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Left for Dead

My Journey Home from Everest

Written by Beck Weathers

With Stephen G. Michaud

Published by Sphere

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Left for Dead

My Journey Home from Everest

BECK WEATHERS

with Stephen G. Michaud

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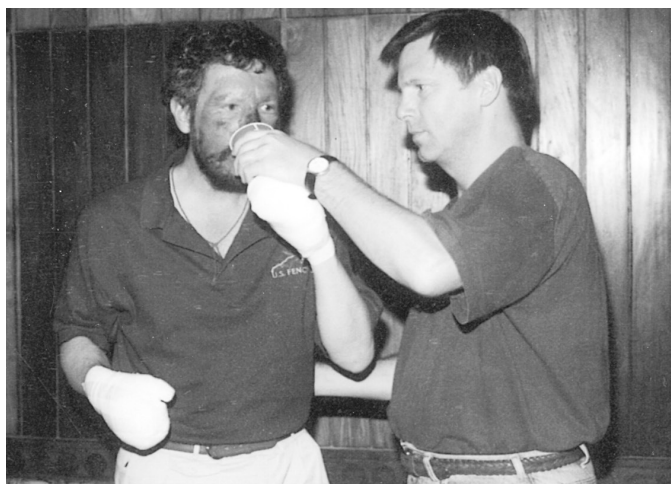
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For Peach, Beck II and Meg, who gave me the vision to stand and rise from the dead; Madan K.C., who showed us the power of a brave heart; David Breashears, Ed Viesturs, Robert Schauer, Pete Athans and Todd Burleson, for keeping me in the brotherhood of the rope; and in memory of Andy Harris, Doug Hansen, Rob Hall, Yasuko Namba, Scott Fischer, Ngawang Topche Sherpa, Chen Yu-Nan and Bruce Herrod—my deepest sympathy for their families.



Beck at Everest Base Camp.



Beck with his brother Dan in Nepal before boarding a plane to return to the United States.

Preface to New Edition

On the 10th of May 1996, high in the death zone of Mount Everest in a terrible storm, nine individuals perished. The following day, one of them was given a second chance at life. I vaguely remember dying on the 10th of May, the cold anesthetized me and I gradually faded away, not knowing at the time that I was going to experience my first death. On the following day, late in the afternoon as the sun was descending toward the horizon, I came back from the dead and opened my eyes. That is a mystery and a miracle which I still don't understand after all these years.



I struggled to my feet, but barely. I was lost. I was almost blind. Both of my hands were frozen. My face had been destroyed by the cold. I had not eaten in three days and I had no water for two. The likelihood that I would find the high camp on my own was just about zero. I remember moving into the wind, praying

for deliverance, but gradually coming to understand that I wasn't going to make it through this thing alive. I looked up. The sun was 15 degrees above the horizon, and I realized that in one more hour as darkness descended again that I would simply kneel and accept the cold moving through me one last time.

If you knew and believed that in one hour you would be dead, what would you think about? What would those last moments hold for you? It was no surprise that at that point that I could see before me my wife, Peach, and my two children. In my mind's eye, they were clear as if they were standing next to me. Maybe your last thoughts will be different, but I can assure you that they will not focus on your successes or any material aspects of your existence.

People commonly inquire where I grew up. The answer, since my new birthday of May 11, 1996, is Dallas, Texas. The drama of the mountain is obviously what people want to hear about but it is far and away the easiest part of the journey. By the time I got back to Dallas, my life was pretty much shattered. My marriage was largely at an end. My relationship with my children was extremely strained and I doubted that I would ever work again. I wasn't sure how I would possibly support my family.



The depression that had driven my life for so many years had disappeared, but I was terrified that it would once again emerge and control my existence. I was somewhat surprised that Peach did not leave me, although that would not have been in her character. She did allow me a year to prove to her that I was

a different person than the man who had left to go to Everest. This was the second miracle: that allowed me to prove to Peach that I was a different individual, and one capable of change. It is one of the major themes of this book.

When I at first was home from the mountain, I had no interest in writing a book. Shortly after the Everest tragedy, other books were published, including Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, which really documented the details of the climb. I simply had no interest in repeating that kind of narrative although I suppose one could easily sell an *Into Thin Air* lite.



In addition, there was always the possibility that I could make a commercial success of a book by picking a villain and attacking him or her to create controversy. There was certainly interest in Peach and me writing a book, but the book they wanted written was one of a warm and loving couple coming together to overcome adversity and be a wonderful example to other individuals. Unfortunately, Peach and I were hanging on by our fingernails and it was not at all clear that we would even survive. We certainly were not going to be that ideal couple. I married Peach in large part because she was a much better person than I am, and very thoughtful to others. I at least had that degree of introspective awareness. Peach married me because I wasn't boring. We certainly both got what we bargained for, although I am not sure that Peach would have been happier to have been more bored by me than I managed to achieve.

Writing a story about Everest from our viewpoint was not be

the kind of usual triumphal mountaineering tale where unique individuals overcome great odds and go on to stand on the summit of a great mountain, having conquered nature. Ours is really a story more of tragedy and the gradual perseverance through that hardship. That ultimately became the reason for writing the book – to demonstrate the price which is paid, surely by those who perished on the mountain, but even more so by those left behind. The parents, the spouse, the siblings, the friends who will have to go on with a hole forever in their lives. In order to write such a book, I had to come to grips with the fact that I would have to portray the truth of my own deeply flawed soul, and that would require a level of brutal honesty which at best would be unflattering, and would expose parts of my life of which I'm not particularly proud.



Mountain climbing as an obsession is a selfish endeavor, and there's just no way to get around that fact. Reading the book after it was finished, I was struck with how completely different Peach and my memories were of many of shared experiences in our lives. Both of us were telling the story as we remembered it, but in many instances, it was as if we were in entirely different universes. My co-author, Stephen Michaud, interviewed and presented the voices of each of the characters in the story other than myself. Any part of the book which contains my voice is written by me. The story portrayed in *Left for Dead* takes us to the year 2000. We were beginning to work through the tragedy of the mountain and the great tragedy of the loss of Peach's brother.



Since 2000, life has gradually returned to normal. On many days I am largely unaware of the loss of my hands as my new reality has become commonplace. When I originally got back from Everest, I could not have imagined that I would ever see this experience as a positive event. But that two-by-four that I had across my face forced me to stop and re-evaluate my life, because I simply couldn't continue living as I had before. The patterns of behavior that had made me successful as a physician were destroying my personal relationships, and I knew that I would have ended my life as a very successful but very lonely individual.

Pathology as I know it is an idiot savant skill practiced in a room by yourself. I have the ability to look at stained human tissue slides, visualize an individual sliced in any of three axes, anywhere in the body, at any age, and recognize whether this is normal or diseased tissue. While that is a fascinating career and an interesting puzzle to solve, it is not exactly what you would call a people profession.

Wonderful opportunities came out of the Everest tragedy that I would never have imagined. I developed a second career as a professional speaker doing keynote addresses. The public speaking takes me into other people's worlds and for the time that I am there with them, I immerse myself into a different profession, a different universe of individuals who live lives that are vastly different from mine and that I find that rather fascinating. I have always been at some level a storyteller. Peach would say that I could talk the ears off a rubber rabbit. It's a

characteristic of Southerners to enjoy storytelling and all of a sudden, one day I woke up and I had a great story.

That's been something I've very much enjoyed over the years.

We now have the experience of having an Everest movie and an Everest opera, both had been finished recently. The Everest movie features Josh Brolin playing myself and I thought that was a particularly good choice, as he is a Texan and would be able to at least understand and replicate the Texanisms which are part of my speech. I think Peach was also very pleased to see Robin Wright as her character.

I had an opportunity to go out to Los Angeles to meet with the cast, director, and producer of the movie at the Chateau Marmont hotel. I don't think when I kept trying to call it the Chateau Marmot, (which is small, furry mountain critter) that they quite appreciated mountain humor, but I didn't quit trying.

One of the things I have had some satisfaction in is meeting with other individuals who have been wounded in a fashion very similar to myself, either through disease or through mountaineering accidents. I try to offer them encouragement as well as to help them embrace the reality of the change in their lives, and to realize that the sudden change is certainly very jarring and difficult but over longer period of times, you get where you really barely notice the fact that you've been crippled. You simply adjust and you go on and are able to live a full and meaningful existence.



The big story of the last years is just going on with our lives. I refer to that as the delightful ordinariness of life. Peach and

I have grown back together and we are gradually becoming a pair of old shoes, comfortable with each other and the vision of growing old together in rocking chairs. Enjoying our children and grandchildren is something we very much look forward to.

Our children, Beck II and Meg, who were early teenagers at the time of the Everest tragedy, are now successful adults. They both went to universities that would not have given me the time of day 50 years ago when I started to college. It is very gratifying to see them do well.

Once the kids left the nest, Peach's hypertrophic mothering instinct was severely challenged. We gradually acquired five cats and four dogs. I often say that you couldn't cuss a cat without getting fur on your teeth. I was getting worried that at some point, we'd be a tease on the 10 o'clock news. You know, 'stay tuned for video of the crazy cat woman of North Dallas.' But fortunately and to our great joy, our first grandbaby, Zara, was born on March 25th of this year. She is an absolute delight with enormous brown eyes and a smile that will break your heart.



As I've grown older, I gradually achieved a state of peace, and no longer define myself by success and goals or really by anything external. I just enjoy the day to day existence of being with my family and my friends and hope that my second death will occur years from now so that I can continue to enjoy living in the moment – and not always believing that I will be happy at some point in the future, a future which never arrives. Life is good.

PART ONE

One

On the evening of May 10, 1996, a killer blizzard exploded around the upper reaches of Mount Everest, trapping me and dozens of other climbers high in the Death Zone of the Earth's tallest mountain.

The storm began as a low, distant growl, then rapidly formed into a howling white fog laced with ice pellets. It hurtled up Mount Everest to engulf us in minutes. We couldn't see as far as our feet. A person standing next to you just vanished in the roaring whiteout. Wind speeds that night would exceed seventy knots. The ambient temperature fell to sixty below zero.

The blizzard pounced on my group of climbers just as we'd gingerly descended a sheer pitch known as the Triangle above Camp Four, or High Camp, on Everest's South Col, a desolate saddle of rock and ice about three thousand feet below the mountain's 29,035-foot summit.

Eighteen hours earlier, we had set out from the South Col for the summit, heartened as we trudged along by a serene and

cloudless night sky that beckoned us ever upward until dawn, when it gave way to a spectacular sunrise over the roof of the world.

Then confusion and calamity struck.

Of the eight clients and three guides in my group, five of us, including myself, never made it to the top. Of the six who summited, four were later killed in the storm. They included our thirty-five-year-old expedition leader, Rob Hall, a gentle and humorous New Zealander of mythic mountaineering prowess. Before he froze to death in a snow hole near the top of Everest, Rob would radio a heartbreaking farewell to his pregnant wife, Jan Arnold, at their home in Christchurch. Another sad fatality was diminutive Yasuko Namba, forty-seven, whose final human contact was with me, the two of us huddled together through that awful night, lost and freezing in the blizzard on the South Col, just a quarter mile from the warmth and safety of camp.

Four other climbers also perished in the storm, making May 10, 1996, the deadliest day on Everest in the seventy-five years since the intrepid British schoolmaster, George Leigh Mallory, first attempted to climb the mountain.

May 10 began auspiciously for me. I was battered and blowing from the enormous effort to get that far, but I was also as strong and clearheaded as any forty-nine-year-old amateur mountaineer can expect to be under the severe physical and mental stresses at high altitude. I already had climbed eight other major mountains around the world, and I had worked like an animal to get to this point, hell-bent on testing myself against the ultimate challenge.

I was aware that fewer than half the expeditions to climb

Everest ever put a single member—client or guide—on the summit. But I wanted to join an even more select circle, the fifty or so people who had completed the so-called Seven Summits Quest, scaling the highest peaks on all seven continents. If I summited Everest, I would have only one more mountain to go.

I also knew that approximately 150 people had lost their lives on the mountain, most of them in avalanches. Everest has swallowed up several dozen of these victims, entombing them in its snowfields and glaciers. As if to underscore its vast indifference to the whole mountain-climbing enterprise, Everest mocks its dead. The glaciers, slowly grinding rivers of ice, carry climbers' shattered corpses downward like so much detritus, to be deposited in pieces, decades later, far below.

Common as sudden, dramatic death is among mountain climbers, no one actually *expects* to be killed at high altitude. I certainly didn't, nor did I ever give much thought to whether a middle-aged husband and father of two ought to be risking his neck in that way. I positively loved mountain climbing: the camaraderie, the adventure and danger, and—to a fault—the ego boost it gave me.

I fell into climbing, so to speak, a willy-nilly response to a crushing bout of depression that began in my mid-thirties. The disorder reduced my chronic low self-regard to a bottomless pit of despair and misery. I recoiled from myself and my life, and came very close to suicide.

Then, salvation. On a family vacation in Colorado I discovered the rigors and rewards of mountain climbing, and gradually came to see the sport as my avenue of escape. I found that a punishing workout regimen held back the darkness for

hours each day. Blessed surcease. I also gained hard muscle and vastly improved my endurance, two novel sources of pride.

Once in the mountains (the more barren and remote, the better), I could fix my mind, undistracted, on climbing, convincing myself in the process that conquering world-famous mountains was testimony to my grit and manly character. I drank in the moments of genuine pleasure, satisfaction and bonhomie out in the wilds with my fellow climbers.

But the cure eventually began to kill me. The black dog slunk away at last, yet I persisted in training and climbing and training and climbing. High-altitude mountaineering, and the recognition it brought me, became my hollow obsession. When my wife, Peach, warned that this cold passion of mine was destroying the center of my life, and that I was systematically betraying the love and loyalty of my family, I listened but did not hear her.

The pathology deepened. Increasingly self-absorbed, I convinced myself that I was adequately expressing my love for my wife, daughter and son by liberally seeing to their material needs, even as I emotionally abandoned them. I'm eternally grateful that they did not, in turn, abandon me, although with the mountain of insurance I'd taken out against the possibility of an accident, I should have hired a food taster.

In fact, with each of my extended forays into the wild, it became clearer, at least to Peach's unquiet mind, that I probably was going to get myself killed, the recurrent subtext of my life. In the end, that's what it took to break the spell. On May 10, 1996, the mountain began gathering me to herself, and I slowly succumbed. The drift into unconsciousness was not unpleasant

as I sank into a profound coma on the South Col, where my fellow climbers eventually would leave me for dead.

Peach received the news by telephone at 7:30 A.M. at our home in Dallas.

Then, a miracle occurred at 26,000 feet. I opened my eyes.

My wife was hardly finished with the harrowing task of telling our children their father was not coming home when a second call came through, informing her that I wasn't quite as dead as I had seemed.

Somehow I regained consciousness out on the South Col—I don't understand how—and was jolted to my senses, as well as to my feet, by a vision powerful enough to rewire my mind. I am neither churchly nor a particularly spiritual person, but I can tell you that some force within me rejected death at the last moment and then guided me, blind and stumbling—quite literally a dead man walking—into camp and the shaky start of my return to life.

Two

The expedition began with a flight from Dallas on March 27. I had to lay over one night in Bangkok before finally arriving in dusty, bustling Katmandu, the capital of Nepal, on the twenty-ninth.

At Tribhuvan International Airport I spied a tall, very athletic-looking fellow waiting in the line to check in. Assuming he was a fellow climber, I approached the fellow and introduced myself. Sure enough, he was Lou Kasischke, an attorney from Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, who'd come to Nepal to climb Mount Everest, too.

Lou and I quickly realized that of all the climbers in our group, we had the most in common. We were both professionals of about the same age and climbing experience, with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. We both were married with kids, and both our wives disapproved of climbing. Over the coming weeks, we would become good friends, as well as tent mates for the expedition.

It took a while to get through customs. Not knowing how things are done in Katmandu, I'd made the mistake of acquiring a visa in advance, which meant I'd stand in a line at least ten times longer than any of my visaless fellow travelers. I was far and away the last person on my flight to finally get out of the airport.

Outside, I joined up with Lou and a couple of other members of our expedition. A van was waiting to carry us through Katmandu's chaotic traffic to our hotel, the Garuda, an open and airy place and a comfortable haven that clearly catered to a climbing clientele. The walls were covered with posters of the world's great mountains. At the top of the stairway, grinning down on us, was a poster of Rob Hall himself.

Katmandu was a busy, hot and friendly place, with numerous tourists and trekkers, plus us climbers. We enjoyed wandering around the city but did no real sightseeing. I put off buying gifts for the children and the usual peace offering for Peach, incorrectly assuming there'd be plenty of opportunity for that when I returned from Everest.

Two days later, Rob Hall put us into a Russian-built Mi-17 helicopter, an enormous, shuddering contraption that bore us unsteadily to the 9,200-foot-high Nepalese village of Lukla, where we would begin our trek to Everest itself.

It takes about a week to walk through Nepal's rugged Khumbu region from Lukla to Everest Base Camp. This is Sherpa country: high valleys and deep gorges, where the natives, about twenty thousand of them, traditionally have been subsistence farmers and hunter-gatherers.

No more, however. The roadless Khumbu is now tourist country.

In 1996, an estimated 400,000 tourists swarmed across Nepal, many of them through the Khumbu, a motley herd of foreigners with fistfuls of hard currency to buy food and shelter, trinkets and entertainment. By far the most important among these visitors were questers such as myself, the deep-pocketed (by Sherpa standards) foreigners who arrive each year to climb Sagarmatha—"goddess of the sky"—as Everest is known locally.

The practical-minded Sherpa have traded their hoes and hunting tools for backpacks to act as porters for the various expeditions. Today, a Sherpa can earn a couple of thousand dollars or more lugging gear up and down the mountain for a typical two-month climbing expedition. That's more than ten times Nepal's annual per capita income.

The downside, of course, is that the work is arduous and dangerous: Memorial cairns erected along the upper reaches of the narrow trail to Everest remind you that one in three of those who've died on the mountain has been a Sherpa.

In his definitive chronicle of our doomed expedition, *Into Thin Air*, the journalist Jon Krakauer would describe me as "garrulous" on the walk in. That's probably charitable. I could have talked the ears off a rubber rabbit. I was eager to be liked, accepted, a member of the group. Under such circumstances, I typically talk a lot. If someone had thrown a Frisbee, I would have caught it with my teeth to please them.

The long trail, which rises ever upward through the Khumbu, is the important first step toward preparing yourself to withstand high-mountain conditions that no organism of more than single-cell complexity was ever meant to endure. It's a pleasant

trek, in any event, or can be if the route isn't choked with trekkers, climbing parties and the Khumbu's ubiquitous yak trains. Every once in a while you come around a turn and there, off in the distance, is this giant rock, nearly six miles high, thrusting its head up above everything around it.

On clear days you can see a steady plume of ice and snow streaming for a mile or so off Everest's summit. This is the mountain's distinctive white banner, highlighted against the cobalt sky, and a signal that the jet stream, with its winds of 150 to 200 miles an hour, is screaming right over Everest, as it does for most of the year. No one tries to reach the top in these conditions.

But at one time in the spring, and once more in the fall, the banner fades. The ferocious winds lift off Everest, offering a brief window of opportunity for you to go up there, try to tag the top and then hope that you get back down alive.

The Khumbu trail leads up out of the valleys past the treeline to the lower stretches of the twelve-mile-long Khumbu Glacier. At an altitude of approximately sixteen thousand feet you encounter the last settlement of any consequence, a pestilential, medieval hellhole known as Lobuje.

One of the ironies of mountain climbing is that in order to achieve the pristine heights, you must inevitably slog through noisome hog wallows such as Lobuje. There is a straightforward explanation for this. Remote settlements like Lobuje were not established with hordes of visitors in mind. Put several hundred humans and the odd herd of yaks together in a primitive hamlet where dried dung soaked in kerosene is the primary fuel, and sanitation a foreign expression, and you get these

characteristically foul trailside settlements. In Lobuje, there was the added frisson of knowledge that the hands that piled up the dung also put out your dinner. Our single hope was to get in and out of Lobuje without contracting any major diseases.

The second I saw Lobuje I realized there was no way I was going to patronize any of its facilities for travelers. Lou and I decided instead to pitch a tent. We had to scout for some time to find a spot both free of offal and upwind of the dung fires.

That season there'd been heavy snow on the trail up to Everest Base Camp, about seven miles beyond Lobuje. Yaks still couldn't negotiate the final stretch, meaning that all gear, equipment and food had to be carried the last few miles on human, mostly Sherpa, backs. Even beneath Lobuje the path was steep and deep with snow. At one turn we saw a bloody yak leg sticking straight out of a snowbank. We were told the limb simply had snapped off as the animal had struggled through the snow.

In Lobuje, we received word that one of our Sherpas had fallen 150 feet into a crevasse and broken his leg while scouting trails on the mountain above us. We all spent an extra day in Lobuje while Rob Hall and one of his guides went ahead to help manage the Sherpa's rescue and evacuation.

Everest Base Camp, where you actually *begin* to climb the mountain at 17,600 feet, is higher than all but two points in the United States, both in Alaska. Interestingly, you cannot see the upper part of Mount Everest from Base Camp. As it is, you are huffing and puffing by the time you get there, and you wonder when you finally arrive, exhausted, just how in the world you're ever going to survive. We arrived on April 7.

The camp is essentially a tent town of about three hundred

transient inhabitants mingling with a bunch of yaks on a glacier. Some structures are built partially of stone, and must be rebuilt each spring due to the constant movement of the glacial ice below. Our cook tent, for instance, had stone walls, as did our dining and storage tents. We also had a first-rate latrine, fashioned from stone, with an opening in the back where our wastes could be shoveled out. This was a necessity under a new rule that mandates all human feces eventually must be removed from the mountain.

This rule, of course, applies only to foreigners. The Sherpas were unconstrained by it. In addition, the feces police there to enforce the rule themselves insouciantly retreated behind any convenient boulder when nature called.

Our facility was easily the grandest in camp, and naturally attracted interlopers. In time, unauthorized deposits became such a problem that a plywood sign with a warning note was placed in the front: "YO! Dude! If you are not a member of the New Zealand Everest Expedition *please* do not use this toilet. We are a way serious bunch of shitters, and will have no trouble filling this thing up without your contribution. Thanks." The message was signed "The Big Cheese," and proved an effective deterrent. Jon Krakauer composed the sign on orders from Rob Hall.

Each climber in our group was assigned an individual tent, a rare and welcome bit of privacy in the otherwise highly communal world of mountain climbing. Our other amenities included a solar-powered satellite phone and fax, and access on three or four occasions to an outdoor shower. To wash oneself under the little dribble of warm water was an exquisite pleasure.

My first fax home from Everest: “If you wish to send me a fax,” I wrote by hand, “you probably need to wait until after 10:00 P.M. Dallas time. The fax here is a thermal unit, and it is too cold to print before then. We had a long approach to the mountain. . . . Lower down the valley the villages were nice, but as you get closer they become *very* primitive. Several of us got the trots. I was lucky and have remained well. . . . The climbing group is strong, and has nice folks. I think I am on the weak end of the team, but am doing OK. I think of you and the children each day. All my love, Dear.”

“Dear Dear,” Peach replied in typescript. “Received your fax last night in the 3:30ish A.M. . . . Scooter [our dog] was certain there was a gremlin on the deck, so he sounded his own special alarm regularly. At 5:00 A.M., I finally put him out in the hall.”

She went on to inform me that our car had suffered a fender bender; that our son, Beck, a member of his school’s fencing team, had advanced to a national fencing tournament; and that our daughter, Meg, had begun taking voice lessons—all events occurring in Dad’s absence, as usual. “We miss you,” she signed off. “Love & Kisses, Peach.”

The quality of the food on a mountain climb is usually a direct function of availability and the willingness of someone to lug it up there for you. Base Camp on Everest, for example, was a busy place and a big market for provisioners. As a result, we enjoyed eggs every morning. But the higher you go and the farther away from civilization you are, the more practical and less palatable the fare becomes.

By the time you get really high (and have just about stopped caring about food altogether), all that you generally consume

are simple carbohydrates and the occasional swallow of soup with cookies or crackers.

The major rigor of Base Camp is boredom; you spend a lot of time getting ready to do things, and a lot of time recovering from doing them, and therefore a lot of time doing nothing. Knowing this from previous excursions, I brought along a favorite author, Carl Hiaasen, to help beguile the hours, plus a little book on learning to juggle, a skill I thought would be fun to master. I became a familiar camp figure, fumbling away in front of my tent. Those of us who had trouble keeping the Sherpas' names straight also used the downtime to take Polaroids of them and then memorize their faces.

For entertainment there was a stereo. Each morning after the Sherpas had burned juniper and chanted their Buddhist prayers, Robin Williams roared "Good Morning, Vietnam!" across the camp, blasting us from our sleeping bags. The rest of the day was rock and roll, plus Indian music from the cooking tent.

We had a couple of parties, for which we broke out the beer. Some people ended up dancing on our dining tent's stone table. It wasn't a mosh pit, exactly, but not unlike one. There were also theme-night dinners, when the food and its preparation and everyone's dress were supposed to complement one team member's salient characteristic.

I'd brought with me several pounds of bodybuilding powder, which I consumed daily to help keep my weight up. So at my theme dinner, the crowd showed up looking like drug dealers. For table decoration, someone produced a mirror and did lines of my powder on it.

By far the predominant physical feature of Base Camp is the

great Khumbu Icefall, which begins just a quarter mile away and stretches up the mountain for two miles and almost two thousand vertical feet.

The Icefall is the midsection of the Khumbu Glacier. It starts above Base Camp at a declivity where the glacier pushes itself out over a precipice, creating giant blocks of ice that tumble downward with an ear-splitting roar. These so-called seracs are the size of small office buildings. They can weigh hundreds of tons. Once inside the Icefall, they continue to groan and thunder along. The whole dangerous mess moves downhill at about four feet a day in the summertime.

Back in 1953, when Edmund Hillary's expedition encountered the Khumbu Icefall on its way to the first successful climb of Everest, team members thought up colorful and highly descriptive names for various stretches of the Icefall. These included Hellfire Alley, the Nutcracker, Atom-Bomb Area and Hillary's Horror. In 1996, we chose to call a giant leaning serac at the top of the Icefall the Mousetrap; no one wanted to be the mouse squashed when the highly unstable Mousetrap inevitably slammed shut. It would snuff out more than just your tender spirits.

In Base Camp, the gargantuan collisions register through your feet as well as your ears, creating in the first-time visitor to Mount Everest the unnerving impression that serial earthquakes and train wrecks are occurring simultaneously just outside your tent.

But that's only the noise.

The reason the Khumbu Icefall concerns you in Base Camp is that it stands between you and the summit. You must go up and

down the thing at least five times, spend about twenty hours in it, like an ant trapped in the bottom of an ice machine, if you are to successfully climb Everest.

One of the Icefall's more challenging features is the light-weight aluminum ladders you use to negotiate its jumble of slippery, cantilevered walls and deep crevasses. Anchored to the shifting ice, and lashed to one another, the ladders have a make-shift look and feel to them. On your five round-trip circuits of the Khumbu Icefall, you cross approximately seven hundred of these ladder bridges.

Your first traverse is a religious experience, certainly not something you can practice at home. When you pass through the Icefall, you try to do so at first light, so you can see, but before the surrounding hills and ice fields can reflect the high-altitude sun's intense radiation directly onto the Icefall, partially melting and dislocating the ladders' moorings, and also energizing the chockablock seracs, loosening them to tip, slide and crash all the more.

It can get extremely warm around Base Camp on a sunny day in May. A thermometer left out in the afternoon sun by the Hillary expedition reportedly registered a high temperature of about 150 degrees.

Above the Icefall's upper edge, and also hidden from your view, is the gradually sloping valley of the Western Cwm (pronounced *koom*), which rises another two thousand feet toward an immense, jagged amphitheater, anchored on the left by Everest, with 27,890-foot Lhotse in the center and, on the right, the third of the three brute sisters that dominate the high terrain, 25,790-foot Nuptse.

The Cwm (Welsh for “valley”) was named in 1921 by George Mallory, who led the first three assaults on Everest, all from the Tibetan side. Mallory, when asked why he wished to climb Everest, quipped famously, “Because it is there.” He may also have been the first person to summit Everest. Then again, maybe he wasn’t.

On June 8, 1924, the thirty-eight-year-old Mallory and his protégé, Andrew “Sandy” Irvine, twenty-two, were seen by Noel Odell, a member of their team, about nine hundred feet below the summit and climbing strongly. Then Mallory and Irvine were swallowed from view by a cloud, and disappeared with no trace.

Mallory’s fate remained a mystery for seventy-five years, until May of 1999, when an American expedition organized specifically to hunt for the famed British climber found his frozen body approximately two thousand feet below the summit, where he apparently had fallen. Whether George Mallory made it to the top before his fatal plunge is an unsettled debate. His altimeter, a monogrammed scarf, some letters and a pocket knife were recovered in 1999, but the Kodak cameras that Mallory and Irvine brought along to record their ascent were not found; nor (yet) was Irvine’s body.

A brief note on my own equipment for Everest: I bought new boots for this trip to replace a set I’d purchased seven years before. They were from the same company, allegedly the same size exactly.

I’d never bought the idea that you need to break in new mountaineering boots; either they fit you from the beginning or they don’t. My old boots had developed holes you could shine

a light through. I didn't think they could withstand one more expedition.

Unfortunately, the new boots rubbed both my shins, which soon were ulcerated. Wounds at high altitude do not heal. I knew I wouldn't recover until I was off the mountain.

One strategy was to keep the boots loose. But no matter what I did, each step was an agony. I had no choice, in the end, but to wrap my shins in bandages, suck it up and learn to live with it. There was no sense in complaining about something I couldn't change.

When you first arrive at Base Camp, you are acutely aware that every motion you make seems to suck the oxygen out of your body. We do not fully understand all the adjustments the human body makes to the stresses of altitude, but we have learned some techniques for acclimatizing ourselves to the high-altitude environment.

If you, the reader, were by some magic instantly transported to the top of Mount Everest, you would have to deal with the medical fact that in the first few minutes you'd be unconscious, and in the next few minutes you'd be dead. Your body simply cannot withstand the enormous physiologic shock of being suddenly placed in such an oxygen-deprived environment.

What a climber must do, as we did over several weeks, is to start at Base Camp, climb up, and then climb back down again. Rest and repeat. You keep doing this over and over on Everest, always pushing a little higher each time until (you hope) your body begins to acclimatize. You basically say to your body, "I am going to climb this thing, and I'm taking you with me. So get ready."

But you must be patient. Climb too fast and you elevate your risk of high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE), in which your lungs fill with water and you can die unless you get down the mountain very fast. Even deadlier is high altitude cerebral edema (HACE), which causes the brain to swell. HACE can induce a fatal coma unless you are quickly evacuated.

There's no way to know beforehand if you are susceptible to these medical conditions. Some people develop symptoms at altitudes as low as ten thousand feet. Moreover, veteran climbers who've never encountered either problem can develop HAPE or HACE without warning.

Similarly unpredictable is a much more common menace, hypoxia, caused by reduced supply of oxygen to the brain. In its milder forms, hypoxia induces euphoria and renders the sufferer a little goofy. Severe hypoxia robs you of your judgment and common sense, not a welcome complication at high altitude. Climbers call the condition HAS, High Altitude Stupid.

My wife offers her own cogent acronym, NUTS, as in Nothing Under the Sun would get her up there in the first place.

The techniques of adapting to altitude are of vital importance to your survival, and not necessarily at extreme altitude only. As recently as twenty years ago, high-altitude sickness killed one in fifty trekkers through the Khumbu each year.

Among the very rarest medical emergencies associated with high-altitude climbing is the one that I unwittingly pioneered, one that nearly killed me. Or it may have saved my life. I'm not sure. There's a sound argument for either point of view.

I'll get to that later.

One of the body's most important physiological adaptations

to high altitude is the millions and millions of extra oxygen-bearing red blood cells that your bone marrow produces in response to chronic oxygen deprivation. The extra oxygen-carrying capacity is critical. Still, you *thirst* for air when high on the big mountains. Breathing is such hard work that 40 percent of your total energy output is devoted to it. Each day you can blow off an amazing seven liters of water through your lungs alone.

That leaves you constantly dehydrated. Also, you can no longer sleep or eat. Once in the Death Zone, above 25,000 feet, the thought of food becomes repugnant to most people. Even if you can force yourself to chew and swallow something, your body will not digest it. Yet you are burning about twelve thousand calories a day, which means you're consuming your own tissue—about three pounds of muscle a day—in order to stay alive.

One of my enduring images of Rob Hall on Everest is of his marvelously plastic face, with character lines etched into it by a lifetime spent outside. If you made the least hint of a complaint or lament, Rob would squint up, looking like a demented Popeye, and ask, "You're not gonna be one a' them moaners, are ya?" I, of course, would reply, "No, Rob, no! I'm not going to be one of those moaners. No, sir."

Besides Rob, our guides on Everest were Mike Groom, a plumber from Brisbane, Australia, and Andy Harris, thirty-one, a Kiwi like Hall, who was climbing and guiding for the first time on a so-called eight-thousand-meter mountain, of which there are just fourteen in the world. All soar into the troposphere within a few hundred miles of Mount Everest.

Take a look at any high-altitude camp and you'll discover that this kind of mountaineering is not a beautiful-body sport. In fact, climbers look pretty much like a bunch of homeless crowding around a steam grate. But Andy was the antithesis of this: a big, good-looking, athletic kid, and a certified mountain monster, despite his lack of experience on the biggest hills.

Then you get down to the grunts, my level. There we find my fellow climber and teammate, forty-two-year-old Jon Krakauer.

I've already mentioned Yasuko Namba, who on this outing would become the oldest woman ever to summit Everest, and the second Japanese woman to do so. By making it to the top that day, Yasuko also would complete the Seven Summits Quest. For these distinctions she would pay an enormous price.

So would Doug Hansen, a forty-six-year-old postal worker from Seattle. Doug had climbed to within three hundred vertical feet of the summit the previous year before being forced to turn back. This year, he was determined, at all costs, to summit Everest.

Rounding out the cast of characters was the baby of our grunt group, Stuart Hutchison, a thirty-five-year-old Canadian cardiologist, and Frank Fischbeck, fifty-three, a Hong Kong publisher of fine books and a gentleman of the old school. Frank provided a measure of civility and dignity to our otherwise pretty raucous group.

Probably everyone's favorite member of our team was Dr. John Taske, fifty-six, an anesthesiologist and Aussie, like Mike Groom. Sharp-witted, with an open and engaging manner, John was a career army officer. Unlike most military physicians, he loved the tougher parts of army life. Nothing made him happier

than an underwater demolition school or hazardous duty of any sort. He even earned a British SAS beret, when detached to the elite commando group, the first physician ever to do so.

John was as good at taking a joke as making one. Doug Hansen and I decided early on that John was romantically interested in a yak we called Buttercup. Since yaks were everywhere, it was easy to keep up a running gag about John and the amorous Buttercup. He seemed to enjoy the raw humor almost as much as we did.

The Australian also had flair. One day he emerged from his tent wearing a sombrero and a red-and-white outfit that looked like a striped sock. He looked more like a cartoon character than a climber. The Sherpas nearly fell out of their boots laughing. If you can wear a getup like that, I guarantee that you're pretty sure of yourself in the company of other men.

Once we were all fully acclimated to altitude—just before our final summit push—Taske supervised a Harvard two-step physiology test for our group. We were curious to see how members of the expedition would handle brief periods of intense effort.

In the test, you repeatedly step up and down about two feet for approximately a minute. Your pulse is monitored before, during and after the exertion. I'd always assumed the mark of the well-trained athlete is a nice, low pulse rate that remains relatively low, even under stress, and recovers quickly afterward.

Two of us, Mike Groom and Lou Kasischke, had exactly this pattern. However, other adaptations seemed to work equally well. Jon Krakauer's resting pulse was approximately 110. Under stress, it promptly plummeted to about 60, then rose

back up to maybe 140. When the stepping stopped, it dropped back to 60 and rose right back to 110.

I had a resting pulse of about 90. When stressed, my pulse went straight up to 170 or 180 and stayed there. Soon as I stopped the two-step, it dropped to 60, and then came right back to 90.

I'm told that this pattern of response is similar to that seen among the Sherpas. Clearly a great deal remains to be learned about how we react to stress at high altitude.

The other team to figure large in the May 10 catastrophe was headed by Scott Fischer, a charismatic, ponytailed free spirit from Seattle who ran a high-mountain guide service called Mountain Madness. That pretty much summed up Scott's idea of how you climb a mountain.

He was backed up by Neal Beidleman, who was not normally a guide but an aerospace engineer, as well as by Anatoli Boukreev, a Russian and one of the world's premier high-altitude climbers.

In the Mountain Madness grunt section there was glamour, New York City socialite and celebrity journalist Sandy Hill Pittman. She appeared in climbing gear in *Vogue* before jetting off to Mount Everest, and filed Internet dispatches to NBC as we climbed the mountain. She may have gone to Everest that year in search of fame, but all that Sandy would achieve was notoriety.

When Sandy got back to New York, the media turned on her, portraying her as shallow, without character. That's unfair. Sandy was a strong and determined climber, and a fairly engaging teammate. She was not the cause of our calamity; the storm was.

There also was Tim Madsen, of the Colorado ski patrol, and the object of his affection (as well as one of my favorite people), Charlotte Fox, a handsome gal who gives lie to the idea that high-altitude mountaineering is strictly a male-dominated, adrenaline-driven, macho sport.

I'd climbed with Charlotte in Antarctica and very much admired her, in part because I knew she could outclimb and outmacho me on the best day of my life.

Another fax home: "We have returned to Base Camp for 3 days of food & rest.... I remain well and have had only a minor dry cough, but no infections or GI problems.... I am convinced that Rob Hall's attention to safety & detail is the best on the mountain.... I miss you terribly. All my love, Dear."

"It was good to know you had a nice adventure up on the mountain with the rest of the kids," Peach typed in reply. She reported that Beck (we call him Bub) had a virus, which threatened his appearance at the fencing tournament in Kansas City. Meg's room was being redecorated. Missy, our other dog, had peed all over the paper the painters had put on the floor. "Take care," she closed. "Love and kisses, Peach."

My final fax: "We go up the mountain day after tomorrow. I have the time to receive a fax from you tomorrow. Please drop me a line. It would also be nice if Bub and Meg could enclose a small note.... All my love, Dear."

Bub politely declined my invitation to drop a note, but the Weathers women didn't.



Peach: "I'm glad you're having an adventure, and I hope your ailments are minimal. The plumber is here. The condensate drain on the air-conditioning unit is plugged.... Much love, Dear."

Meg: "Dadoo. How are we? I'm better now.... We performed today for Mrs. Porter's aunt's birthday. She was 90 years old. For this and my piano recital I was shaking like Missy does when she goes to the vet.... I got my hair chopped off up to my shoulder (when wet) and about a little below my ears when dry.... Mom says, 'Dinner!' Have to be off, Love, Meg."