seven daughters, then in various stages of adolescence. To make matters worse, Ferdie Crawford, another member of the 1933 expedition and a close friend of the Longstaffs, had told the girls that I was a brilliant pianist and that they must persuade me to play for them. He warned them that I was extremely shy and would probably deny my prowess, and that they would have to insist very strongly to get me to comply. This they certainly did. Luckily, despite the years I had spent practising five-finger exercises in lieu of prayers, I could not play a single chord; and when at last I got them to believe me, their mounting anger was turned on Ferdie, who, having savoured his joke to the full, had drifted out of the drawing-room.

I received a great deal of help from Longstaff, who advised me to concentrate my efforts on the Rishi Ganga. Though on one of his expeditions, in 1907, he had tried to penetrate the gorge, he had not been able to press home his attempt; but he was convinced that it was possible. However, he was frankly skeptical about my budget, which he considered ludicrously small. I had made a careful estimate, and I believed that by travelling to India and back by cargo ships I could spend five months in the Himalaya with two Sherpas for an overall cost of £150. A certain amount of local transport would be necessary to carry us to our base of operations, but by cutting down equipment to the bare necessities and by living almost entirely on local produce, it would not cost much. Apart from this, the only expenses in the field would be the Sherpas' wages, 1*s.* 10*d.* per day each, and the cost of our food, which would consist mainly of flour and ghee (clarified butter). Frugal fare no doubt, but since it was the basic diet of the Sherpas, I saw no reason why I should not thrive on it as well.

There was, of course, the problem of raising the £150. At first I was confident that the project would be of sufficient interest for some newspaper to pay me a substantial part of the sum in exchange for a series of articles; but I was wrong. Though I took my proposition to the editors of most of the

Nanda Devi

leading journals in London, I failed to elicit any response. How different it would have been today! An alternative source of income was lecturing about Everest. I had never lectured before, and the prospect appalled me, but I wrote an account of the recent expedition, 8000 words long, and learnt the whole thing by heart, including some corny jokes. Perhaps my earlier struggles with *The Odes of Horace* and *Cicero Pro Milone* had been of some benefit after all. The result was an exceedingly dull lecture, but it was repeated often enough to yield most of the money I required, and the experience helped to conquer my horror of public speaking. I also spent much of that winter learning the rudiments of topographical survey.

I tried hard to find someone to come with me, but before long it seemed clear that I would have to attempt the venture alone with the Sherpas. Maybe the prospect of living for five months on flour and ghee was a deterrent, but of those whom I invited only Dr. Noel Humphreys was enthusiastic about the project. Unfortunately he had recently undertaken to lead an Arctic expedition, and though he tried to find someone to take his place so that he could join me, his sponsors would not agree to release him. Then a man of fifty, he had led a life of Spartan simplicity, dedicated to exploration; his chief field of activity had been Ruwenzori. Starting

with virtually no private means, he had become a qualified geographical surveyor and a trained botanist. He was also a mountaineer. Two years before, at the age of forty-eight, he had qualified as a medical doctor. To do this he had rented an attic in London for a nominal sum, where he had lived for four years at an average total cost of 24*s.* 6*d.* a week. His chief motive for becoming a doctor had been to further his career as an explorer. I spent delightful evenings in his attic discussing the many fields of exploration still untouched. A keen exponent of the art of travelling light, willing to undergo any privation to achieve his objectives, he was in complete accord with my views, and could not understand why I had any qualms about abandoning my pursuit of security to embark on a life with no discernible prospects. He provided the encouragement I desperately needed, and I owe a great deal to his sympathy and advice.

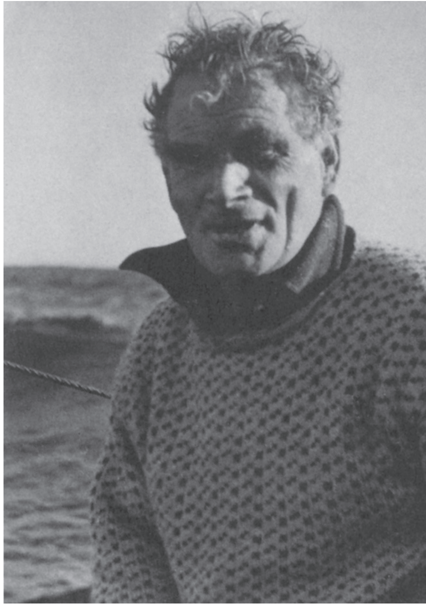
Early in 1934 I received a letter from Bill Tilman telling me that he, too, had given up the struggle to make a reasonable living in Kenya; that, after an unsuccessful spell of prospecting in Kakamega, where people were still hoping, now rather forlornly, to strike fresh deposits of gold he had bought a push-bike and, living almost entirely on bananas, had ridden it across Africa to the West Coast, where he had boarded a homeward-bound cargo ship. He suggested that I should join him for a fortnight's climbing in the Lake District. I replied with a counter proposal that he should join me on a seven-month trip to the Himalaya, and he readily agreed. His return to England was most opportune, and I believe that the course of both our lives would have been profoundly changed if he had arrived a few months later. For, while he would probably not have gone to the Himalaya during the next five years, thus missing the experiences which laid the foundation of much of his subsequent career, I for my part owe the success of the Nanda Devi venture very largely to his support.

For the plan I had devised, Bill was nearly the ideal partner: he was tough and always ready for any amount of hardship and privation; indeed, his ascetic tastes often made me feel a positive sybarite. Nearly ten years older than me, he had served in France from 1915 to 1918, winning the M.C. and bar, though he was only twenty when the war ended. Because I had had a great deal more mountaineering experience, he was apparently

content to let me assume charge and take the decisions, and we always seemed to be in general agreement about our plans. He was a recluse and a misogynist, and he had no taste for the softer pleasures of life: he had never even been inside a cinema. By contrast, he had a sensitive compassion for animals and an effervescent humour which won the hearts of the Sherpas. Nevertheless, he was astringent company, with little use for small talk and none for abstract discussion; and, much as I liked him for his humour and admired his staunchness, our relationship remained practical rather than intimate. As we had done in Africa, we continued to address one another as "Tilman" and "Shipton"; and when, after another seven months continuously together, I suggested that it was time he called me "Eric" he became acutely embarrassed, hung his head and muttered, "It sounds so damned silly."

My previous experience of travel in Garhwal was, of course, a great help, and when we reached Ranikhet a day and a half was all that was needed to complete our simple preparations and start on our march across the foothills. With two to share expenses, I had recruited three Sherpas instead of two, and we had brought from England some biscuits, cheese and pemmican to supplement the local food. Our diet, however, was mainly composed of chupattis and tsampa; the former are pancakes made of flour and water, baked on a hot plate; the latter is roasted barley meal, which can either be made into a hot porridge, taken as a cold cereal or, following the Tibetan custom, mixed in tea. The Sherpas spiced their meals with a strong sauce, made with lentils or edible plants if these were available, or simply boiled chillies. Though Bill and I adopted this practice, we also ate a great deal of sugar. At first I found this simple fare very bleak, and sometimes, particularly at breakfast or when I was tired, even repulsive; though nothing would have induced me to say so in face of Bill's stoicism. But I soon became accustomed to it, and before long I ate my portion with ever-increasing relish. Apart from our ten tins of pemmican, which we kept for high camps, we hardly tasted meat, and though we probably suffered from lack of protein, we were not aware of this.

Later, Bill and I acquired a wide reputation for Spartan living, which gave rise to endless banter. In fact, though we had broken with contemporary tra-



H.W. Tilman

dition, we were merely following the example of countless pioneer travellers in various parts of the world: Simpson in Canada, Stefansson in the Arctic, Lawrence in the desert, each had found in close adaptation to his particular environment not only a convenient means of survival and of accomplishing his ends but a luxury sweeter and far more satisfying than any artificially contrived. Compared with such men we were mere novices; indeed, I often feel that I have never graduated from that category.

We soon had striking evidence of one of the many advantages of travelling light in the Himalaya. At Surai Tota, a village in the Dhaoli Valley, which we reached in twelve marches from Ranikhet, we engaged some men to carry supplies to our base in the Rishi Ganga. To avoid the lower section of the gorge, which was said to be impassable, we had to cross a pass over a flanking ridge; though this was only 13,000 feet high, it was still (May 22) under deep winter snow. The Surai Tota men, unwilling to face the heavy toil involved, deserted us as soon as we reached the snow-line. Luckily we had not discharged the ten Dhotial porters we had brought from Ranikhet, and they volunteered to come with us, carrying extra loads. These people were low-caste Hindus who lived and worked in the foothills; they had no experience of travelling in rugged, uninhabited country, let alone in snow. No doubt they were quite unaware of what they had let themselves in for, but their magnificent fortitude saved us from failure; for it was vital that we should reach our base several weeks before the onset of the monsoon. Had we been encumbered with anything but bare necessities we would not have stood a chance. As it was, for the next six days the issue hung in a delicate balance.

For most of two days we struggled through soft snow up to our knees, our waists and sometimes up to our armpits. Bill and I, lightly laden, went ahead to flog the trail, while the others followed with their heavy loads. Twice, after exhausting effort, we reached a saddle which we hoped was the pass, only to find a sheer drop of several thousand feet on the other side. The third time we were lucky, and descended into the gorge beyond. It was an astonishing place. The southern side of the valley was composed of tier upon tier of gigantic slabs, steeply inclined, which culminated, 10,000 feet above the river, in a host of spires set at a rakish angle, while beyond them stood a range of ice peaks. The northern side, the one we were on, was scarcely less precipitous, which made it impossible to see the way ahead for any distance. This, coupled with the immense scale of the gorge, made route-finding difficult. We would clamber 2000 feet up a buttress and then down a similar height into a gully beyond to gain a bare half mile of progress. Sometimes we reached an impasse which forced us to retreat to try another line. This was particularly disheartening for the Dhotials, their morale already badly shaken by the difficulty of the terrain; but we urged them on through all the daylight hours with the promise of rich rewards. The reason for our haste was that, with fifteen mouths to feed, each day spent in reaching our base meant three days less food for the work beyond.

Luckily the weather remained fine, for in mist or rain it would have been almost impossible to find a way. As it was, at dusk on May 28 we arrived at the Junction of the Rhamini Nullah (named by our predecessors) with the Rishi Ganga, which was the farthest point reached by Graham and Longstaff, and where we had planned to make our base. To emphasise our good fortune, a heavy storm broke a few minutes before we got there. The following morning we discharged the gallant Dhotials who, despite the hammering they had taken, left us with touching expressions of regret.

Now, after the anxieties of the past week, at the threshold of our adventure, we were in a splendid position. A stock-taking showed that we had food enough for five weeks, and thus ample time for our fascinating task of finding a way through the upper gorge into the untrodden sanctuary beyond. A strip of shore along the southern side of the river, overhung by cliffs, provided us with snug, weather-proof quarters, and a grove of birch

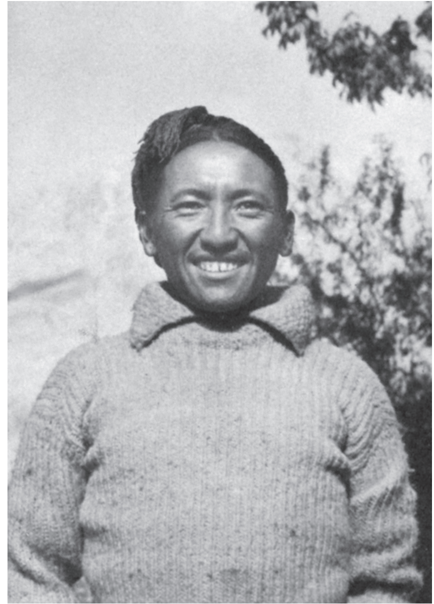
trees with ample fuel. By an extraordinary chance, at this very point a vast boulder was wedged above the river, forming a natural bridge and giving us access to both sides of the gorge. After so much strenuous exercise Bill and I were very fit, while our recent trials had shown our three Sherpas to be men of very high quality.

Among the many delights of this Nanda Devi venture was that, for the first time, I was able to treat these people as friends rather than as hired porters and servants. Sharing with them our food and tent-space, our plans and problems, we came to know their individual characteristics and to appreciate their delicious humour and their generous comradeship in a way quite impossible on a large expedition. Having spent all their lives among high mountains, they naturally saw no purpose in climbing them; nor did they understand our desire to penetrate unexplored gorges and glaciers or to cross unknown passes, for all these objects abounded in their own land. But whatever task we undertook, they tackled with as much zest as though it was their own ambition to achieve it. With such colleagues leadership was hardly called for; indeed, in more than one tight corner it was theirs rather than ours that saw us through. We owed all our successes to their unfailing staunchness.

Angtarkay had distinguished himself on Everest in 1933 by weathering the three-day storm at Camp 5, which left most of us weak and dispirited, and then volunteering to carry to Camp 6. He was five feet tall, small even for a Sherpa, lightly built and with pronounced knock-knees. He had a diffident manner and a flashing smile. Both his diminutive stature and his retiring demeanour belied the remarkable force of his personality, which was manifest in any crisis or adversity. Though then illiterate, he was intelligent, balanced and capable of shrewd appraisal of men and situations. Indeed, he was a shining example of my contention (based, no doubt, on personal prejudice) that literacy is not a prerequisite of wisdom. He was to be my companion on seven more expeditions, and he acquired an international reputation which in no way spoiled him.

Properly speaking, the Sherpas are inhabitants of the Nepalese valley of Solu Khumbu, though racially they are pure Tibetans. A large proportion of the so-called Sherpas who have taken part in Everest and other Himalayan expeditions have in fact come from Tibet itself, and many of them had never

even visited Solu Khumbu. Pasang Bhotia, as his name implies (*Bhot* means Tibet), was one of these. He, too, had reached Camp 6 in 1933, and I had known him better than most, as he had been appointed my personal "orderly" on the outward march. Tall and spare, with sensitive aquiline features, he was something of a dandy, and always contrived to look a great deal more presentable than the rest of us. Like the other two Sherpas, he wore his long hair plaited in a single pigtail with a red tassel at the end, and he was at great pains to keep it neat and sleek. He was a fine climber, and his graceful movements on difficult ground were delightful to watch. He was inclined to be temperamental, and his elan often needed restraint; but he was not easily discouraged.



Angtarkay

Kusang was Angtarkay's cousin. He had also been on Everest in 1933, though among hundreds of others, I did not even remember his face. Sherpas rarely know how old they are, but we judged him to be about twenty, several years younger than the other two. For this reason no doubt he was somewhat put-upon in the matter of work, performing the bulk of the camp chores, fetching wood and water, washing up and always carrying the heaviest load. But he seemed to delight in work of every kind, and he certainly never resented it. We were often grateful for his extraordinary ability to kindle a fire with the most unlikely material, while his complete composure in times of stress did much to steady our morale. He spoke little Urdu, our only means of communication with the Sherpas, but as he always knew what was required of him, this hardly mattered.

Elated though we were at having reached our base with such ample supplies, the prospect ahead was far from encouraging. Fifty yards beyond the

shore the river issued from a perfect box-canyon, its vertical walls smooth and unbroken. The northern side seemed quite impassable; but luckily the cliffs overhanging our camp were split by a narrow cleft, which enabled us to reach a gully above and to climb 2000 feet up the southern side of the gorge. There we found the first of a series of ledges running westward above the canyon. We took nine days to find a way and to relay our food and equipment through the remaining four miles of the gorge. It was exciting work, for until the last moment the issue remained in doubt, and each section of the route appeared to rely for its continuity upon the slender chance of a rock fault in the right place. The last mile looked so unpromising that we tried to force our way along the bottom. It was lucky that we failed in this, for when the ice of the glaciers began to melt more rapidly the river became enormously swollen, and we would not have been able to return that way. Eventually we found the last frail link along the precipices of the southern side and entered the Nanda Devi basin with enough food to stay there for three weeks.

It was a glorious place, and, of course, the fact that we were the first to reach it lent a special enchantment to our surroundings. The Sherpas, whose appreciation of country was more practical than aesthetic, were particularly impressed with the extensive grass land, which, they thought, would provide unlimited grazing for yaks. The season was still early, and the flowers, though beautiful, were not yet so luxuriant as they had been lower down in the Rishi Ganga. We saw many herds of *bharal* (wild sheep) and though fresh meat would have been most welcome, I was not sorry that we had no rifle. Several long glacier valleys ran down from the great circle of mountains, between 21,000 and 23,000 feet high, surrounding the basin. In the centre of this mighty amphitheatre, standing 13,000 feet above its base, was the peerless spire of Nanda Devi, ever changing in form and colour as we moved.

It was soon clear that three weeks was not time enough to explore the whole basin, so we decided to concentrate on the northern half and return to survey the southern half in September when we hoped the monsoon would be over. The weather was mostly fine, and usually we slept in the open, even at our highest camps, for it deepened the sense of harmony with our exquisite surroundings. Though our main task was to map the country with a plane-table,

we were able to combine this with some mountaineering. We climbed one peak of 21,000 feet and failed to reach the summit of another of 23,000 feet. We also reached three cols on the eastern and northern "rim" of the basin.

Towards the end of June the monsoon arrived, and we retreated down the Rishi Ganga in torrential rain. Though we had a lot of trouble with swollen side-streams and had to be very careful negotiating the more difficult passages, we knew every yard of the way and, with little to carry, we made rapid progress. The gorge was even more splendid in foul weather than in fair. Particularly I remember one night of violent storm when I was snugly wedged in a little recess between two boulders listening to the hiss of the rain outside, and to the thunder which, echoing along miles of crag, maintained an almost unbroken roll. Lightning flickered incessantly upon the vast precipices and upon cloud banners entwined about ridges and corries. The sense of fantasy was heightened by the semi-consciousness of fitful sleep. At times, it seemed, I was perched on an eagle's nest above an infernal cauldron, infinitely deep; sometimes I was floating with the mist, myself a part of the tempest. On July 1, our food exhausted, we regained the Dhaoli Valley, after an absence of six weeks.

During July and August we made two complete crossings of the Badrinath Range, the first outside the pages of Hindu mythology, to effect a direct connection between the three main sources of the sacred River Ganges. The second of these journeys proved tougher than we had anticipated, and we landed ourselves in an awkward situation.

From the head of the Satopanth Glacier, west of Badrinath, we reached a saddle, 18,400 feet high, on the crest of the watershed. We arrived there in thick mist and falling snow, but early the following morning, a brief clearing revealed that we were on the brink of an ice precipice plunging 6000 feet into the valley below. But this looked so green and enticing that we decided to attempt the descent. It proved no less difficult than it had appeared, and it was not until the next day that we reached the foot of the precipice, having cut off our retreat by roping down one section in our eagerness to reach the Elysian fields below. The valley, however, was no primrose path; instead it was a formidable gorge filled with dense, trackless forest, where progress was terribly slow and laborious. The rain was heavy and incessant, and our sleep-

ing bags became as saturated as our clothes. The sides of the gorge were precipitous and often it took us an hour to cover twenty-five yards, while we rarely achieved more than a mile in a day. Much of our trouble was caused by side-streams, which were generally at the bottom of deep ravines and always in spate. One held us up for two days before we found a place where we could bridge it. Before long our food ran out, and for a week we lived on tree-fungus and bamboo shoots, happily then in season. Eventually we reached a tiny hamlet where we obtained four pounds of flour, a cucumber and a handful of dried apricots. Though these provided a memorable banquet, even more welcome was the forest track which led us down to the Kedarnath pilgrim route.

At the beginning of September we returned to the Rishi Ganga. With no problem of route-finding and with local porters to help us, we got through the gorge in eight days from the Dhaoli Valley. By then the monsoon was over, and we enjoyed a long spell of fine weather. The geography of the southern section of the basin was relatively simple, and it did not take us long to complete our survey. We found a practicable route up Nanda Devi itself by way of its southern ridge, but though we climbed some way up it, we were not equipped to make a serious attempt on the summit; for one thing our boots were now full of holes and almost devoid of nails.

Our ambition was to find a way out of the basin over some part of the encircling ranges which had so long proved impregnable. With little choice in the matter, we determined to concentrate our efforts on the lowest depression (18,000 feet) on the southern wall, which Hugh Ruttledge and his Italian guide, Emil Rey, had attempted to cross two years before. Angtarkay, Kusang and I climbed a peak of 22,360 feet immediately above this col, and from there we saw the 6000-foot precipice forming its southern side. Though I fully appreciated Ruttledge's decision to abandon his attempt to climb it, we thought it might be possible to descend. In fact, it proved to be even more difficult than the precipice we had descended into the Kedarnath valleys seven weeks before, though this time we had fine weather, plenty of food and the certainty that when we reached the bottom we would be only a couple of days march from habitation. It was perhaps the most exciting of our adventures, and certainly provided a wonderful finale.

The march back to Ranikhet, in golden autumn weather, through new and beautiful surroundings, gave us time to reflect on the crowded events of the last five months. We had achieved far more than I had dared to hope. I appreciated as never before not only the joys of unencumbered travel but also the deep satisfaction of exploring unknown ranges; and from then on I became far more interested in this than in climbing peaks. It might be argued that, by relying upon such slender resources, we had run too many risks; for the bulk of the time had been spent in uninhabited regions, where even a relatively minor mishap could have had grave consequences. But it should be remembered that, before the advent of radio and helicopter, such risks were inherent in most exploratory journeys through wild country; certainly those we ran seem paltry compared with the appalling hazards faced, quite deliberately, by polar travellers only a few decades ago when the art of survival was sometimes their only asset. The expedition cost £286 for the two of us, including all our travel; £14 less than my original budget.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
THAT UNTRAVELLED WORLD

About the Author

Eric Shipton (1907–1977) was one of the great mountain explorers of the twentieth century. Together with frequent partner H.W. Tilman, Shipton explored new regions in the Himalaya, discovering the way to the Nanda Devi sanctuary, now a World Heritage Site. With Frank Smythe, he reached the summit of Kamet in 1931, then the highest summit to be reached. He participated in five Everest expeditions and was responsible for the inclusion of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay on the successful 1953 attempt. Shipton wrote half a dozen other books in addition to *That Untravelled World*; *Nanda Devi*, *Blank on the Map*, *Upon That Mountain*, *Mountains of Tartary*, *Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition 1951*, and *Land of Tempest* are included in the omnibus *Eric Shipton: The Six Mountain-Travel Books* (also published by Mountaineers Books).

EVEREST

THE WEST RIDGE

THOMAS F. HORNBEIN

FOREWORD TO THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION BY JON KRAKAUER

EVEREST

THE WEST RIDGE

THOMAS F. HORNBEIN

Roughly two weeks after Jim Whittaker became the first American to summit Everest (via the South Col route), Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld, fellow American mountaineers on the same expedition, were the first climbers to summit the world's highest peak via the deadly and forbidding West Ridge—a route on which only a handful of climbers have ever succeeded.

The following is excerpted from *Everest: The West Ridge*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

A pool in a glacier at Base Camp
(Photo by James Lester)

Our Turn

The light died in the low clouds. Falling snow drank in the dusk.
Shrouded in silence, the branches wrapped me in their peace.
When the boundaries were erased, once again the wonder:
that I exist.

—Dag Hammarskjöld

May 1. Fresh eggs, chicken, even a can of beer that had somehow escaped prior consumption, then a bucket of warm water for a piecemeal bath in the morning sunshine, followed by clean underwear and socks after a month—it all took a bit of the edge off our regrets at coming down. It was a relief for me—and for Willi too, I suspect—to escape for a few days from my nervous energy.

The morning was warm and sunny, but streamers of snow blew like prayer flags off the crest of Nuptse, carrying far out across the Cwm. Could they even move under such conditions? The whole battle seemed remote, unreal, unimportant. Here in the shelter of towering peaks, where weeks before all had been frozen, water coursed in rivulets over the surface of the Glacier. Base Camp looked well worn and lived in. The red tents seemed a permanent part of the moraine. Paths had been cleared and lined with rocks. A stone-sided, tar-proofed kitchen had been constructed; inside, box shelves were half-filled with long-forgotten delicacies too heavy to be car-

ried farther up the mountain. There were chairs to lounge in and a slightly sagging table to write on and eat from. There was no use fighting it.

We busied ourselves with chores. I sharpened my ax, made new bindings for my crampons, read *From Russia with Love.* We weighed in on Siri's scale; at 131 pounds I was only four below normal, even with the dirt washed off. Willi had lost about the same. Perhaps our eating habits were paying off.

From Camp 4 on the Lhotse Face, Dingman reported high winds and no sign of movement above. Prather, he informed us, had had breathing trouble during the night, possibly pulmonary edema. Dave had given him digitalis and some oxygen the Sherpas had uncovered outside the tent. He was better today, but weak.

At 3 PM on May 2, the eight Sherpas who had carried the high camp reached Base. They were tired. "Camp 6 very high, Sahib," Nawang Dorje reported proudly, but that would not matter if the wind had kept them pinned down all day. An hour later the radio squawked to life with Gil's voice from Advance Base.

Gil (Advance Base): The clouds have lifted up here and we see nine climbers descending from above the Yellow Band and an additional three between Camps 4 and 3. Don't yet know what all this means—whether they have been successful or are retreating.

Our conversation with Kathmandu at 5:00 that evening found Bill Gresham's radio shack packed in tense anticipation.

"No word," was all Al Auten could offer to Jim Ullman. But ten minutes after we signed off, the Base set came to life.

Roberts: 2 to Base. 2 to Base. Come in Base!

Auten: This is Base. Go ahead 2.

Roberts: Three people are down. The Big One and the Small One made the top! Over.

Auten: Hallelujah! What news!

Then, recovering his usual radio calm, Al said, "Sure. Whittaker and Gombu, we're assuming. Is that correct? Over."

Roberts: It is Roger, but not for release, not for release. Over.

Back at Base Camp (Photo by James W. Whittaker)

They'd made it. In spite of the winds, they'd made it! Willi and I hugged each other with a feeling of relief. Relief and pleasure, too—at their success. Jim and Gombu had given us our chance to try the West Ridge. But we couldn't completely share the elation of our companions. For us it was premature; we had scarcely begun. I wrote that evening, "I envy Whittaker only in having his effort behind him, while ours is solidly, challengingly before us."

Nawang Dorje came to ask for fuel for celebration. Will gave him a bottle of Scotch, which Nawang accepted with a mischievous grin. Though the Sherpas appeared less excited about the success than we, they weren't going to pass up an excuse for a party. Will and Maynard felt like celebrating too and Noddy joined them. After a while, Willi and I headed for bed. A tremendous weight had been lifted. As we lay in our bags, thinking of the future, we could hear Maynard talking in the mess tent, fifty feet away.

"Now that the mountain is climbed we've got to put our major effort into research," he said. Will's softer reply was lost in the night breeze. Willi and I were suddenly alert. We turned around on our air mattresses and slid our heads out the vestibule of the tent. The lantern on the table in the mess tent cast silhouettes of the tent's three occupants on its red-orange wall. We watched and listened attentively, picking up only tantalizing snatches of conversation.

Our effort was more wonderfully rewarded by the beauty of the night. It was alive with sound—the roar of remote wind off high ridges, water trickling in tiny rivulets over the surface of the glacier, the deep settling *whoompf* which said the glacier had moved. Moonlight touched the half-imagined walls of Nuptse, and reflected brilliantly from the many facets of *névé penitentes* on the glacier below. My thoughts wandered upward from the crumbled chaos of the Khumbu Glacier, past the West Shoulder—home.

Days passed as Willi and I lazily fattened. The afternoon of May 5, we went to our tent, bored and impatient, and I to my diary:

"Weather was too poor for Norman to come from Advance Base yesterday, so we expect him down this PM. Now we can have at the West Ridge in earnest, but with not much time remaining. To add to the excitement and to our difficulties, yesterday four Sher-

pas cooking tea in the tents at the Dump were suddenly accosted by a powder-snow avalanche. It carried them several hundred feet downhill, rolling them up in the tents, and providing a nice ride down. Their axes, crampons, and ropes, sitting outside, were lost. They came down to Advance Base without them, but able to laugh at the whole episode. Fortunately almost all our supplies were at the New Dump and hopefully are unscathed. All four kept their good humor as they descended to Base Camp for rest, but only Passang Tendi volunteered to go up on the West Ridge again."

About mid-afternoon a buzz of excited voices brought us out of the tent. Several figures moved slowly toward Camp. In front Dingman travelled with weary resignation. Norman's Sherpa, Ang Dawa, still moved like a lithe spider monkey; but Norman came slowly, each slightly wide-based step taken with the painful deliberation of a man almost drained dry. He appeared more than just tired; he had aged considerably.

Within an hour of his arrival we were all gathered at the table in the mess tent. There were things to be discussed and, with a strange urgency, Norm wanted to discuss them now. Should we release the names of the summit team? No, we had decided during the approach march to avoid or try to avoid making a hero of the first American in such a team effort; we'd wait until all attempts had been completed. But now, Will Siri pointed out, the Sherpas could not be held to this strange pact, and word would leak back to Kathmandu within a few days. Dingman agreed. Big Jim agreed too; he felt that all publicity would be good for the Expedition. The majority voted to wait.

Norm was impatient to move on. His lined, windblasted face showed fatigue. His eyes, set deep, seemed empty, as if he had gone some place and had not completely returned. He began as he had ten days before at Advance Base: "If I had known Tom was going to be so fanatical about the West Ridge," he said, and this time he finished the thought, "I would have increased our budget, ordered three hundred oxygen bottles, and hired fifty Sherpas. If only Tom had been honest with me about his ambitions back in the States."

"I'm sorry, Norm, I guess I wasn't aware of my own ambitions back then," I replied, puzzled.

The Maytag oxygen mask worked wonderfully, he said, but the plastic sleeping masks were unbearable. The main mistake, he felt, was insufficient oxygen; not nearly enough had been allotted for two four-man ascents of Everest, plus Lhotse. By implication, too much had been assigned to the West Ridge. Willi, sitting beside me, placed a hand gently on my shoulder, anticipating a volatile rebuttal. I remained silent, waiting.

Norm described the extreme breathlessness of just sitting inside the tent at 27,000 feet. The oxygen left in his climbing bottle helped. When it was gone, anxiety and air hunger returned. Another bottle was started. Perhaps there was logic in its continued use considering what they would be called upon to do the following day. Regardless, Norm needed it; the others would benefit by it also. During their two nights at Camp 6 almost all the eighteen bottles carried there were consumed. Six had been meant for the second assault.

Basing our oxygen needs on the experience of the British and the Swiss Expeditions, I had not reckoned on a supply of "sitting" oxygen. If we used it only for climbing and sleeping, there was more than enough oxygen for all our objectives. Now, Norm raised the question: Was this adequate? He had been higher than most of us, and could speak with an authority that even the Masherbrum group didn't have. He needed more oxygen; the rest of us might too.

Norm, at forty-five, had climbed higher than any man his age. To film the summit climb he and Ang Dawa, burdened with cameras, had gone above 28,000 feet before their oxygen ran low. As he talked, I began to realize that he had travelled to the edge of physical limits—oxygen almost had led him beyond. He was exhausted, possibly disappointed, perhaps suffering the lingering effects of oxygen lack and his restraint was gone. His feelings poured forth. There was nothing to say in reply, in my own defense; there was no need. I turned and looked at Willi's hand on my shoulder, then at Willi, and the hand relaxed.

A discussion of the future followed. For once the West Ridge was free of attack. Lute and Barry were eager for another chance, so it was decided they would wait at Base until the West Ridge team was in position, then move up, hopefully to reach the summit by the Col the same day we came up the

West Ridge. Unfortunately, with ten men having gone as high as the South Col, about seventy-five of the ninety-five bottles of oxygen were consumed to get only two men to the top; just enough remained to permit one two-man assault by the Col, with a two-man support. It was our turn now; all we had to do was climb the mountain.

The next morning we sat in the sunshine sorting gear and chatting with Jimmy Roberts about our Sherpa requirements. Perhaps our lack of haste was a reluctance to surrender the security of Base Camp for the physical and emotional effort we knew waited above. Leaving an hour late, we headed for the sun-baked oven of the Icefall. Almost with the first steps onto the ice our mood changed to one of pleasure at moving our legs, climbing, panting, sweating and coming alive again. The pleasure was heightened by our feeling of pleasant finality at heading up for the last time. No matter what happened in the next two weeks, the effort would soon be over. Life could take on a new direction.

We dragged into Advance Base in time for supper. Al was there with Dick and Barry, who had descended in forlorn frustration from another round with the winch. After supper we had problems to solve.

"Where are you going to house the Sherpas?" Barry asked.

"At the Dump," Willi replied.

"You're kidding," Dick said.

"No, why should I be kidding? That was just a surface slide that swept the camp away."

"It's nothing to gamble with," said Gil.

Dick agreed. "It was a continuous small surface slide that could have killed them."

"It's only a veneer about five inches thick," I said. "That's all that's going to come off that slope any time, Dick."

"Now, just a minute, Tom; a very small percentage of the slope that could come did come. What kept the rest of it up there I don't know, but the very small section that did come completely buried the tent. It didn't just roll over it, it consumed it."

"How far down the hill is the tent?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Dick answered. "The one that was buried, I don't think ever moved. Those guys were very unlucky to get hit with a slide, but given that they were going to get hit they were just damnably lucky, just extremely lucky."

"But this is always the case, Dick; you're lucky if you get out of it, and unlucky if you don't," I said.

"That's right," Gil said. "But I don't care to play Russian roulette."

Barry interrupted. "Anybody have a spoon they're not using?" Auten licked his off and passed it over to Barry, who thanked him.

"I think the ideal thing is to try relocating the camp," I said.

"Try to put it on a rise instead of in a groove and it ought to be 98 or 99 percent safe."

"Maybe," Dick conceded. "You've got to do some careful calculating on that whole area to find such a spot. You've got a potential avalanche slope above everything."

This did seem to be true. Gil ended the discussion:

"Whether you yourself are willing to camp there or not has nothing to do with it," he said. "The way I look at it, if you're going to use Sherpas, you're obligated to take care of them and protect them. And the way to protect them is not to put them in a camp at the bottom of an avalanche slope."

Willi didn't quite concede; he just changed the subject. But had he really believed what he was saying, or was he only debating? Starting on a new tack, he said: "We've got to carry those two lousy winches on up to try them again. Obviously, Al's the guy who's got to do it, because he has the know-how to make them work." Looking at me, he added, "And obviously one of us two has to go up also."

"Why, obviously?" Dick asked.

"Because you guys are on R and R, that's why," Willi answered. "You're run down and recuperating. And since Hornbein is under the weather…"

"I'm not under the weather."

"Just barely made it up here," Willi said.

"You had to run the corners, Unsoeld. We made it up in two and a half hours, almost a record."

"Just as long as you two compete with each other, I don't give a damn," Dick said.

Two days later, Willi and Al headed up with two spare winch motors and ether to prime them. They were determined to make them work. Eight Sherpas went up with them to carry the remainder of our supplies from the New Dump to Camp 3W. They would stay at 3W and descend each day to pick up loads.

The next three days were immaculate summit days, alas, with us nowhere near our destination and looking up 8,000 feet at that which had hung out of reach so long. One night we watched the full moon rise over the summit of Lhotse. Long before it appeared, the slopes above shone white as the shadow of Lhotse crept downward across the face of Everest. Ridges and flutings blocked the light, leaving swaths of impenetrable darkness in their lee. Night retreated up-Cwm before the steadily advancing light, and in its wake black slits of crevasses scored the gently rolling whiteness. Lhotse's skyline began to glow, caught fire from the eerie light, and then disgorged a thin edge of unbelievable brightness. The moon burst from behind the mountain, taking possession of the knoll on which Dick and I stood. Bathed by light devoid of warmth, we shivered, reluctant to surrender the moment for the comfort of our beds. Undulating terraces of the Lhotse Glacier mirrored the brilliance of the moon. Fear lurked in the shadows, memory stirred.

Such weather couldn't last. On May 9 it snowed hard. Mindful of the avalanche hazard below 3W, we stayed put. The major consequence of the lost day became apparent at the radio contact with Base the following afternoon:

Advance Base (Gil Roberts): The feeling up here is that Bishop and Lute should postpone coming up by a day because the West Ridge is running a day behind and Lester wants to shrink them before they leave. Over.

Base (Prather): They're looking for a summit date of the 18th, possibly the 19th. They can't delay any more. When is the West Ridge planning a summit attempt? Over.

Advance Base (Roberts): The 20th.

Base (Prather): That's too late, and too bad! Barrel and Lute are going to just about have to go up tomorrow. Over.

Advance Base (Roberts): This means that they won't form any support for the West Ridge Party and people are wondering why!

Base (Prather): The porters are coming in on the 21st and we're leaving Base Camp on the 22nd. Over.

Advance Base (Roberts): Basically, I'm not in the mood to get into the argument, because I don't really give a damn about it. Why don't you talk to Hornbein. Over.

Base (Prather): They just say they're coming up tomorrow. Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): The only conditions under which we can hit the summit on the 19th or 20th are if we do not lose any more days because of weather. In other words, perfect conditions. Is this clear?

Base (Prather): Roger, Roger. Gotcha. It's just that time is running out. Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): May I talk to Norman, please?

Base (Prather): Roger, he's listening. [Norman, with laryngitis, couldn't talk.] Go ahead.

Advance Base (Hornbein): O.K., we realize time is running out but we envisioned that there were a few more days beyond the 20th or 21st, so far as summit attempts by our route are concerned. And even though this might retard at least part of the exodus from Base Camp, we would hope that we could pursue our attempt beyond the 20th or 22nd of May. How do you read that? Over.

Base (Prather): Only comment is, there are 300 porters coming in here on the 21st. Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): Well, I guess we'll see you in Kathmandu then. Are we going to have any support for our traverse if we happen to get that far and it happens to be later than the 20th of May? Over.

Base (Barry Bishop): Tom, do you read me? Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): Yes, I do, Barrel. Fire away.

Base (Bishop): Righto. Lute and I will delay another day, so that the first possibility of our hitting the summit will be the 19th and, if weather closes in, we may be able to give her a go on the 20th. But I think that's about it. How does that tie in with you, Tom?

Advance Base (Hornbein): As long as the weather is this good, fine. We lost yesterday because of tremendous snowfall and a fantastic avalanche hazard up there. We'll expect to see you here one day later. I would drop one other thought, though, that you consider leaving us a small nest egg if you really have to pull out on the 22nd. In case we get out a little later than that, we can move out behind you and perhaps catch up. Over.

Base (Prather): Roger. We hope this doesn't happen, though.

I could understand Lute's and Barry's impatience. The longer they waited in order to synchronize with us the more they jeopardized their own summit opportunity. But if we chose to, or were forced by difficulties on the West Ridge to traverse the mountain and descend to the South Col, their presence would add greatly to our safety. Once again the question, what priority did the West Ridge have in the scheme of things? Why, now that the Col route was climbed; wasn't the decision made to wholeheartedly support our effort? Wasn't it our turn now?

On the following morning, the conversation resumed:

Base (Prather): Lute and Barrel don't want to delay too long. However, on the brighter side, we're going to delay leaving until the 25th. So go get her! Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): Very good, Balu! We greatly appreciate the 25th.

Base (Dingman): One other thing, Tom. We're wondering, because of the oxygen situation on the Col, about the possibility of deciding now that the traverse is unfeasible. Do you read? Over.

Advance Base (Hornbein): I don't think we can make that decision, Dave. It's going to end up being a climbing decision, I suspect. If we can possibly traverse it might be the easiest way down. Over.

Base (Dingman): Roger, Tom. But you don't want to go over with no one in the Col.

Advance Base (Hornbein): I think that will depend on how hard it is getting down the other way. If there is no support, if at all possible, we would prefer to go down the way we came up, but I don't know that we can really answer this until we see how things work out.

The 11th was another lost day. The summit of Everest was capped by a seething black lenticular cloud. Rainbows flashed along its edge. The roar of wind against rock filled the Cwm. I sensed the uncontained power I could not see.

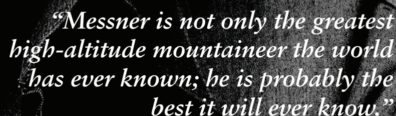
On May 12 I wrote: "Damn! We're falling behind, mostly discouraged with weather and lack of progress. This AM, Norm, laryngitic-voiced, came on the radio to reaffirm the plan. Bishop and Lute could not wait for the summit beyond the 21st. Lute, Bishop, and Jim Whittaker all took the air to induce us not to try the traverse—too hazardous to descend a route unknown to us. Norm closed with heartiest good wishes for the success of our great and desperate undertaking, making me feel all warm inside. Eight more days could see us through. Whatever the outcome, for me the whole wealth of the Expedition, or much of it anyway, lies ahead. Without this prospect the affair to now would seem mighty unsatisfying and not a little sour—but horribly educational. Tomorrow, I'm up to 3W. Next day, to 4W, the following, a recon to 5W, and then we are moving."

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
EVEREST: THE WEST RIDGE

Next page: Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein at Camp 2 (Photo by Richard M. Emerson)

About the author

Tom Hornbein grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. He studied geology at the University of Colorado. His climbing and mountain rescue activities led him to medical school at Washington University, an internship in Seattle, and a residency and research fellowship in anesthesiology in St. Louis. He served as a Navy doctor in San Diego. Following the American Everest Expedition, he joined the department of anesthesiology and physiology and the department of biophysics at the University of Washington. He served as chair of the department for nearly sixteen years. His research resulted in more than one hundred journal articles and book chapters. He was a member of expeditions to Masherbrum, Paiju, Ulugh Mustagh, and Kangkarpo, in addition to Everest. He has six children and lives with his wife, Kathy, in Estes Park, Colorado.



REINHOLD MESSNER

My Life at the Limit

Interviewed by Thomas Hüetlin
Translated by Tim Carruthers

REINHOLD MESSNER

MY LIFE AT THE LIMIT

Interviewed by Thomas Hüetlin

This intimate interview of perhaps the world's greatest high-altitude climber, reveals a more thoughtful and conversational Reinhold Messner than is found in his previous books. The interview format reveals the driven personality behind Messner's varied achievements; incredibly, Messner is more than his adventures! In these conversations he shares his thoughts on his many "firsts" in the Himalaya; his treks across Tibet, the Gobi, and Antarctica; his five-year-stint as a member of the European Parliament; his encounter with and study of the yeti; traditional male/female roles; and much more.

The following is excerpted from *Reinhold Messner: My Life at the Limit*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

FROM THE EPILOGUE OF REINHOLD MESSNER: MY LIFE AT THE LIMIT

H: Herr Messner, what do you regard as your greatest achievement?
M: Having survived.

H: Which of the defeats do you find hardest to bear?
M: The death of my brother on Nanga Parbat in 1970.

H: There is an old boxing adage that backslapping does more damage in the long run than the punches you take from the front. What did you learn from this defeat?
M: I came to the conclusion that life is limited and only worth something if you exploit its full potential, if you savor it to the fullest. After that tragedy, which nearly killed me, I lived life much more intensely.

H: So the death of your brother did not inhibit you—it freed you?
M: It showed me my limits and my mortality, and challenged me to keep living with double the effort and commitment.

H: What was the most important decision of your life? That fateful descent on Nanga Parbat?

M: No, it was my resolve to live life on my terms, according to my wishes, ideas, and dreams, and not those of my parents, teachers, or brothers. I have never let myself be coerced into a conformist middle-class existence.

H: You have always had a tendency to be a loner. Did the death of your brother strengthen this trait?

M: I would dispute the fact that I have a natural tendency to be a loner. As a young man, I only climbed alone when I didn't have a partner or when the others stayed down below because they thought the weather might turn bad. But I was always more scared of soloing routes than doing them with a climbing partner.

H: But the achievements that revolutionized climbing, and for which you gained the greatest recognition, were your solo ascents of Nanga Parbat and Everest. Where others struggled for months with tons of equipment and dozens of helpers, you carried only a small rucksack and climbed the mountain in a few days on your own.

M: The 1978 Nanga Parbat expedition was the next logical step in the process of reduction. The idea was to do without all that equipment—radios, satellite phones—and ultimately to do without a partner as well. It was a chain of experiences that allowed me to take that last big step. Soloing Everest was about me wanting to test myself. I was looking for the answer to the question of whether I'd be able to cope up there on my own.

H: What do you see as the main problem on solo ascents?

M: The technical difficulties are no greater than they are when there are two of you. But having no one to talk to, no one to share the fear, the joy, and the doubts—that becomes a huge psychological burden.

H: To borrow a phrase from Franklin D. Roosevelt, what you feared most was fear itself?

M: Not during the day. I generally feel pretty good during the day and enjoy being on my own. I even talk to myself as I'm going. It's in the evening that the problems

start. It's not that I'm scared of being attacked by a snow leopard during the night or anything; it's just that things get more dangerous when it's dark. When it's dark and you're doing nothing, it's very, very difficult to cope with being on your own.

H: Surely fear of the dark is something that only small children have?

M: We humans need warmth, light, and a feeling of security to survive. When one of these elements is missing, fear creeps in. We all have an aversion to being alone at night.

In 1969 I soloed the hardest rock and ice routes in the Alps: the north face of the Droites and the Philipp-Flamm on the Civetta, both around 1000 meters long. At the time, the north face of the Droites had never been climbed without a fall. I didn't dare start up those routes at two o'clock in the morning, which would have given me the whole day to do them. I didn't leave the hut until it was daylight. In the early morning light, my fears evaporated.

H: There are no cozy huts on Nanga Parbat, though. How did you cope with the nights in the tent?

M: It was hard work. I had to learn to cope with being completely on my own without going crazy.

H: What does the night do to you?

M: The dangers are magnified, and my abilities are diminished. I think it's an instinctive thing. At night it's hard to react to dangers. A hundred thousand years ago we stayed awake when there was danger nearby, keeping watch. Survival was easier the more of you there were, so we banded together in groups or tribes. These primeval instincts are still ingrained in us. I don't have a problem admitting it. I try to come to terms with my instincts.

H: So you prefer to go solo, and if others are required then, that's purely because of ego and self-preservation?

M: I've never tried to hide the fact that I'm an egoist. I've always been honest about it. Every human being is an egoist, and the more we stand with our backs to the wall, the more egoistic we become. We wouldn't survive otherwise. This is not a positive or a

negative thing; it's just a fact. To dispute it would be disingenuous. Having said that, I think I've probably done more for the community than many self-proclaimed altruists.

H: That depends how you define it. For many altruists, the egoism lies in helping others. Your egoism is predominantly about helping yourself.

M: And others. How many people have I helped down the mountain, supported, rescued? My approach has allowed me to live my life the way I wanted to live it.

My father wanted to make me into a good citizen; I was supposed to become a poultry farmer. Herrligkoffer didn't even want me to tell anyone what really happened on Nanga Parbat. In the '70s, the South Tyrol bureaucrats tried to make it impossible for me to go on my expeditions because I'd come out with a statement that was not politically correct. Now I'm trying to build my mountain museums, and once again I'm having to overcome huge opposition.

I could claim that all my projects are altruistic, but I don't do that. All I'm saying is this: is it really a sacrilege to do the best you can, to express yourself, to do what I do?

H: In spite of the opposition, you have always won in the end and gotten what you wanted. Today you are the most famous living mountaineer in the world; your books have sold millions of copies. Yet your ego still seems to be unsatisfied. Why is that?

M: Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately—I am very aggressive by nature. A friend of mine who works as a doctor in Zurich once told me that he didn't know anyone else capable of getting so aggressive when faced with a life-threatening situation. I'm like a wild animal. My eyes get really wide, and my body produces an incredible amount of adrenaline. I can feel the energy, the courage, the rage inside me. It's a survival thing, an instinctive reaction. Without it, I—and many of my partners on those extreme climbs—would now be dead.

H: Fine, but what kept you alive in the death zone is not necessarily a recipe for daily life in civilized society, is it?

M: I've often used the same approach when confronting my opponents—those who wished to vilify, oppress, or ostracize me—as I did when confronting danger in the mountains and the wilderness. And achieved my objectives. Maybe I've carried the

behavior pattern through into old age because it's worked for me. We humans learn through trial and error.

H: Do you consciously use these outbursts of anger?

M: I can playact, yes. I had another outburst of anger only yesterday, as a matter of fact, and all because of a few bureaucrats who were making things difficult for my organic farm. It was so bad they could have prosecuted me for it. When people mess with me, I can quite easily explode, and there's no guarantee what might happen then. Generally, it's me that suffers as a result.

H: Have you ever thought about taking an anger-management course? It's supposed to have helped Naomi Campbell, and she—apparently—beat her assistant with a cell phone when she was unhappy about something or other.

M: I can control myself. But I won't put up with people messing with me. My time is too precious for that. And as for getting wise in my old age, well, let's just say I haven't got there yet.

H: So the anger will continue, even though it can sometimes get ugly?

M: If I've got an idea and it's legal and it doesn't harm anyone, why should I allow a bureaucrat, an opponent, a wheeler-dealer, or a journalist to stop me from doing it?

H: So who on earth is allowed to criticize you?

M: Anyone, if it makes them feel better. I've had to put up with more criticism than the rest of the climbers put together, much of it unfounded. Now and then I'd like the right to reply, that's all.

H: Another immoderate statement that's unlikely to win you many new friends.

M: Should I lie or curry favor just to make myself popular? I don't react badly to criticism, and I don't dwell on it. I react when people try to prevent me from putting my ideas and plans into practice, some of which will ultimately be of benefit to everyone.

H: Your first wife, Uschi Demeter, once said this about you: "I don't know anyone who wants so much to be loved yet can do so little about it."

M: I'm not going to pretend to be something I'm not—to smile sweetly all the

time—just to get recognition and love. I won't play the whore for anyone, least of all for journalists. I can't do that. I want to be loved, yes, but the way I am and not the way people would like me to be. I have to be allowed to be myself.

H: With all due respect, you owe your success not only to the fact that you have climbed some big mountains but also to the fact that you were able to tell people about it. Many of your expeditions were financed in part by magazines, and over the years many journalists have raised your fame. Without the modern media, the phenomenon of Reinhold Messner would never have existed.

M: That's anyone's guess really. I've always gone on the stage and told my stories. I am an adventurer and a bard; I come home and I tell my story. Above all, I am a self-made man. The fact that the media seize hold of my stories has helped me, for sure. I've never complained about that. But they don't have to distort my stories in order to sell them over and over again.

H: The media have profited from you, and you from the media.

M: Yes, there's always give-and-take. We struck deals over the financing of expeditions. A good story always has a financial value, too. Why should I give it away for nothing? However, I've never scrambled to get interviews or publicity. When I go on my trips, I need to be a free agent. Nor have I ever told stories just because they would sell well.

Others have curried favor, but not me. I know how it works, of course. All you have to do is wax lyrical about getting close to God on the summit, about idealism, noble comradeship, and the fact that climbers are better people—about loyalty unto death and all the other stuff that goes to make up the popular view of mountaineering.

My life has given me a different view of the world, and of human nature. It's shown me that up on the summits, people are exactly the same as they are down here. There are a lot of nice people who go climbing: lads and lasses, children and old men. But there are also some bad characters with serious hang-ups trying to compensate for their failed ambitions, people who talk about comradeship in the mountains but don't know where the mountain is or that a willingness to help should be a matter of course.

H: The journalist Wilhelm Bittorf, another great admirer of yours by the way, once wrote that being continually challenged in extreme situations has given you an enviable confidence in life. Normal everyday worries, he concluded, are alien to you. Problems like "Who will pay for my pension?" or "Will my car pass its inspection?" seem not to affect you. Is this diagnosis still applicable?

M: It's still accurate, yes, but I don't think my carefreeness has anything to do with the many extreme situations I've faced in my life. I think it stems from the fact that I've always managed to keep moving my life forward, in spite of all the obstacles that were put in my way, in spite of all my mistakes.

Even when I fell off the castle wall and the doctors told me I'd never walk again, there was no angst, no existential fear. I simply told myself I'd find something else to do, even if I had to do it in a wheelchair. As long as I have my set objectives, I am confident.

H: Do you think that might have something to do with the fact that, at the time of the accident, you were financially and materially secure? After all, you were the owner of a castle and a working farm.

M: Owning things is boring—obligations and responsibilities. It interests me less than creating things. Right now, I'd be prepared to give everything I own to my children and start again from scratch. The farm and the self-sufficiency do give me a good feeling, though.

H: And you won't go hungry.

M: What gives me strength is the feeling of being independent. In effect, I'm really just a dilettante. I've lived, explored, and worked—but only in nonjobs. I've often achieved success against all the predictions. And I've done it by following a very simple pattern of behavior: stick at it and do everything in my power to make it happen.

No reasonable person would invest the time, energy, and money I'm investing in my museums. My financial advisers just shake their heads. The passion I have for what could be viewed as a futile pursuit has made me strong, and it is this that gives me the confidence required to lead a self-determined life.

H: What advice would you give to those who are totally passionate about something yet fail to achieve success?

M: It obviously helps if you have a talent for what you do. It's hard to get enthusiastic about something that doesn't suit you. If I have a lung disease, I'm not going to get very far with mountaineering; I'll never get to the summit of Everest, for example. Having a physical injury can also take away some of the drive and passion. When I lost my toes to frostbite on Nanga Parbat and wasn't able to climb as well, my passion for my first love, climbing, was lost. It began to fade. Fortunately, I discovered something else, which replaced the old passion: high-altitude mountaineering.

In later life, too, the fact that I was able to change direction again and again—and always at the right time—was a distinct advantage. Throughout my life I've usually realized when it was time to say, "That's enough of that; I need something new."

H: You once said that you only find things exciting when they are new. When you look back at your achievements, do you find them boring?

M: I even get bored when strangers pat me on the shoulder and congratulate me on my successes. The only time the way I feel about what I've achieved changes is when I'm onstage talking about it. That's when it all comes back to me and I relive it all—the pack ice, the storms, the rock and the ice.

I am the storyteller and the protagonist in one and the same person. I'm part of the story, yet I'm also detached from it. My skills as a storyteller are based on the ability to immerse myself in past situations and different characters.

H: Do you perceive this constant drivenness, this inability to look back at things in a calm and relaxed manner, as a shortcoming?

M: No, I see it as good fortune. I couldn't cope with life any other way. And I can always get wise when I'm older. A last hope.

H: You also said, "When I no longer have any dreams, I'll kill myself." Do you need this kind of emotionalism to drive yourself onward?

M: I don't think you necessarily do everything you say you'll do. Or should that be the case? No, suicide is not my thing. I hope I will always have dreams.

Architectural rendering of the sixth Messner Mountain Museum, the MMM Corones designed by Zaha Hadid

H: You don't find the pathos in that statement embarrassing?

M: No.

H: Last year you had a break-in at Juval. You caught the intruder. Did you call the police?

M: No, I didn't call the police. I'd left the door open for my daughter Magdalena, and I was sitting reading, when just after midnight I heard footsteps. "Good," I thought. "We can chat for a bit before bed." Then I heard a man coughing. I went into the living room and saw a shadow behind a pillar. There was a man with a hat on, and he was bigger than me. I thought about getting a knife from the kitchen (I don't have a gun in the house) but decided against it.

I felt an uncontrollable fury, the tremendous aggression I can summon when I feel threatened—my best weapon. With a roar like a war cry, I just went for the intruder and grabbed both of his hands. I held them so tightly that I

tore a tendon in my left thumb. I dragged him to the bridge, where there's a thirty-meter drop, and told him, "You try that again and I'll throw you down there." He was so scared he was shaking all over. "Please, no," he said, whimpering by now. I let him go. He disappeared, and he's never been back.

H: For many years, Death was one of your closest companions, challenging you to achieve peak performance. After which, as you yourself have said, you felt reborn. As you approach the age of seventy, does that change your relationship with your old companion, with Death?

M: He's just around the corner and closing fast. The time I have left is decreasing. All I really want to do now is put a few ideas into practice. I don't want to waste any more time with self-righteous critics or people wandering around my castle at night. I would like the children to take over from me. I'm not an administrator, nor do I enjoy patching up old building sites.

For me, "success" is not measured at the end of a life. A successful life is what you have when you are doing things. There are moments when I overcome difficulties, and that's when I feel strong and fulfilled. My success, my life, was nothing more than turning ideas into reality.

H: You already speak about your life in the past tense?

M: Yes. I don't really have to do anything more now. But I will continue to fill my time implementing ideas. I am incapable of doing anything else.

H: Do you ever experience feelings of gratitude?

M: Of course. I've had a fantastic time. The generation of climbers before me got to go on maybe one or two expeditions in their whole life. We could do virtually anything we wanted to do. We could live out our wildest dreams. We were even able to finance the trips ourselves. We didn't have to carry the Austrian, German, or Italian flag up the mountain with us just because we were being funded by the state or some national association. We got the money we needed from private enterprise, which meant that we developed an objective relationship with what we did, and with our successes. There were opportunities for all of us.

It was a crazy time. And I was lucky enough to survive it; lucky that I didn't make that one big mistake; lucky that, from 1972 onward, I was able to follow

my dreams; lucky to share my life with a few strong women; lucky that I was able to get back down the mountain in time before things got too desperate. Recently, when I was leaving the auditorium at the end of one of my lectures, someone shouted out, "You've been lucky!" That's right, I thought, I've had more luck than any man deserves.

H: Let us assume for a moment that we could turn back time and you were in your midtwenties again. Could you compete with the climbing stars of the present, men like David Lama and Alexander Huber?

M: It's harder to become a top climber these days; the bar is set much higher than it was in my day. The standards that people like David Lama and Hansjörg Auer are operating at are so high that I would never be able to achieve them. I was never that brilliant.

Climbing has become a global phenomenon. The top professional climbers do nothing else apart from climb. They have one or two sponsorship deals, and everything is hyped up so they can finance their routes. I had to give lectures and write books in order to finance my expeditions.

Nowadays, 90 percent of climbers climb indoors. Most of them never climb outside at all. Indoor climbing is just pure sport; it has nothing to do with adventure. But the few top athletes who make it out of the climbing gym and into the mountains—[Alex] Honnold, for example—climb several grades harder than we ever did.

In my time I was regarded as a suicide candidate; they said I wouldn't live very long, that if I kept it up I'd be dead within a few weeks. But the stuff that Alexander Huber is climbing now—free-soloing the Hasse-Brandler Direttissima on the Cima Grande, for example—I would never have dared to attempt. And then there's Honnold, [Chris] Sharma, and [Adam] Ondra—unbelievable what those boys can do!

H: Although that kind of rock gymnastics has very little to do with classic alpinism, surely?

M: Yes and no. Classic alpinism has decreased in popularity. I still go out with Simon and do long middle-grade routes in the Dolomites—big 1000-meter faces, some of them. In the past they would have had fifty or more ascents over the summer. When the weather was good, there was always at least one party climbing on the Civetta every

day. These days, if I spent a month there I'd probably only see one team climbing. People don't go climbing in the mountains anymore; they go to indoor walls with plastic holds.

H: Is that a bad thing?

M: Not really. You don't always find happiness in the mountains. It just happens. And then, when you realize that you were happy, it is too late. It's got a lot to do with what the Americans call "flow," the concept of being in the zone. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that I have found out that I was happiest when I was doing my own thing, and it was often unquantifiable.

Incidentally, that is one of the reasons why I still cause offense in Germany. They think I'm egotistical. When I am implementing my museum ideas, I am doing my own thing—and I do it with great enthusiasm. The fact that it might also bring benefits to South Tyrol in terms of local tourism is just a side issue for me. My feeling of satisfaction, my happiness if you like, is not dependent on applause or accolades of any kind but on the fact that I was able to do what I wanted to do—and to see it through. The museum thing proved to me that my way of life would also work outside of climbing and expeditions. Or it has done up to now.

Perhaps the true purpose of life is simply to express ourselves as best we can. Maybe my ability to keep finding new challenges appropriate to my age is part of the happiness, the thing that keeps me young, creative, and full of life. The setbacks and the opposition I've encountered are all part of my happiness. I have grown as a result and am still able to lead a self-determined life.

H: One of the paradoxes of life is the fact that happiness sometimes just befalls us.

M: Good feelings sometimes show up unexpectedly. It might be a nice turn of phrase when I'm writing, sharing a glass of wine with a friend, a walk in the woods, watching my children play, an evening with my wife, or an idea I have. And when I don't feel good, I simply go for a walk.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
REINHOLD MESSNER: MY LIFE AT THE LIMIT

About the authors & translator

Reinhold Messner, born in 1944 in Villnöss South Tyrol, is the most famous mountaineer and adventurer of our time. He has accomplished about one hundred first ascents, climbed all fourteen eight-thousanders, and crossed the Antarctic, Greenland, Tibet, and the Gobi and Takla Makan deserts on foot.

After serving a term as a member of the European Parliament, he now devotes much of his time and energy to his Messner Mountain Museum (MMM) project and to his foundation, the Messner Mountain Foundation (MMF), which aims to support mountain people worldwide. For more about the author, visit www.reinhold-messner.de.

Thomas Hüetlin was born in 1961 and grew up between Munich, Tegernsee, and Lech am Arlberg. He has worked for fifteen years as a reporter for Spiegel magazine.

Tim Carruthers has translated several books by Reinhold Messner, as well works by Hermann Buhl, Heinrich Harrer, and Anderl Heckmair.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

Foreword by YVON CHOUINARD

RICK RIDGEWAY

THE LAST STEP

THE AMERICAN ASCENT OF K2

THE LAST STEP

THE AMERICAN ASCENT OF K2

Rick Ridgeway

In September 1978, Rick Ridgeway, Jim Wickwire, Lou Reichardt, and John Roskelley stood atop K2, the first Americans ever to reach the summit. Under the leadership of Jim Whittaker, they and their teammates spent sixty-seven days on the mountain, nearly all of them above 18,000 feet, where the stresses of high-altitude living, monotonous food, confinement in tiny tents for day after day of frustrating storms wore them down—but did not chase them off the mountain nor diminish their obsession.

The following is excerpted from *The Last Step*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

From Chapter 7: The Snow Dome

All preoccupation with splits in the team, personality problems, petty quarrels—even most of the concern about slab avalanches—was lost in the work of clearing the ropes to Camp IV. I had not felt so good since John and I had led this traverse twenty days earlier. The weather was superb. There were just the two of us and the surrounding mountains, and it was easy to forget the rest of the expedition even existed. We climbed as fast as possible, methodically kicking a new trail in the snow and pulling out the ropes.

Jim Wickwire, resting in his tent at Camp III, wrote religiously in his journal:

> *Incredibly, at 9:00 a.m. we could pick out two climbers on the snow pyramid just in front of Camp IV, a scant three hours after John and Rick left, and a virtual refutation of Chris's judgment of yesterday that snow conditions on the Chinese side of the ridge were too risky. So we were back in Camp IV ready to resume the long-awaited push to Camp V.*

John and I unshouldered our packs and set to work excavating the tents that Chris and Cherie had collapsed to prevent their ripping in the wind the week before. It was a slow job. Care was needed to avoid tearing the light tent fabric with the snow shovel. In a half hour Lou arrived.

"Are Chris and Cherie behind you?" we asked.

"They hadn't left camp when I took off," Lou said with obvious displeasure. "And there was no indication they would be ready soon."

John and I were disappointed. We had worked as hard as we could to open the way to Camp IV quickly so Chris and Cherie could follow right behind us and start toward Camp V.

"I'm going up to clear the ropes as far as they extend," Lou said, indicating the slope above Camp IV.

"I'll go too," John said, "and help you out."

The two left as I continued to excavate the tents. By ten-thirty Chris and Cherie still had not arrived; by eleven I realized our plan was going sour. There was too little time left that day for any substantial effort toward Camp V.

Lou and John reached the end of the first fixed rope and, not knowing where the next section was buried, came back down. Finally, at noon, Chris and Cherie hauled into camp. The tents had been repitched, and everyone was inside seeking protection from the sun. Chris and Cherie crawled into a deserted tent without a greeting. Again, there was the awkward, deadly silence I so loathed. Even John, atypically, said nothing.

At one, Chris announced he and Cherie were going up to start pushing the route. Relieved that at least some effort would be made, I allowed myself the thought that, if they worked to sunset, they might move a worthwhile distance toward our goal. Neither John nor Lou, however, seemed to care whether the two went up or not.

About two-thirty we saw Chris and Cherie coming back down. Back in camp, Chris said, "We started across the flat section above the first ropes and there was a big crack—a really loud pop—in the snow. It sounded like a slab cracking. I think it is still unsafe and I'm not going to climb higher until it looks better."

"Maybe it was just a crevasse cracking," Lou said.

"No, it wasn't a crevasse."

Chris went back to his tent. Terry and Bill had earlier come in from Camp III. Again, other than the occasional whisper, there was silence.

Lou, John, and I quietly began to formulate a new plan. It was obvious we would have to put in Camp V ourselves; we felt there was a chance we could do it in one day.

"The three of us can share the leading, but we still need Chris to show us where the ropes are buried," Lou observed.

Chris called from the neighboring tent, "I'll go with you."

"Terrific," Lou said. "You can share in the leading if you want." Lou's voice had a conciliatory tone.

"O.K.," Chris said.

"And if everyone else carries loads behind us tomorrow, we can not only reach Camp Five, but stock it with half the supplies we'll need up there."

Terry responded enthusiastically; Bill and Cherie also agreed to carry loads. Rising from the mood of despair was a kindling optimism, and we started to talk about the possibility of a summit assault in four days. All mention of the dangerous snow conditions Chris had suspected was dropped. Later that evening we radioed the plan, with enthusiastic response, to Camp III. Jim had independently devised a similar plan; he was pleased Chris was included. He had his fingers crossed this would end the widening schisms; little did he—or any of us—know it would only make them worse.

4:45 a.m. First dawn. A cloud rising behind the Abruzzi Ridge, billowing on the morning convection. Pastel colors backlight the roiling cumulus; a phantasmagoria of dervish sworls.

"Hold your boot over the stove," I told John. "It's worth the fuel to start with warm toes."

We defrosted our boots over two butane cartridge stoves. Steam rose from a cup of cocoa in a vapor like the cloud rising over the Abruzzi Ridge.

"Hope the weather holds. I would prefer a clear sky this morning."

"It's got to hold. We only need four more days to top out. Just four."

"We'll get Camp Five today, at least."

"Even if we reach Camp Five, it won't do much good if another storm comes. We're not fixing much rope. The snow would cover our tracks and we'd be back where we started."

"Maybe we can get some loads up, then. That would accomplish something. Anyway, the weather has to hold."

I set down my boot and picked up the cocoa to finish it before its warmth was wasted to the cold morning air. I wrapped my fingers around the cup, luxuriating in its warmth; I knew they would soon be numb when, outside, I fastened the metal crampons on my boots.

We left Camp IV a few minutes before six—a good, early start. John, Lou, and I were first on the trail, and Chris followed a few minutes behind. The others would follow, but as usual they were late getting started. By seven-thirty we were at the end of the ropes Chris, Cherie, and Skip had fixed in their previous efforts. Above us, a steep snow slope rose about four hundred feet to the top of a large pinnacle. Having studied the route from below through binoculars, we knew it would be an easy walk from the top of the pinnacle several hundred yards to the base of a large snow dome about fifteen hundred feet high, which formed the terminus of the northeast ridge. The dome sat directly under the immense summit pyramid. At the top of this dome we would place Camp V.

I took the first lead, stretching out a hundred fifty feet of rope. The slope steepened dramatically near its top, and this lead would be the toughest, especially with the heavy packs we were carrying. Not only did we hope to establish Camp V, but we also carried full loads. We were determined to make progress that day. I finished my lead; it looked like one more section to the top of the pinnacle.

"I'll take this pitch," John said.

Chris came up last and for a few minutes stood with Lou and me on a small platform stomped in the slope while John worked toward the top of the pinnacle, struggling in the soft snow on the steep slope with his heavy load. It was an impressive performance.

"I'm going down," Chris said.

"Huh?"

"I'm going to rappel down and wait under that serac." Chris pointed to a large ice block about a hundred fifty feet below.

"What for?" I asked. "Why not stay here, instead of going down and having to come back up?"

"It's safer down there."

Lou said nothing. We had hoped Chris might share in the leading, but he would not be able to take over if he was down below. There would be the snow dome, though, and plenty of opportunity to lead up the fifteen-hundred-foot gain to the dome's top.

The slope on which we were climbing was covered with at least a foot of new snow, and while it was not the safest place to be, there was no better choice, other than turning around. I watched Chris rappel to the serac. The space between us seemed to represent our continually increasing psychological separation. I knew Lou was disappointed but not surprised. Even if the slope was dangerous, I wished Chris had stayed. Just so we could be standing together in the same place, I thought.

John reached the top of the pinnacle and secured the rope to an aluminum deadman anchor. Lou climbed up next, and while I followed Lou began plowing through soft snow toward the base of the dome. The three of us alternated leads. The wind picked up, sending spindrift sweeping across the surface snow, stinging the exposed skin of our faces. Ground-hugging clouds scudded up the snow dome—and the cumulus that earlier in the morning had rolled up the far side of the Abruzzi had increased, covering part of the mountain in front of us. The building clouds would soon cover us, too.

We were at twenty-four thousand feet. We each carried a thirty-pound load; with each step we broke through hard crust and sank to our knees. Progress demanded a slow, even pace. It helped to drift into a meditative trance as I lifted one leg, stepped up, broke through the crust, breathed a few times, then lifted the other leg—again, and again, and again. Chris was some distance behind, by himself, keeping the same pace, not catching up with us.

The slope gradually inclined as we approached the snow dome. Crevasses were visible on its slope, and we hoped these would not cause problems in

navigation. We picked what looked to be the best route, hoping we would not find soft snow on the slopes of the dome. With heavy loads at high altitude, that could thwart all efforts.

We started up the base of the dome. Luckily, the surface was wind-packed, with a crust thick enough to support our weight, and we only occasionally broke through. Taking turns in the lead, we made steady progress.

We reached the crevassed section but before crossing it uncoiled our climbing rope and tied together. I could see Chris below, slowly climbing up the slope.

"Maybe we should wait for him so he can tie in," I said.

"We can't delay," Lou argued. "We've got to get to the top of the dome."

"It's not our fault he's slow," John added. "If we waited for everybody on this climb we wouldn't get to the top of the thing until Christmas."

I glanced back at Chris, then at the crevasses. They were not so bad; it would not be too dangerous crossing them after we had scouted a route. Still, I would have felt more comfortable waiting for Chris to tie in with us. And I would have felt less guilty. "He should have stayed with us in the first place," I said as we continued on, every now and again glancing back.

I thought, Chris should be able to move faster. We are breaking the trail, kicking the steps, and he's just following them. But the distance between us was closing only very slowly.

It was my lead. I climbed up to John and tied in to the end of the rope while he took my place in the middle. I rested, then started up. The wind had lightened, but there was more cloud—it had the feel of storm. Chris was still behind, and I kept checking back.

I should say something to Lou and John, I thought. I should insist that we wait for Chris to catch up. But John and Lou won't like the idea of waiting; we have to reach the snow dome, and there isn't much time.

"Maybe we should wait for Chris," I said. There was no answer from Lou or John. I went on climbing.

My mind drifted into a trance: *Lift your foot and plant your crampon and pull your other foot up, but casually so as not to waste effort, breathe a few times. Keep a steady pace. Got to get to the top of the dome. We should tie in with Chris. We should wait for him. It's more than just the safety of being on a rope, you know:*

it symbolizes everything. That's it, it's a metaphor for all the problems and everything that has gone wrong and the distance that's grown between us and the loss of our friendship. We're not roped up and you know he's thinking the same thing, how his pal is ahead of him now, gone over to the other side, gone over to the A Team (remember, A is for Assholes), and won't even bother to wait so he can catch up and tie in to the rope. Yes, it's everything. The feeling at the beginning of the climb when you wanted to team up with Roskelley because you knew that was the best way to get to the top even though it meant deserting your friend. Lift your foot and place your crampon and pull up and drag your other foot and place your ax and breathe a few times. Keep the steady pace. Got to move as fast and as far as Lou and John, and Chris is still back there catching up but not fast enough and it's over twenty-four thousand feet here and it's hard to breathe and think right . . .

"Let's stop and have lunch," Lou suggested.

I had been leading for what seemed like forever. The watch showed it had been only fifteen minutes. The three of us took off our packs to use them as seats on the snow. We had each brought a few lunch items: crackers, cheese spread, a can of tuna, two candy bars, and a few pepperoni sticks.

Chris slogged on toward us. At least he could now tie in to our rope, but I wondered if he felt the same estrangement. He would know we stopped, not to wait for him, but only to have lunch. Later, weeks after the expedition, I would talk to him about the incident:

> *I remember that day well, climbing alone behind the rest of you, feeling completely separate and cut off. I even felt separated from the others below, and I wondered why you didn't stop so I could rope up with you. But I knew why, really, in the back of my mind.*

The clouds swept by us, obscuring the view of the glaciers below, giving us only peeps through momentary windows of the mountains across the valley: Broad Peak and the Gasherbrums. There were all the signs of more bad weather.

"All our efforts are going to be wasted," John said. "The main reason for coming up here is to kick a trail so we can haul the rest of the loads

tomorrow and the next day. If the trail gets covered with snow, all this work will be for just about nothing."

"We've got a few loads with us," Lou said. "If we get this stuff to Camp Five it will count for something."

"Not much," John said. "We can cache it here."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'm not sure it warrants the effort to carry it higher." I was feeling enervated, drained; it had been very hard work to get this high, and we still had a thousand feet to go. The snow was softer in places, too. At that altitude, it took every effort I could muster to kick steps with the heavy pack and keep a good pace. Camp V would be over twenty-five thousand feet. The thin air was a soporific that sponged from my psyche all its willpower.

"We've got to get to Five," Lou reiterated. *"Especially* if there is another storm coming. It's more than delivering a few loads. If we don't get to Camp Five now, and we're delayed again, a lot of people will lose the motivation to keep going. It will be a great psychological boost to tell ourselves that we've got to Camp Five."

John and I knew he was right, but it was such an intangible reward to justify the work ahead of us. It was painful to accept the reality that our efforts kicking the trail would only have to be repeated after another storm.

"I'll lead the rest of the way," Lou said tenaciously. We knew he would, too, if we let him.

"Oh, hell," John sighed. "We're going all the way, and we'll switch leads."

All of us smiled. I watched Lou finish lunch and thought of the time, weeks before, when we first reached the Camp II site, when Lou and I sat together eating lunch. He looked just the same now: the torn red parka he had used for years on all his climbs (he had been given a beautiful Gore-Tex jumpsuit, as we all had, but he had left it behind in Skardu, saying, "My red parka still has lots of use left"), the beard matted with sunscreen, the tufts of hair sprung out between his ski-goggle straps. The only thing different was that now I knew him a little better. Not a great deal better—I still thought him the most enigmatic person on the expedition—but a little better. While I was still puzzled by what inner drives could be responsible for his almost unbelievable motivation, I at least had had several weeks to observe the

empirical results of those drives—such as forging on, when the rest of us were so close to turning back, to Camp V. It was as if his mind thought an idea through to its logical conclusion, then if that conclusion demanded of his body some phenomenal physical effort, the body simply obeyed orders. It was as if he lacked what, to the rest of us, was the main limiter of our efforts: feedback from the body to the mind. Lou's body just carried out the mind's orders, and from observing him there was no indication any signals got through the other direction.

"How you doing?" John asked Chris when he caught up with us.

"O.K.," Chris replied laconically. "My load is heavy."

"Yeah, so's ours," John said, with the clear suggestion we were not only carrying loads, but breaking trail as well.

"Have some lunch," Lou offered.

Chris sat down. We glanced at each other, not speaking. I felt the distance between us was now a gap too wide to span: I was on the A Team, Chris was on the B Team, and our courses were inexorably destined to part.

We finished lunch in silence.

"Care to take a lead?" John asked Chris.

"My pack is too heavy. I've got a big load," Chris answered. "It's all I can do to keep up."

"O.K.," John said. He prepared to lead the next section. We fell into a mindless routine. John, Lou, and I switched leads, with Lou pushing farther than John or me each time. We were soon more than halfway up the dome and knew we would reach our goal in time to return to camp before dark. Behind we could see the other three: Bill had turned back, apparently caching his load partway; Terry and Cherie were also a long distance behind, moving very slowly, and it seemed unlikely they would reach Camp V in time to get back down. We were discouraged—it minimized further the value of our efforts stomping the trail all the way to the top of the dome. It looked as though the only major benefit from our effort would be, as Lou had said, the psychological boost to the expedition's morale.

For most of the way up the dome we climbed simultaneously, the four of us tied together on one rope. At a crevassed section, however, we would stop to belay the first man across before the others followed. Lou was leading and

called for a belay before exploring a bridge over a crevasse partially buried by snow. Chris braced himself and fed the rope from around his waist to Lou. John and I stood by, resting. Lou probed the crevasse with his ice ax, searching for a secure crossing. For a minute no one said anything; we just stared at the clouds sweeping up the east side of K2. Then John suddenly piped up:

"I've got nothing against you personally, Chris, and even though I don't imagine we could ever be good friends, I think we can clear this up enough so we can get along for the rest of the trip."

I glanced at John. In his usual style he was saying exactly what was on his mind, and for a moment I admired his ability to bring things into the open. I thought perhaps we could air our grievances and mend them. Chris nodded his agreement. My sanguinity vaporized with John's next comment:

"But there's one thing I've got to get clear. I don't like you and Cherie blaming Rick and me for what has been going on between you and her. It's clear to everyone what's been going on."

Oh, no, I thought. Here we go again.

Lou, fifty feet above us and oblivious to the conversation, went on exploring the crevasse. Chris shot back in defense:

"That's not the way I understand it. According to a lot of people on this expedition, you and Rick are responsible for the rumors and most of the mess."

"Who said we were responsible?" John shot back, his voice rising.

"Whittaker for one. And most of the others."

"That's bull. It's been obvious to everyone what's been going on—all you need is two eyes. Rick and I were no more responsible for it than anyone."

My mind quickly thumbed through the scenario. Things had been going on of which John and I were not aware. It sounded as if others, not just Chris and Cherie, had blamed us for raising the issue. We both felt wronged, taking all the blame.

Chris belayed the rope out to Lou while arguing with John. I stood watching as they bitterly accused and counter-accused one another of being responsible for the divisions in the team; occasionally, I glanced up to see how Lou was doing. Lou still seemed unaware of the argument; he was engrossed in the job of reaching the other side of the crevasse.

Suddenly the rope went taut and I looked up. Lou was gone, disappeared down the crevasse. The sharp pull momentarily threw Chris off balance, but he quickly recovered and held the rope. Both he and John saw Lou had broken through the bridge and was in the crevasse. But they turned back, face to reddened face, and resumed their argument.

"Hold the belay and I'll climb up to see if he's O.K.," I hollered.

Chris did not so much as nod, but held the rope tight as if by instinct. He was so absorbed in the argument it was as if he were not aware of the problem.

"I don't see what my personal life or my personal business has to do with the expedition anyway," Chris yelled at John. "It has nothing to do with whether we get up this mountain or not."

"That's just more bull," John yelled back, eyes flaring. "We're in this thing together, and it affects us all."

I climbed as quickly as I could toward Lou, but at twenty-five thousand feet I was necessarily moving slowly. I shouted to Lou, but there was no response and no sign of him. I stopped for a few seconds to catch my breath, looked up to see the rope disappearing bar-taut down a hole in the snow, then looked the other way to Chris and John wildly yelling at each other. Chris still had the rope tightly belayed around his waist. Both of them ignored Lou's predicament.

"And what about you and Diana?" Chris yelled. "You've been sleeping in the same tent most of the trip. Tell me about that."

John and Diana had developed a close friendship and had often bunked in the same tent. But everyone knew their camaraderie went no further. Quite apart from John's fidelity and conservatism, we all knew how much Diana still loved Dusan, and how strongly she felt Dusan's presence on the expedition. That she would be with anyone else was simply unimaginable.

"At least I can deny that," John shot back. "Go ahead and deny that there's been something between you and Cherie."

"I don't have to deny anything to you," Chris yelled.

I was nearly at the hole into which Lou's rope disappeared, with John and Chris still arguing heatedly. Just before I peeked over the lip, out popped Lou's head, like a seal surfacing, disoriented, through a hole in pack ice. His goggles were pushed down over his nose, his glasses under the goggles packed with snow. He could not see. Snow clung to his hair and beard. I

stared at Lou, then down at Chris and John still yelling at each other, not even noticing that Lou had surfaced. It was like a Jerry Lewis comedy act. I started to laugh at the absurdity, which seemed to confuse Lou all the more.

"You O.K.?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I guess so. I didn't expect the bridge to break. Guess I better move over to the right." Still half hanging in the crevasse, he removed his glasses and cleaned them. Then he said, "What's going on down there, anyway?"

"A little argument," I said, and turned to climb back to Chris and John, still blustering at each other. Lou crawled out of his hole, dusted the snow off his hair, and headed on up, crossing the bridge at a more secure spot farther right. The rope went tight, forcing Chris to start climbing. He yelled at John as he climbed, turning back now and then to make his points.

"I'm just sick of your applying your redneck values to everyone on the expedition," Chris shouted back.

"At least I have values," John screamed.

Losing patience, I yelled, "God, I'm getting sick of this. I wonder if we're ever going to learn to act our ages on this climb."

Chris turned back to climbing; the exertion of climbing and arguing simultaneously at nearly twenty-five thousand feet was too much, and he continued in silence. There were still fifteen more feet of slack rope before John would have to start up.

"You know," I said to John, "sometimes you ought to watch your temper and think a little before you start saying stuff."

"Yeah, but I've got to say what's on my mind."

"I noticed the habit."

The rope paid out and John started climbing. In a few minutes our minds were again lost in the drudgery of placing one boot in front of the other and slowly, slowly climbing. At the end of another hour we made the last steps to the top of the snow dome. It was Camp V.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
THE LAST STEP

About the Author

Rick Ridgeway is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, author, photographer, and environmentalist based in Ojai, California. He was included in *National Geographic Adventure's* "Hall of Fame" in 2008/2009. His other books include *Big Open: On Foot across Tibet's Chang Tang*; *The Shadow of Kilimanjaro*; *Below Another Sky: A Mountain Adventure in Search of a Lost Father*; and *The Boldest Climb: Story of Twelve Who Climbed Mount Everest*. His writings and photographs have appeared in many publications. Most recently, he has been Patagonia's Vice President of Environmental Initiatives, promoting "freedom to roam"—protection and expansion of wildlife corridors—and their "sustainable apparel coalition."

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

Foreword by Jon Krakauer

DAVID ROBERTS

THE MOUNTAIN OF MY FEAR AND DEBORAH

TWO MOUNTAINEERING CLASSICS

THE MOUNTAIN OF MY FEAR AND DEBORAH

TWO MOUNTAINEERING CLASSICS

DAVID ROBERTS

The publication of *The Mountain of My Fear* in 1968 and *Deborah* in 1970 changed the face of the mountaineering narrative. Now both books are available in a single volume. *Mountain of My Fear* tells the story of David Robert's 1965 expedition, with three other Harvard Mountaineering Club members, that attempted the first climb of Mount Huntington's treacherous west face, while *Deborah* is the gripping account of Robert's 1964 expedition to the eastern side of Mount Deborah in Alaska with Don Jensen. Their two-man attempt on the then-unclimbed ridge was a rash and heroic effort. Roberts examines not only what happened on the mountain, but what happened in the stark isolation to the climbers and their friendship, as each became totally dependent on the other for survival.

The following is excerpted from *Mountain of My Fear and Deborah*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

FROM DEBORAH

| 11 |

We woke comfortably late the next morning and dawdled over breakfast. When we looked out, we saw that a beautiful day had dawned on the Gillam Glacier; it was virtually windless, and a strong sun warmed us and dried the tent and sleeping bags. We were packed up by 12:30 pm. As soon as we had put on our snowshoes and hefted our packs, we looked over all the glacier, which was blindingly white with sun. The snow looked perfectly smooth, but here and there we could see pale, diagonal hollows that suggested crevasses. Don led off. Only fifty yards from camp he stuck his foot into a crevasse. He yelled back to me, "Give me a belay." I put my ax in the snow and knelt, as he gingerly stepped across. Then we were both moving again.

Perhaps sixty yards farther, Don suddenly plunged into a crevasse and stuck, shoulder-deep. Immediately I thrust my ax into the snow and took in slack. Then I waited for Don to crawl out. I was not terribly worried: I had belayed a few crevasse plunges like this on McKinley, and Don had belayed me in one near the summit of our 11,780-foot peak. I even grew slightly impatient as Don seemed to thrash around helplessly.

But then he yelled, "I'm choking!" I was alarmed; I imagined the pack strap or the edge of the crevasse cutting off Don's wind.

I waited a few more seconds, but it was obvious Don couldn't get out. Perhaps rashly, I took off my pack, untied myself from the rope, tied the rope to my ax, and thrust it in again for an anchor. It didn't seem solid enough, so I quickly took our spare ice ax from my pack and tied the rope to that too. Then I walked quickly up to Don. I could not really see the crevasse at all, but I could see that Don was wedged pretty deeply in it. His hands clawed at the snow, but he said that his snowshoed feet were dangling loose. He was not actually choking, but he was in a cramped situation. The heavy pack seemed to be the obvious problem: its straps were constricting his arms and upper body. I reached out and carefully tried to pull the pack up and back. Don screamed, "Stop! It's the only thing holding me up!" His voice was full of panic. My pulling had made him slip a little farther into the crevasse so that all but his head was below the surface. Don sensed, as his feet waved in space, that the crevasse was huge. He warned me that I was too close to the edge. I backed up about five feet. For a moment I stood there, unable to do anything.

Suddenly Don plunged into the hole. The anchoring axes ripped loose and were dragged across the snow as Don fell within the crevasse. I grabbed the rope, but it was wet and whipped violently through my hands. I heard Don's yell, sharp and loud at first, trail away and fade into the frightening depth. All at once the rope stopped. About sixty feet of it had disappeared into the hole.

An excruciating silence surrounded me. With a kind of dread, I yelled Don's name. There was no answer. I yelled twice more, waiting in the silence, and then I heard a weak, thin shout: "I . . . I'm alive." The words were a great relief, but a scare as well: how badly was he hurt? I yelled, "Are you all right?" After another pause, his voice trickled back: "I think my right thumb is broken! I hit my head and it's bleeding and my right leg is hurt!"

I ran back to reanchor the rope. From my pack I got our snow shovel, dug a pit in the wet snow, tied one of the axes to the rope again, and buried the ax in the pit, stamping down the snow on top. Perhaps in a little while the snow would freeze, making the anchor solid. Through my mind flashed all kinds

of thoughts, reminders of warnings before the expedition about the dangers of going with only two men, fears of never getting Don out, the thought of his blood spilling, a curse for the worthless radio.

When the snow had broken around him, Don's first impressions had been of bouncing against ice and of breaking through ice: he was not aware of screaming. He expected to feel the jerk of the rope at any moment, but it had not come. Then suddenly he had been falling fast, free; he somehow supposed that I was falling with him, and he instinctively anticipated death. Once before, in an ice-gully avalanche in New Hampshire, Don had fallen eight hundred feet—but he had been knocked out that time and had remembered only the beginning. This time he stayed conscious throughout the terrible fall.

At last there was a crushing stop, followed by piles of ice and snow falling on top of him in the darkness. Then it was still. The fear of being buried was foremost. He fought his way loose from the ice; some of the blocks were heavy, but he was able to move them and scramble out. He realized that, miraculously, he had landed on his back, wedged between two walls of ice, with the heavy pack under him to break his fall. His hands hurt, his leg felt sharply painful, and his head rang from a blow. He became aware of my shouting, the sound weak and distant, and yelled an answer upwards. As his eyes grew used to the dark, he could see where he was.

The inside of the crevasse was like a huge cavern. The only light came from the small hole, appallingly far above, and from a dim seam in the ceiling that ran in a straight line through the hole: the continuation of the thinly covered crevasse. The bottom was narrow, and the walls pressed in on him, but about thirty feet above him the space bulged to the incredible width of a large room. Above that, the walls narrowed again, arching over him like a gothic roof. Don began to glimpse huge chunks of ice, like the ones that had fallen and shattered with him on the way down, stuck to the ceiling like wasps' nests.

When I had got the anchor buried, I returned to the edge of the crevasse and shouted again to Don. With great presence of mind, he realized how possible it would be for me to fall in too, and shouted, "Dave! Be careful! Don't come near!"

His voice was so urgent that I immediately backed up to a distance of twenty feet from the little hole. But it was much harder to hear each other now. We were shouting at the tops of our lungs; had there been any wind, we could never have heard each other.

Fortunately, Don's bleeding had stopped. Struggling loose from the debris had reassured him that he wasn't seriously hurt; in fact, the thumb seemed only badly sprained instead of broken. Industriously, he got his crampons loose from his pack and put them on in place of his snowshoes. He still had his ax; chopping steps and wedging upward between the walls, he got to a place where he could see better. At once, he discovered the real nature of the subsurface glacier: corridors and chambers, at all depths, shot off in every direction. The whole thing was hideously hollow. At first Don had thought he might climb out; now he realized it would be impossible. But he had a furious desire to get out. He had put on his mittens but was getting cold anyway. Around him, on all sides, water was dripping and trickling: it was impossible to stay dry.

Don became obsessed with warning me away from the edge. If I fell in too, there would be no chance for either of us to get out. I stood still, outside; I could see only the small hole and had little idea in which direction the crevasse ran. Don, on the other hand, could tell which way it ran but had no idea where I was. With a confused series of shouts we managed to orient with respect to each other.

We both realized Don's pack had to come out first. We could not afford to leave it there. He could not wear it on the way out; I would have to haul it up. It would not be safe at all for Don to untie from the rope; I might never be able to feed the end back down to him. But it was the only rope we had. I racked my brain for an alternative. There was some nylon cord in the repair kit, which was in my pack. I ran back and got it out—it was not nearly long enough. Then I remembered our slings and stirrups, nylon loops and ladders we had brought for the technical climbing on Deborah. I dug them out, untied all the knots, found some spare boot laces, and finally tied everything together in one long strand. When it was done, I threw the end into the hole and lowered it. Don yelled that it reached.

He had taken his pack apart. Now he tied his sleeping bag onto the end of the line, and I pulled it up. But as the load neared the top, the line cut into the bad snow at the edge of the crevasse. Just below the top, the load caught under the edge. I jerked and flipped the line, to no avail. Don saw the problem but could think of no solution.

It became obvious that I had somehow to knock loose the rotten snow from the edge. But I didn't dare get near the hole, and Don would be standing beneath all the debris I might knock down. I could imagine only one way to do it.

I checked the rope's buried anchor again: it seemed solidly frozen in. I pulled and jerked on the rope, but it wouldn't budge. With one of the nylon slings I had left, I tied a loop around my waist, then tied a sliding knot to the main rope with it. When I pulled, the knot would hold tight; but when I let up, the knot would slide. Don, meanwhile, had found a relatively shielded place to hide. I inched toward the hole, carrying an ax and the shovel. If the edge broke, I should fall in only a few feet: then I might be able to scramble back out. I got no closer than I had to, but finally I was within two feet of the dangerous edge. The rope was stretched tight behind me. I squatted and reached out with my ax. The stuff broke loose easily and plunged noisily into the crevasse. As the hole enlarged, I slipped the knot tighter and waddled back a foot or so. Some of the snow had to be dug loose; some fell at the blow of the ax. It was awkward work but it was profitable. At last I had dug back to bare, hard ice. The rope would not cut into it. Leaning over, I peered into the awesome cavern. At first I could see only darkness; moments later, I glimpsed the faint outline of Don below, much more distant than I had even imagined.

I retreated from the hole and resumed hauling Don's sleeping bag; this time it came easily. One by one, I fished out the pieces of Don's load. With each, we grew more optimistic. The pack frame itself was hardest—its sharp corners caught on the ice; but at last I shook it loose and jerked it out.

Now there was only Don himself to get out. There was no possibility of hauling him. He would have to use the sliding knots on stirrups, which would support his feet, to climb the rope itself. I dangled some stirrups

into the hole for him. He yelled when he got them. Then I retreated to the anchor, added my weight to the solidity of the frozen snow, and waited.

Slowly, painfully, Don ascended the rope. Everything was wet, so he had to tie an extra, tighter loop in the knots. This made them tend to jam, and he had to claw them loose several times. He was shivering now, soaking wet, and tired; in addition, his sprained fingers made handling the knots clumsy and painful. But from time to time he shouted his progress, and each time his voice sounded stronger and closer.

The weather was still perfect, but the sun had traveled far into the western part of the sky. A full four hours had elapsed since Don had fallen in. The peaks, as intriguing as ever, towered out of the smooth, apparently harmless surface of the glacier.

At last Don's head poked out of the hole. I cheered him on, but I was struck by the shaky tiredness I could see in his face. He crawled out of the hole and sat gasping on the edge. I came up to him, full of a strong impulse of loyalty, and put my arm around his shoulders, telling him he had done a good job. We ate a few bites of lunch—the minute the emergency was over, it seemed, our appetites returned.

We decided simply to backtrack the hundred yards to the camp site and pitch the tent again. I gathered the pieces of Don's pack and loaded it up. We staggered back to the fresh platform, very careful as we recrossed the first crevasse. In the subtle light of afternoon, looking back eastward toward the mountains we had been trying to reach, we could see faint blue line after faint blue line intersecting our potential path, parallel marks indicating a dozen farther crevasses like the one Don had fallen into.

I repitched the tent while Don rested. Inside, we looked at his injuries. He was badly bruised, especially on the right thigh; his head was bruised, with a small cut showing through blood-matted hair; half his fingers were sprained, the thumb badly. But it was a blessing there was no injury worse than that. Gradually, Don warmed up as his clothes dried out. We cooked dinner and ate, with a sense of peace and reprieve. Afterward, as it grew dark, we each took a sleeping pill; within a few minutes we were deep in slumber.

12

In the morning, when we awoke, we found the watch had stopped. We set it arbitrarily and started breakfast. Don was stiff and sore from his injuries, but the sleep had done him good. In my mind there was no question now but that we had to hike out to civilization. I was pretty sure Don would agree; even so, I was reluctant to bring up the matter. Finally I did. To my surprise, Don was set on going on.

We argued for more than an hour. I listed all the reasons for my decision. First, we were down to five days' food (perhaps seven, if we stretched it), and the hike out, we thought, would take about five days. If we went two days farther toward the airdrop basin, we might be forced into a seven-day hike out on only three days' food. And we had encountered only one of the obviously many hideous crevasses on this glacier. I argued that we had been very lucky to get Don out alive and that nothing would keep us from falling into another crevasse. The snow conditions, as we had found, were no better at night. Moreover, part of the hike-out route, to the south down the Susitna Glacier and River, was off our maps, since we

hadn't anticipated it: who could say what obstacles we might run into? The radio was worthless, we were constantly hungry, and Don was bruised all over.

Despite all this, Don was determined to push on. He did not want it to be his accident and his injuries that stopped us. We could hike up the glacier on its southern edge, he argued, where the crevasses would be small enough to be safe. He was as eager as ever to climb the peaks ahead, and he was willing to go without food a few days, if need be, so long as we could definitely ascertain whether or not our airdrop was buried.

Don's stand put me in a strange situation. I was torn between admiration for and fear of him: at once he seemed terribly brave and terribly foolish. I remembered his insistence, early on the expedition, on going ahead the night he had been feeling dizzy and losing his balance. I wondered now if he wasn't expressing the same kind of overreaction: if so, it seemed a kind of madness. My inner voice, with its calculation of risks and complications, seemed to be speaking pure common sense, while Don's was fanatic. At the same time I could not help wondering if I was quitting on him, panicking prematurely. After all, before the accident I had been the one who was anxious for the trip to be over. I remembered the urge toward the safe south I had felt that dreary night, a week before, hauling loads across the West Fork Glacier. Perhaps I was "crumping"; perhaps I was not good enough for Don.

Our argument was uncommonly restrained, and for once we seemed objective, and frank, as if a residue of respect for each other had settled out of the recent accident. I admitted that I was afraid of the glacier; Don granted that he didn't look forward to getting back to California. But I was possessed with a feeling that Don had gone slightly crazy, or that the crevasse fall had done something to him. I even fancied that the blow on his head had distorted his reason. At one point, as we were arguing about food, he said, "I'd almost rather starve here than go out now." Each symptom of fanaticism, like this one, made me look at Don in a more curious light. Yet I could not bear to attack his motives, as I had before, so soon after his ordeal in the crevasse. Don interpreted my reluctance to force the decision as a cowardice about taking the responsibility for it, which it may partly have

been; all the same, I wanted the decision to be both of ours, so that we could not recriminate later.

Gradually, with heavy heart, Don saw that I was firmly set on hiking out. He could not be as staunchly in favor of going ahead—he naturally recoiled at the thought of falling into another crevasse. At last he gave in and agreed with me. I tried not to gloat over the relief I felt, and Don concealed his bitterness. We got dressed and packed up the camp in a marvelous spirit of reconciliation, a spell of grace over our life of antagonism. When we were ready to leave, we called it 2:00 pm. With wistful glances back at the mountains we would never reach, still holding out their clean arms to us under a warm sun, we started trudging back up the pass to the Susitna Glacier.

My spirits, as always when the doubts and fears that had gnawed inside me were resolved, rose to exuberance. At first Don could not share my feeling, but his disappointment softened. On the climb to the pass we made up four or five verses, to the tune of "The Cowboy's Lament" ("As I walked out in the streets of Laredo"), about the crevasse accident. Instead of funeral roses, we pictured sacrificial piles of our favorite foods all over the glacier. One verse seemed particularly poignant:

It was once with my ice ax I used to go dashing,

Once in my crampons I used to go gay,

First over to Deborah, then down to the Gillam,

But I've broken my thumb, and I'm dying today.

At the top of the pass, we stopped to rest and gathered our last look to the north. Our marks on the snow eloquently told our story. Below us was a flat rectangular patch, where the tent had been pitched. From it a short track led straight east until it abruptly ended in a little hole. There were stray marks around the hole, but the snow lay untouched beyond.

We turned and headed down the Susitna Glacier. For a mile I led, here and there picking out our tracks from two days before, where they still showed under an inch of new snow. At the corner, the tracks turned west toward the pass we had crossed from the West Fork Glacier. We continued straight down the Susitna. We had only about a thousand feet of altitude still to drop before we would reach the névé line, below which all the snow had melted, leaving bare ice, with the crevasses exposed and safe. But there were still quite a few crevasses to cross. I led for another half mile, through what seemed to be the worst of it. I was nervous about the hidden cracks and stuck my foot through a couple of snow bridges. However, the crevasses didn't look as big as the ones on the Gillam. Still, Don belayed me over any stretch that looked dubious, and we carefully skirted the obvious crevasses. It was slow going. As we seemed to enter a comparatively safe plateau, Don took the lead. The snow was soft and wet, scalloped with confusing sun cups. At about 4:00 pm he stopped to ponder an apparent pair of crevasses that nearly touched end to end. At the other end of the rope, I kept the line almost taut between us. Don started to cross what he thought was a little island of snow between the crevasses. Suddenly the island collapsed. I saw Don disappear and plunged the ax in immediately, crouching for the shock. A little pull came but it didn't budge me. I supposed Don had fallen about five feet and waited for him to scramble out. But there was no sign of him. Without getting up, I yelled, "Are you all right?" After a moment I heard his weak, distant voice, tinged with something like hysteria: "I've stopped bleeding, I think!"

With a gust of weariness and fear, I thought, "Not again!" I shouted, "How far in are you?" Don's voice came back, "Thirty feet . . . there's blood all over in here. I've got to get out of here quick!" He sounded beaten, as if a vital string in him had broken.

When the island had collapsed, he had fallen slightly backward into the crevasse. The nylon rope had stretched and cut back into the near bank, allowing Don to fall as far as thirty feet. But this time the walls were only three or four feet apart. He had smashed his face brutally on a shelf of ice halfway down.

Outside, I imagined having to go through all the emergency procedure of evacuation again and hurriedly got out our hauling line. But Don, seeing that he could climb out by himself, took off his pack and snowshoes and put on his crampons. This was difficult, wedged as he was between the close walls. The crevasse, at a lower altitude than the one on the Gillam, was dripping and running with water. With the energy of panic, Don forced his way up and out of the crevasse, chimneying between the icy walls. As soon as I realized what he was doing, I pulled the rope in to try to aid him. Within a few minutes he had reached the surface.

I hurried over to help him. He looked scared and exhausted, on the verge of tears. His lower face was covered with blood; I winced at the sight of it. He was in an agony of pain. I made him sit down and got some codeine from the medical kit, which he managed to swallow. We got the bleeding mostly stopped. It was fairly warm, but Don was shivering uncontrollably in his soaked clothes. I helped him take off his shirt and put my own jacket on him. Don apologized for getting blood on it; I told him not to be silly, but I felt suddenly defenseless before his pathetic concern.

I changed to crampons; as Don gave me a nominal belay with one hand, I slithered down into the crevasse to get his pack. The ice on which Don had cut his face was actually sharp to the touch. The wetness was oppressive, and as I got farther into the crevasse, the darkness added to a sense of claustrophobia. I found Don's pack at a place where the walls were not much wider than my body, and tied the rope to it. Don's blood was visible on both walls of the crevasse; I felt an irrational fear of getting it on me. There was a rank smell of stale air and blood in the gloomy, wet cavern. I felt the same panicky urge to get out that Don must have felt. Quickly I chimneyed back to the top of the crevasse; then I sat, wedged feet and back, between the walls of ice, and tried to pull the pack up in one piece. It took an extreme effort, but at last I got the thing up and shoved it over the edge onto the snow. Then I crawled out of the hole myself.

Don was obviously in some kind of shock. The bleeding had essentially stopped, but his chin was a raw, ragged mess, and he could hardly talk. Despite the down jacket, he was shivering miserably. We decided to set up camp on the spot. I pitched the tent and got the stove and food out of our

packs. Still, it was 7:30 pm before we were settled inside. The codeine had helped numb the pain, but Don was still in great suffering. He had sprained all the fingers on his left hand, so that he could barely use them. The knuckles were scraped raw. At last he could get into his sleeping bag and begin to warm up. I started the stove, which helped warm the tent, and melted snow for hot water with which to bathe Don's cuts. I daubed at the lacerations on his face with some wet cotton, but it only made the blood flow again. With pained words, Don complained of cuts inside his mouth too. I tried to look, and saw gouges on the inside of his lower cheek. Blood was getting all over the tent.

Just when we seemed to be getting the cuts clean, Don closed his mouth, and we heard a soft hissing sound as he breathed. "What's that?" he asked. With alarm, I saw bubbles of air in the blood on his chin. Checking his mouth, I found that the cut went all the way through the cheek below the lip. We both felt nauseated, but I tried to cheer him up by telling him that such things happened all the time. Finally Don settled into his bag, where he could hold a piece of cotton to his mouth to clot the blood. I cooked dinner. When it was ready, Don tried to eat, at my insistence. He found that by cutting the food into small pieces he could feed them into his mouth, chew them delicately, and swallow. This was crucial, even if it took him an hour and a half to finish a meal.

He took another pill for the pain. He seemed numb and sluggish, but he was taking the injury bravely. We divided a sleeping pill between us, Don taking three quarters and I a quarter. We would have taken more, but we felt we had to get up in the early morning, just on the chance that it might be colder and safer then. Ideally, we would have rested there the next day. But we did not have enough food and would have to push on. We had only made about two miles that day, much less than we had planned. We were down to four days' food, and we still had a mile of this treacherous glacier to cross and forty-five miles of wilderness beyond.

As I lay awake in the gathering dark, I heard Don's breathing grow deep and even. It was a blessing that he was able to sleep. Since the moment he had apologized for getting blood on my jacket, I had felt an inarticulate impulse of love for him. He had been so courageous; already he was showing

signs of taking this accident, too, in stride. But I could not sleep. I imagined the morning's trek through the last of the crevasses. They were fiendish; there was no way to find them or tell how big they were: the ax could not probe far enough. And there was no way to belay across them safely. Even now, as we camped between a pair of them, I sensed the others crowding around our tent, like wolves in the night, waiting for us.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
THE MOUNTAIN OF MY FEAR AND DEBORAH

About the author

During the 1960s and 1970s David Roberts led or co-led thirteen expeditions to the mountains of Alaska and the Yukon, making many first ascents. He is the author of more than twenty books, including three published by The Mountaineers Books: two collections of adventure essays, *Moments of Doubt* and *Escape Routes*, and *Sandstone Spine*, an account of a three-week traverse of the Comb Ridge in the American Southwest. His latest books are *Finding Everett Ruess* and, with Alex Honnold, *Alone On The Wall*. He has also co-written three books with Ed Viesturs. His articles have appeared in *National Geographic*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *The New York Times*, *Outside*, and other publications. He lives in Watertown, Massachusetts.

LEGENDS AND LORE SERIES

Foreword by Tashi Sherpa

Translated by Corinne McKay

Ang Tharkay

with Basil P. Norton

SHERPA

THE MEMOIR OF ANG THARKAY

SHERPA

THE MEMOIR OF ANG THARKAY

Ang Tharkay
with Basil P. Norton

Ang Tharkay was one of the most well known and important Sherpas of his day. Tharkay traveled frequently with Eric Shipton and he was the head Sherpa on Maurice Herzog's 1950 ascent of Annapurna—the first successful ascent of an 8000-meter peak. This is a rare first-person account by a Sherpa of the great era of Himalayan exploration. Tharkay reveals some of the politics within the Sherpa support teams that were, presumably, invisible to those who hired them and, while he clearly admired many of his employers, he was not blind to some of their foibles.

The following is excerpted from *Sherpa*; to read more, purchase the book in paperback or ebook from your favorite retailer, or visit Mountaineers Books.

| 4 |

I Choose a Career as a Sherpa

I cannot really say what drew me to the whirlwind of high mountain expeditions. As a child, isolated in the village where I was born and completely unaware of the outside world, I barely knew what mountain climbing was.

I was a little older than twenty when I met Nim Tharkay, one of my friends from the village, who was returning from General Bruce's expedition. He was coming to see me at home in Khunde, still carrying all of his climbing equipment. He strutted from house to house as if he had just accomplished something awe-inspiring. As I was younger than he was, my imagination ran wild when I heard his sensational descriptions of his adventures. I was so impressed that I immediately felt an uncontrollable desire to follow his example and try to join an expedition myself. I did not leave his side and listened avidly as he told of his adventures in the mountains.

Shortly thereafter, I went with Nim Tharkay to Oaku, a Rai village fairly far from Khunde, to get the grain provisions that both of our families needed. The journey took us about three days, so we had time to talk and, of course, our only topic of conversation

was Nim Tharkay's climbs and adventures. My enthusiasm and interest grew. I could think and talk of nothing else. Perhaps destiny hopped on board with my desire. Along the way, we had stopped at the home of a Sherpani who had just come back from Darjeeling. She told us that a new expedition was underway, and that they were hiring young Sherpas. She told us that the sirdar Gyalgen still had several spots available on his team, and she enthusiastically encouraged me to go there and apply.[1] She was a young woman, about my own age, who was also enthusiastic about these adventures, and she made me wish I were in Darjeeling just then.

We went home the next day with our provisions. Along the way, I met up with another of my friends, Jigme Sherpa, who would meet his death on Nanga Parbat soon after. As he also had some climbing experience, I went to ask his advice. I told him about the news that the woman had shared with me, and about my intense desire to go immediately to Darjeeling and apply for a job. He told me that it was not complicated. I didn't need to take anything with me, because the organizers would provide me with everything I needed: clothing, blankets, mountain climbing shoes, et cetera. I only needed a small amount of money to pay for my expenses on the way to Darjeeling. Jigme was so happy about my enthusiasm that he offered his wool coat to me to sell in order to raise the money that I needed. The next morning, I went to Namche Bazaar with my father. Once we had done our shopping, my father decided to return home that same evening. I told him that the *makai* (corn) that we had purchased needed to be ground into flour, and I asked him to leave me in Namche to take care of it. He agreed and went home alone. During my stay in Namche, I went to the bazaar to listen to people talking about the new expedition that was being organized. I asked them questions, and they told me that the expedition would not leave until at least a week later. I was happy to learn that I still had time to ask for a job, so I returned to Khunde with the flour, and then I left for the Khari-Khola without attracting any attention. This journey normally takes three days, but I was so nervous and excited about my adventure that I walked quickly and reached Oaku two mornings later. There I went to see a friend who very kindly invited me to have dinner and stay with him for several days, but I declined his offer because I was in such a rush to find Jigme Sherpa.

I couldn't locate him that night, but I found Ang Pasang instead.[2] He was preparing to return to his village, and I was unsuccessful in convincing him to accompany me to Darjeeling.

I left Oaku at night, for fear that the Kirat people would tell my father about my disappearance. I slipped stealthily out of my host's house and found Jigme, who was waiting for me one hundred meters away. Together we headed for Darjeeling. We walked all night and reached Solang the next morning. We did not have any money to speak of, but we met a friend of Jigme's in a teahouse, and he gave us a snack. After a brief rest in Solang, we continued our journey. We crossed the Solba ridge and reached Tumlingtar after crossing the Arun River on a raft. With my last Nepali rupee, I paid the six annas that the river crossing cost for the two of us.

Tumlingtar is famous for its rustic pottery, made from a local variety of clay. We purchased two pots in which to cook our meals. Jigme had brought corn flour with him, and fortunately that would be enough for us on our journey. We drank a glassful of local chang and continued on our way. We were not at all bothered by the prospect of making the entire journey on foot, because we wanted badly to reach Darjeeling before it was too late. So we walked fairly quickly despite our empty stomachs and the steep, seemingly endless trail. We went through Terhathum, a Limbu village, and just past Terhathum is the Tamur River. I had assumed that we would cross the river on foot, but Jigme warned me not to count on that: it was dangerous, full of treacherous pools. As with the Arun, we would have to cross on a raft. After that, we reached the village of Panthar, in the heart of Limbu country. When we arrived, a local person was being cremated, and the funeral ceremony was taking place on top of a hill. The funeral was accompanied by a feast of roasted meat and chang, and all of the guests were invited. We were greatly relieved to take advantage of the occasion, because we were very hungry and completely out of money. While we were gorging ourselves, a village elder advised us to leave as soon as possible, because the Limbus would soon be drunk, and, when night fell, any stranger in the village might find himself under attack. We headed for Singalapa, bringing with us enough chang for the journey.

On the trail between Singalapa and Ilam, two men who we knew joined us. They were also going to Darjeeling, so now we formed a small troop. Toward evening, we reached Simina, where we camped in an empty shack. There we were able to grind our corn and collect some wood to build a fire. We left Simina the next morning and finally arrived at Darjeeling at the stroke of eleven o'clock. Our two companions left us there.

We wandered around Chowk Bazaar, with the hope of meeting some people we knew. We had the good fortune of running into our old friend Mingma Thu Thu, who has since accompanied Tilman on his expedition to Rakaposhi.[3] We asked him to find lodging for us. He told us that my aunt's daughter now lived in Darjeeling, and she had just returned from a stay in Benares. This was good news for us, and we hurried on our way to her home. She welcomed us most cordially and offered us her hospitality. Next, we rushed to the Himalayan Club's hiring office.

Unfortunately, the new expedition had already departed, and we had arrived too late. But we had to find work. At that time, the Victoria Hospital was being built, and I got a job there as a laborer—my job was to carry rocks. After three months, I was hired by one Nima Tempa to transport goods to Pemionche. We formed caravans of twelve Sherpas and carried the goods on our backs. We were each paid an advance of three rupees, which was not enough to cover our expenses along the way. We had to pool our money and buy, ahead of time, all of the provisions that we might need on the trail. It took ten days to reach Pemionche, and we found ourselves with no more resources and with too little money to return to Darjeeling. Nima Tempa abandoned us to our own devices, despite the fact that we were almost dead from hunger and fatigue.

For better or worse we returned to Darjeeling, and my friend Mingma Thu Thu suggested that I go and register with Gyalgen, who was in charge of hiring staff for expeditions. I did so as soon as possible. But a man named Tobi was also in charge of hiring, and I did not know that he had previously been Gyalgen's business partner. There had been a conflict of interest, and the two had had a falling out. Tobi had arranged to keep most of the business for himself, leaving only a small clientele for Gyalgen.

I arranged to win Tobi's trust through a ruse that you might find unscrupulous. Everyone who had been hired by Tobi had received a brass badge to show that they were part of the staff for an expedition. I bought one of these badges from a Sherpa for five rupees, and I shamelessly impersonated him when I went to see Tobi. He hired me immediately for the 1931 German expedition to Kanchenjunga. That was how I got started as an expedition Sherpa.

Base camp was set up near Green Lake on Zemu Glacier. We were promised that the first to arrive at the glacier would definitely be hired. Ang Song, three other Sherpas, and I were the first to arrive, but unfortunately, despite that, we were not hired. There were rivalries among the sirdars. They never kept their promises and selected their own protégés. For us this was a bitter disappointment, and we returned to Darjeeling dejected and deeply discouraged. I told Tobi about the incident, but he could not do anything, and so I was unemployed for June, July, and August, and I stayed with a relative in Darjeeling. Then Tobi asked me to go with him for some climbing practice in Selu-La-Tu. That was my first experience with the brutal and dangerous life of a climber. During the return trip, in Ching-Thung, I came down with jaundice. There were three of us with the same illness, and Tobi loaned us a horse. We took turns riding until we got to Gangtok. We were put to bed in the bungalow, the *daks* (travelers) house, and when Tobi arrived soon after, he found me nearly in a coma. He wanted to take me to the hospital immediately. I was very afraid, because I did not know what a hospital was. I thought that people were sent there to die. So I refused to go, and Tobi was very upset. He decided to leave me, come what may, and he continued on with the rest of the group. I was furious at being abandoned, and I tried in vain to follow him. Weak and sick, I had a great deal of trouble even standing up. I resolved to reach Singtam, which was a good distance from Gangtok, no matter what effort was required. I arrived there in four hours and rested at an inn in the village, where I drank a pot of chang. I felt horribly sick, and I had a nosebleed. I began to wonder if I would ever make it back to Darjeeling. I stayed in Singtam for four days and ate almost nothing. I had nothing to protect myself from the cold, and I had nearly no shelter against the wind that blew at night. I truly thought that my last hour on Earth had arrived, and I wondered what people would say at home. But

undoubtedly the hour of our death is already determined, because at the end of the fifth day I felt a little better. I stumbled and limped for day upon day, fueled by the desire not to be on the trail any more. And with God's help, after once again crossing the Tista River, I arrived back in Darjeeling after six weeks of superhuman effort.

When I arrived in Tumsang, on the outskirts of Darjeeling, I collapsed on the trail and was helped to my feet by a passerby who took me to the hospital. I was treated there for several days, and they sent for my brother-in-law. He immediately took me to his home, where I still had attacks of jaundice. My aunt was still staying with him as well. I honestly believe that without their care I would not be here today.

Three weeks later, my brother-in-law left on a journey, but my aunt delayed her departure for four months in order to take care of me. Before she left, she gave me a small amount of money to take care of my needs for a little while. The months passed, and one day I ran into a distant relative who advised me to go to Yatung to gather some medicinal plants and then sell them in Kalimpong. In the meantime, I had spent all of my money, and I had to pay for my trip to Yatung by carrying a load of cigarettes to Phari. For that I was paid five rupees. Flush with this money, I went to Yatung, where I met up with a few friends. I went with them to hunt for the medicinal plants that we could sell. We succeeded in picking nearly two mounds (seventy kilos) that we brought to Kalimpong. For this load we were paid twelve rupees. One month later, we were once again out of money, and I could not find any work. After being unemployed for some time and relapsing—my health was still not outstanding—I decided to return to Darjeeling and try my luck with an expedition once again.

A few days after I arrived, I was still feeling weak, and death still crossed my mind. I ran into Mingma Thu Thu who told me to go immediately to the Himalayan Club, where a new expedition was forming and Sherpas were being hired. I rushed there, saying a prayer that I would finally be granted the chance to seize the opportunity. When I arrived at the hiring office, I saw a crowd of Sherpas who were waiting to have their credentials reviewed. I got in line, but I was able to cut ahead a bit, and I was no more than twenty meters from the front of the line. I had no real hope of being hired, though,

because I was feeling weak. My eyes were sunken and I was thin. My legs trembled underneath me.

I knew how slim my chances were, and when it was my turn, I proceeded humbly before the examiner. I answered the questions that I was asked, with a confidence and vigor that surprised me. I undoubtedly made a strong impression on the group that was responsible for selecting people, because, to my great joy, I was finally approved and sent to Victoria Hospital for a medical examination. There again providence protected me, because I was declared fit for service in the mountains. That is how I was hired for the 1933 Everest expedition organized by Hugh Ruttledge, who was planning to attack the mountain from the Tibetan side.

We left Darjeeling on March 3, 1933. It was a memorable date, one that will be forever etched in my memory as a Sherpa. The expedition's members were all British, under Mr. Ruttledge's direction. We were divided into three groups, and I was part of the first group to leave Darjeeling, via Kalimpong and Pedong. We then crossed Sikkim and continued on to Gautsa after crossing the 3600-meter Jelep-La.[4] We were now in Bhutan. From there the various groups in our expedition came together and embarked on the assault of the world's highest mountain. That is how I was introduced to the passion of Himalayan mountain climbing.

Endnotes

1 Born in 1900, this Gyalgen climbed in Sikkim with [Harold] Raeburn (1920), on Everest (1921, 1922, 1924), and on Kanchenjunga (1929, 1930). Seven other well-known Sherpas have the same name.

2 Ang Pasang, born in 1912, took part in the 1933 Everest expedition (Ruttledge, *Everest 1933*), the 1934 Sikkim expedition with [G. B.] Gourlay, (Anon., "Expeditions"), and the 1936 expedition to Tibet with [J. A. K.] Martyn. He died in 1943.

3 Born in 1900, Mingma Thu Thu, known as "Alice," accompanied expeditions to Everest in 1922 and 1924, to Kanchenjunga in 1931, to Sikkim (with [Gordon] Osmaston) in 1932 and to Rakaposhi in 1937 (with [Bill] Tilman). He disappeared on the return journey, probably as a result of the unrest in the country.

4 Eric Shipton notes in *Upon That Mountain* that his group traveled "via the 4,267-meter Natu-La." The two passes are about five kilometers apart, as the crow flies, and the two

routes that Shipton and Ang Tharkay took meet up in Yatung. The ridges above these passes are listed on maps as having the following altitudes: Jelep-La, 4400 meters; near the Natu-La, 4728 meters.

CLICK HERE TO KEEP READING
SHERPA

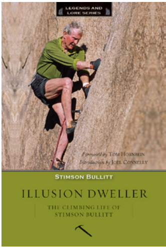
About the author

Born in 1908 Ang Tharkay was one of the leading Sherpas of the exploration period of the Himalaya. He was a regular on expeditions by Eric Shipton as well as sirdar for the successful French ascent of Annapurna. He was also on the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance – the trip in which Shipton met Hillary thus leading to Hillary's place on the 1953 team. Ang Tharkay opened his own guiding service in 1954, taking trekkers up Kangchenjunga, although he also continued to work for some high-level mountaineering expeditions. He died, of cancer, in 1981 in Kathmandu.

Corinne McKay is an American Translators Association-certified French to English translator based in Boulder, Colorado. She has served as President of the Colorado Translators Association and was elected to a three-year term on the Board of Directors of the American Translators Association.

CHECK OUT ALL OUR LEGENDS AND LORE TITLES ON THE MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS' WEBSITE

or ask for them at your local bookstore or library!

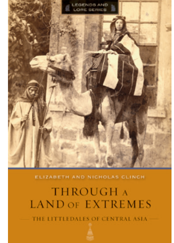


Illusion Dweller

The Climbing Life of Stimson Bullitt

by Stimson Bullitt

"A lovely mix of recollections coupled with erudite reflections of, at times, an almost too openly honest elder." —Tom Hornbein

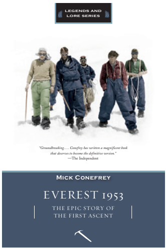


Through A Land of Extremes

The Littledales of Central Asia

by Elizabeth and Nicholas Clinch

The life and times of a largely forgotten Victorian couple who just happened to make some of the most amazing expeditions of their day, including nearly reaching the forbidden city of Lhasa.

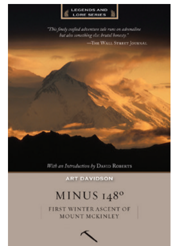


Everest: 1953

The Epic Story of the First Ascent of Everest

by Mick Conefrey

"An exciting, moving account . . . a fascinating piece of documentary writing as readable and as poignant as *Into Thin Air* or *Touching the Void*." —Spectator (London)



Minus 148°

First Winter Ascent of Mount McKinley

by Art Davidson

"This finely crafted adventure tale runs on adrenaline but also something else: brutal honesty." —*Wall Street Journal*

Extreme Eiger

The Race to Climb the Eiger Direct

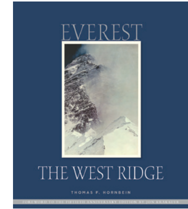
by Peter and Leni Gillman

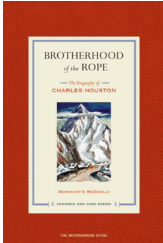
"[A] story of courage and competition, triumph and tragedy, that will appeal to anyone keen to know just what happens to those who risk everything to achieve their dreams." —Wade Davis

Everest: The West Ridge

by Tom Hornbein

The fiftieth anniversary edition of Thomas Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld's first glory-or-death ascent of Everest's West Ridge, with never-before-published expedition photographs and a new foreword by Jon Krakauer.





Brotherhood of the Rope

The Biography of Charles Houston

by Bernadette McDonald

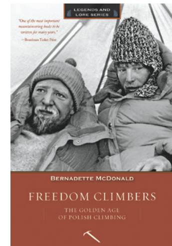
Charlie Houston was an authentic American hero, famous not only for his role in the 1953 attempt on K2 but also for his pioneering research on the effects of high altitude.

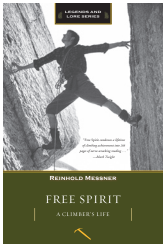
Freedom Climbers

The Golden Age of Polish Climbing

by Bernadette McDonald

"A brilliantly crafted tale of mountain and political adventure that reveals a golden era of Himalayan climbing that was as glorious as it was tragic." –Sir Chris Bonington





Free Spirit

A Climber's Life

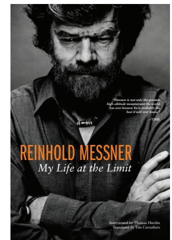
by Reinhold Messner

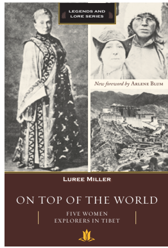
"*Free Spirit* condenses a lifetime of climbing achievement into 288 pages of nerve-wracking reading." –Mark Twight

Reinhold Messner: My Life At The Limit

Interviewed by Thomas Hüetlin

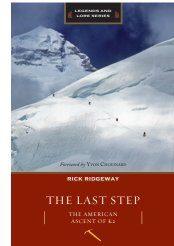
A more thoughtful and conversational Messner emerges in this interview-format memoir of the world's premier mountaineer.





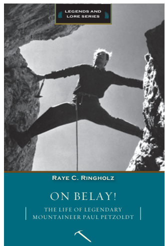
On Top of the World

Five Women Explorers in Tibet
by Luree Miller
In the late 1800s, when women were bound by both cumbersome clothing and strict Victorian morals, Nina Mazuchelli, Annie Taylor, Isabella Bird Bishop, Fanny Bullock Workman, and Alexandra David-Néel were notable exceptions: women who explored Tibet.



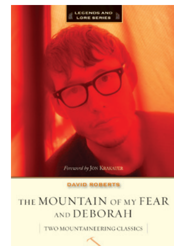
The Last Step

The American Ascent of K2
by Rick Ridgeway
"Never before have the people who climb the high mountains of the world seemed so human. But it is this frailty that makes us root all the harder for their success." –*Outside* magazine



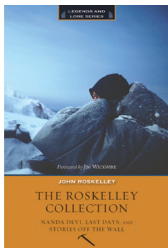
On Belay

The Life of Legendary Mountaineer Paul Petzoldt
by Raye Ringholz
Legendary climbs in the Tetons and beyond were just the beginning for Paul Petzoldt who founded the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and originated many Leave No Trace principles.



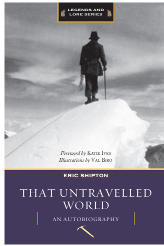
The Mountain of My Fear and Deborah: a Wilderness Narrative

Two Mountaineering Classics
by David Roberts
"David Roberts has already written one excellent book, *The Mountain of My Fear*; *Deborah*, in my opinion, is even finer." –W.H. Auden



The Roskelley Collection

Stories Off the Wall, Nanda Devi, and Last Days
by John Roskelley
Together in one volume for the first time, the writings of one of America's premier—and most outspoken—climbers. Includes three new essays.

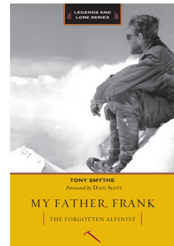


That Untravelled World

An Autobiography

by Eric Shipton

"You can't separate the fast-and-light aesthetic from the wry, ironic, understated brilliance of Shipton and Tilman's narratives . . . no glory for the Fatherland bullshit, no 'first British ascent'—just good days in the mountains with friends." –David Roberts

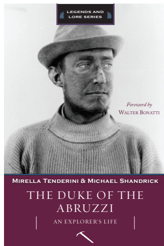


My Father, Frank

The Forgotten Alpinist

by Tony Smythe

This biography of Frank Smythe, written by his son, is "[t]imely, well-researched and written with the authority of a committed climber." –Doug Scott

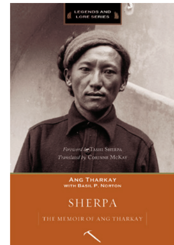


The Duke of the Abruzzi

An Explorer's Life

By Mirella Tenderini and Michael Shandrick

A compelling portrait of the fascinating man for whom the Abruzzi Ridge is named. Luigi Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta, the Duke of the Abruzzi, had a lifelong passion for adventure that took him from the Italian Alps of his childhood to the heights of K2.

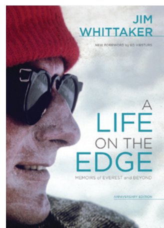


Sherpa

The Memoir of Ang Tharkay

by Ang Tharkay with Basil P. Norton

Never before published in English, *Sherpa* is a curious blend of innocence and insight, of adventure and hardship, offering a priceless glimpse into the lives of the local guides and porters of the Himalaya and Karakoram.



A Life on the Edge

Memoirs of Everest and Beyond

by Jim Whittaker

"Jim Whitttaker is an American adventure hero of the highest order –on the highest peaks and deepest oceans. His story is a timeless tale of inspiration and living life to the fullest—on the edge and at home. He's a model for us all." –Tom Brokaw

MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS is a leading publisher of mountaineering literature and guides—including our flagship title, *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*—as well as adventure narratives, natural history, and general outdoor recreation. Through our two imprints, Skipstone and Braided River, we also publish titles on sustainability and conservation. We are committed to supporting the environmental and educational goals of our organization by providing expert information on human-powered adventure, sustainable practices at home and on the trail, and preservation of wilderness.

The Mountaineers, founded in 1906, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit outdoor recreation and conservation organization whose mission is to enrich lives and communities by helping people "explore, conserve, learn about, and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond." One of the largest such organizations in the United States, it sponsors classes and year-round outdoor activities throughout the Pacific Northwest, including climbing, hiking, backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, camping, kayaking, sailing, and more. The Mountaineers also supports its mission through its publishing division, Mountaineers Books, and promotes environmental education and citizen engagement. For more information, visit The Mountaineers Program Center, 7700 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115-3996; phone 206-521-6001; www.mountaineers.org; or email info@mountaineers.org.

Our publications are made possible through the generosity of donors and through sales of more than 600 titles on outdoor recreation, sustainable lifestyle, and conservation. To donate, purchase books, or learn more, visit us online:

MOUNTAINEERS
BOOKS

1001 SW Klickitat Way, Suite 201
Seattle, WA 98134
800-553-4453
mbooks@mountaineersbooks.org
www.mountaineersbooks.org