



A CAMP 3 WAKE-UP CALL

It is infinitely easier going down. Stuart and I left Camp 2 at 7:10 a.m. on April 15 to return to Base Camp. (Ted opted to stay another night at Camp 2.) We ran into Phil and Sue Ershler at Camp 1 and exchanged pleasantries. Then we descended through the Icefall. I felt great and made good time. I actually beat Stuart down.

It was hot descending through the Icefall and a section of the route had been destroyed by a falling serac. No big deal, we just skirted around it to the right. It would have been deadly, though, if you were there at the wrong time. We reached Base Camp a little before noon. Just in time for lunch.

We spent almost a week in Base Camp. R&R. Then, on April 21, it was time for Ted, Stuart and me to head back up.

This foray would take us to Camp 3. We planned to spend one night there without supplemental oxygen. Little did we know what awaited.

The second trip to Camp 1 was better. I made good time—4 hours, 15 minutes. I was still the last one, but it was a little more respectable. We spent one night there. No headaches. Then up to Camp 2. I was feeling pretty good at this point. I was thinking, “OK, that little mountain is hurdled.”

It was my 45th birthday when we climbed up to Camp 2. The year before I’d spent my birthday with Maggie in France. April in Paris. We celebrated at La Focquettes—a fancy restaurant on the Champs d’ Elysee—a great time and a great meal. Now my waiter was Mingma Sherpa.

In my journal on April 22, I wrote:

I’m extra homesick on my birthday. I wish I were spending it with Maggie. Ah, the yin and yang of Everest. On one hand I want to get a shot at the summit and on the other hand I want my cushy life back! It’s 5:30 p.m. now and it’s gently snowing. I’m about to slip into my down suit and head to the cooking tent. Can’t wait to be in Maggie’s arms. But when?

We rested at Camp 2 on April 23 and on the 24th we ventured out onto the Lhotse Face. It was spectacular. There are fixed lines and it’s quite steep. The face is about 4,000 feet, stretching from 22,000 to 26,000 feet. It reminded me of the fixed ropes on the Denali Headwall, but we climbed up to 22,400 feet—2,000 feet higher than Denali. I was closing in on a personal altitude record, where every step would be

a new all-time high.

On April 25, we rested again. We heard that winds were supposed to come up in the evening so we shored up our tents. As promised, the wind arrived and it was fairly blustery. On the morning of the 26th, we delayed our departure to Camp 3 because of the wind. But then we saw a bunch of Sherpas going up so we took off at about 7:45 a.m. As we headed up the Western Cwm toward the Lhotse Face, the wind picked up in intensity. Before too long, all of the Sherpas had turned around and headed back to Camp 2. If those studs spun, I knew we would, too. So, within an hour of taking off, we were back at Camp 2.

After eating some breakfast in the mess tent, I retreated to my personal tent. That's when the wind started to really increase, and before long we were in the throes of a full-blown windstorm. It was probably gusting to 70 or 80 mph. The main cooking/eating tent got shredded. We all tried to brace our individual tents, which was no easy task with the wind whipping granular snow that really stung our faces. We were in survival mode, at least so far as the camp was concerned.

Ershler, who was with us now at Camp 2, told us to relax. "I've never abandoned a camp yet," he said. "We're going to save this."

It was hard, exhausting work from 11 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Especially since we were at 21,300 feet. We finally secured the campsite as best we could and had dinner at 6:30 p.m. We returned to our individual tents at about 7:30 and the wind mercifully abated, but only for about 30 minutes. Then it was back to ripping. Not quite as bad as in the afternoon, but still bad. I sat up in the tent in my down

suit with everything packed in case the tent came apart. It sounded like gravel hitting the sides, sandblasting the tent. It was dark, except for little sparks from static electricity flying off the nylon. It was pretty weird. Then, finally, at about 2 a.m., the wind stopped.

We were quite haggard from the windstorm, so April 27th turned into another rest day.

From ABC to Camp 3, you had to ascend the final slopes of the Western Cwm to get to the base of the Lhotse Face. It took us one and one half hours and that got us to about 22,000 feet. Then it was 2,000 feet up the steep Lhotse Face to Camp 3. The route was entirely fixed with ropes attached to anchors that use either pickets or ice screws. To ascend, one used an ascender that slides up the fixed ropes, but doesn't slide back. I had practiced this technique with Craig John in New Hampshire. It took us about four and one half hours to go up to the Lhotse Face to Camp 3. Exhausting—steep, thin air and moderate ice climbing.

We got to Camp 3 about 1:30 or so. Camp 3 was a desperate perch in the ice. Tent platforms had been chopped into the steep ice in a terrace-like system. Safety lines were strung from tent to tent. People had gone out to go to the bathroom without being clipped into the ropes or without their crampons and had taken the big fatal slide. There was no margin for error here. You sleepwalk; you're a dead person.

Just before we got to Camp 3 the wind had picked up. Just enough to make our grim perch even grimmer. Ted and I shared a tent while Stuart got his own. The tents were so small they felt claustrophobic. But they were nearly bomb proof against the wind. Still, it was almost impossible to sleep

because of the lack of oxygen and space. Plus, the roaring winds kept the tents flapping noisily all night. I longed for the light of morning so we could get the hell back to Camp 2—or lower. But when the morning of April 29 dawned, the storm, if anything, was stronger.

Wait it out or try to descend the fixed lines in the gale? A very difficult decision. We were getting conflicting viewpoints from ABC and BC, but in the final analysis we owned the decision. I pushed Ted and Stuart to go down because I had a bit of a headache and I was concerned that we—or, to be honest, I—might get sick as time wore on. So, at 2:45 p.m. the three of us put on our gear and headed out into the storm. The visibility opened up for a moment, but quickly closed again. It was a desperate situation at best. Ted and I started down with Stuart right behind us—or so we thought. Ted and I descended a few hundred vertical feet and there was still no sign of Stuart. We were in radio communication with Ershler and Mark Tucker at Advanced Base Camp and Simo at Base Camp. Stuart and I both had a radio. Ted and I didn't know where Stuart was at the time, but we were now fully committed to descending. Finally, Stuart checked in on his radio and said that his glasses fogged up and his hands got dangerously cold putting on his crampons. His crampon straps were a little short and he had to remove his gloves as he wrestled with his crampons. He'd never left Camp 3. Ershler came on the radio and said, very authoritatively, "Stuart, you stay put. Kevin and Ted, you continue down."

Descending the Lhotse Face in a blizzard was incredibly stupid. The winds were gusting to more than 50 mph and visibility was only about 20 feet. It was colder than you can imagine and managing the fixed ropes was tricky business.

Then bad got worse. We were descending and I was in the lead when, to my horror, I found the fixed line buried in the snow. We couldn't see where it came out. Ted and I tried in vain to pull the fixed lines out from under the snow and ice. To unclip and feel our way around would have been suicide. There was no visibility. One slip would have meant certain death. Ted immediately came to the unpleasant conclusion that we must re-ascend to Camp 3. The fixed lines were our "bread crumbs" back to the relative warmth and safety of our tent.

Coming down at that altitude in a blizzard had been tough, but going up was far more difficult. At that point, I started to check my watch. I figured we should be able to get back to Camp 3 by dark. But I was beginning to get more frightened. I had icicles hanging from my eyelashes, mustache and beard. It was face-numbing cold and hard to breathe. At times the gusts were so severe I had to stand with my back to the wind and wait for them to subside. And we were climbing the Lhotse Face, which was steep. At times I had to front point with my crampons to get up the steeper sections. We moved in slow motion.

We reached a section below Camp 3 where the skeletal remains of tents from years past were strewn around. A good sign, but it was still another hour or so from there back to Camp 3. At sea level it would have taken us five to ten minutes, but we were now close to 24,000 feet and it was difficult to move. At that elevation, one step is usually accompanied by four or five labored breaths. The minutes ticked away toward darkness. That was when I realized I'd only eaten a candy bar all day. Plus, I was not drinking enough water. I could understand now how people might give up in these

circumstances. Not me. I was pretty sure Maggie would kill me if I quit. In moments of desperation, I focused on her face. I kept putting one foot in front of the other. We were close to our tent, sleeping bags and stove.

Ted got to the tent first and sat shivering half inside with his crampons still on. I took off my spikes and then helped Ted take off his spikes and boots. He thought his nose might be frostbitten. We were two desperate, cold men and the light was just beginning to fade.

In my journal on April 29, I wrote:

Stuart yelled something from his sealed-up tent. I think he asked us to come get the water he had warmed for us. Ted and I were busy trying to get warm so I yelled to Stuart "could you bring the water over?" He crawled out of his tent and handed us some hot water. I'm not sure he knew how desperate and uncomfortable our situation was. It turns out he made a smart decision to stay (I wish we had). Later he told us he had no idea how hammered we were. Communication at high altitude in between tents with a storm roaring is always problematic. None of us had any fun that night.

The next morning conditions were tough—it was still windy—but visibility was good and there was a better feeling in the air. Now there were only two parties at Camp 3—the three of us and two climbers from Himalayan Guides. Peter Liggett, a British climber, and his partner from the Himalayan Guides expedition pulled out of Camp 3. They knocked on our tents as they went by. "Americans, we're going down now," Liggett said. And then he was gone.

In my journal on April 30, I wrote:

I heard Eric on the radio talking about a fall on the Lhotse Face. He said there was no reason to believe it was survivable. Then he radioed me to tell of the fall. It was someone from the Himalayan Guides twosome. Eric wanted to forewarn us of what we were about to encounter. The news was surreal and I was numb from it. I knew it was a terrible tragedy, but I was tired and I had all I could do to keep it together and descend safely. Nevertheless, there was gruesome evidence of the climber's demise. There were five or six different areas where this poor soul must have bounced on the way down. Terrible images of blood and tissue stains against the white snow and blue ice.

I had to tell myself not to freak out. You could recreate and picture the fall. It had to have been violent. But you couldn't think about it. We had something to take our mind off the awful moment, though. As we climbed down the Face, Ted was quite tired. It was then and there that he was hit with a bout of diarrhea. He had trouble exposing his rear-end to the world—the bulky down suit and sit harness made access difficult. He asked me to help him, which, of course, I did. Modesty be damned. Ted kept his cool and humor in that demoralizing situation. When he was finished, we continued down the Lhotse Face. Stuart was in front of us and had to occasionally pull the fixed lines out of the snow and ice. The bloody reminders of the tragedy were ever present. With only about two hundred vertical feet left, the fixed lines again disappeared. No amount of brute force could expose them. We had to free climb down the last bit.

In my journal on April 30, I wrote:

As we got down to the base of the Lhotse Face, some members from IMG were on their way up to see if we needed any support and to tend to the grim duty of the body. Since Stuart, Ted and I were fine, albeit tired, they passed us and went to work. Dave Hahn and Ben Marshall, who were guiding for the Ford Women's Team, along with Phil Ershler, Mark Tucker, Jake Norton (women's team photographer and guide), and the deceased's climbing partner went to the bergschrund where the body ended up. They recovered his pack and some personal effects for the family and committed his body to the mountain. I understand they performed an impromptu memorial service. Outstanding behavior under a terribly difficult situation.

It had been a scary time for us. Back at ABC we were met by the Ford Women's Team that IMG was supporting, Susan Ershler, and our cooking Sherpas. They greeted us with big hugs. Our whole drama on the Lhotse Face in the storm had unfolded on the radio with everyone listening in. It had been an incredible two days. The kind of days that made you question what you were doing there. When Peter Liggett fell, I immediately thought of Maggie. I also thought about Liggett's family. Before something like that happens, those things are just statistics. You read about it, but it isn't real until it happens in front of you. There it was—right in front of me.