

Misadventures Below Zero

Up against it in Antarctica

by ERIK DECAMP

translated by MARINA HEUSCH

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve broken my leg. Open fracture.”

“Merde.”

Catherine has fallen some 20 meters on a slope of snow mixed with rocks. I ask the question in the hopes that the accident is nothing but a minor incident, but I know that it is more.

Three days earlier, on January 10, 1996, the Twin Otter of Adventure Networks International dropped us off in the Ellsworth Mountains, a chain of high mountains in Antarctica. We are north of Mount Vinson, at the foot of great, and as yet unexplored, summits. At base camp we have only one tent, a VHF radio to communicate with the base at Patriot Hills, and two *pulkas* (sleds) to allow us to move along the glacier that lines the mountain range. Our project comprises climbing unknown faces, working our way progressively south all the way to the Vinson base camp. We have 21 days of autonomy.

The Antarctic environment is entirely new for us: there is no animal life whatsoever, no plants, and, above all, permanent daytime. We must adapt our sleeping patterns, and we envision a climbing tactic significantly different from the one we habitually employ in the Alps or the Himalaya. We will climb continuously, with time set aside for meals, but no bivouacs. We find the dry cold to be rather agreeable, and we are able to start in clear, still weather. In this impressive calm, we feel the blood pulse in our temples.

On January 11, we choose to climb an easy peak, Mount Viets, in order to orient ourselves in this



Destivelle in Base Camp, with Peak 4111m behind. Erik Decamp

land in which we lack bearings. Everything is about twice as big as we imagine, and we are surprised by the heat and our dehydration. This first taste also allows us to observe the large south face of a peak called "4111" on the USGS map from a better vantage point. It is immense, and quite sobering, but we trace a line of ascent. There is apparently no easy descent from this summit, but the west face appears the least difficult.

4111 will be the first major climb of our adventure (and, in the end, the only one). Informed of the size of the area, we decide to bivouac near the base of the wall on January 12, with the bare minimum, leaving the VHF and the main supplies at our base camp.

On January 13, we leave at approximately 10 a.m. We have chosen this time so the face will be in the shade, because two days before, the sun and heat parched us. We make the approach on foot; it is faster than on skis on the hard-packed snow. There is little to say about the climb itself: 1500 meters beginning with a 900-meter, 50-degree couloir, then proceeding on mixed terrain that is awkward

without being really difficult. Long upward-ascending traverses allow us to find the weaknesses of the face, which proves to be truly grandiose. A route that shouldn't be down-climbed. . . . We rejoice in the magic of exploration.

At about 7 p.m., at the top of the face, we run into an arête behind which an immense slope drops like a toboggan run toward the north-northeast. To our right and left, in close proximity, stand the two summits of 4111. We head toward the westernmost summit, which brings us closer to the descent: a traverse of a 50-degree slope of hard packed snow, followed by a short step of outcropping rocks. From there, we must gain a foothold on a cornice that overhangs the west face. I rejoin Catherine, who has planted the picks of her two ice axes in the snow and passed her rope through a 'biner. She stops a few meters below the summit, and I set up another belay a little to her right in order to have enough room to take the inevitable summit photos, which comprises the cornice that we have



Strange gravity. Erik Decamp



The inevitable summit photo.... Erik Decamp

no desire to climb together at the same time!

Catherine leaves her belay, climbs a bit, and shifts positions according to my request for photos. She is very close to her belay, but has to take herself off to move, and she has no ice axes at hand.

Suddenly, the snow gives way beneath her right foot, and she topples backward down the slope, unable to self-arrest. I have time to see that there is enough slack to catch her fall without ripping out the belay. She has fallen head-first. Twenty meters below, she is able to turn herself upright.

It is time to take stock of the situation—not a joyous prospect.

“Are you bleeding much?”

“No.”

Catherine is suffering. She makes a rapid diagnosis: no artery has been touched, a fracture can be fixed, and the rest seems to be functioning. She thinks of Doug Scott’s odyssey in the Karakoram and doesn’t let herself slip into unconsciousness. Full of recent readings on the Antarctic adventure, I can’t stop from thinking briefly of Shackleton’s words to his team upon the swallowing up of his vessel amongst the ice: “Ship and stores have gone—so now we’ll go home.” I say nothing; black humor has its limits, and we have other worries.

No helicopter can come to our rescue here. We must act quickly and make the right decisions. We look at the toboggan-like northern slope, and each of us imagines what would have happened if the belay had not held. . . .

How should we descend? In order to join up as we had planned with the west face, we would have to traverse the arête—impossible. There really isn’t any choice: we have to climb down our route. This descent route does at least have one advantage: it will be in the sun during the “night” hours. And we know the face.

Catherine is hanging at the end of the rope, and she must get back to the point of the arête where we topped out—some 20 meters’ traverse. She needs her ice axes; I slide them toward her along the rope, trying not to hit her in the face with them. She uses them to place an ice

screw, and I join her. Below us lies a 1500-meter descent through terrain comparable to the north face of the Matterhorn.

“How are we going to do this?”

“I’ll lower you by the rope.”

“And you?”

“I’ll manage.”

We have a 50-meter rope, a few pitons, slings and ice screws—in any case, not what we need to rappel down.

Catherine’s leg dangles lamentably, her foot points in any which direction. The rigid make-shift splint, consisting of an ice ax, quickly proves too painful, and she settles for a polar jacket rolled up and knotted around her leg. . . . Besides, the ax will come in handy.

I lower her 25 meters, and she sets up a belay; I rappel down to her. It is the beginning of a slow advance downward that will take us 15 hours. Catherine has to shield her leg from jolts, and she turns herself sideways to rest her broken leg on the other. She tries to find belay stations every 25 meters so that I can rappel down. For my part, I use all kinds of tricks to rappel or climb down without leaving gear.

We cannot make use of the oblique traverses of the slope, and by climbing straight down we find ourselves on delicate, tricky terrain in which natural plateaus are rare. Soon, length by length, I lower Catherine with the rope, she sets up an anchor (at least enough of one to protect herself) and I downclimb. We knock off half the mixed terrain in this fashion.

We would have to traverse right in order to reach the top of the large couloir; otherwise, we would be stuck on very steep slabs. We are forced to resort to pendulum swings: with Catherine at the belay, I traverse some ten meters, set up a belay station, and she swings until she reaches me. We repeat this procedure until we reach the opening of the couloir. After this, we still have to climb down the 900-meter couloir.

We instinctively divide up our roles. Catherine concentrates on her pain, on the necessity to keep a stiff upper lip. She never gives in to panic. At the end of the rope, she still finds the energy to belay me. I listen for her words, anxious that I will no longer hear her; what would I do if she faints? In order to retain the concentration necessary to ensure her survival, I cannot make much room for compassion. Catherine takes care of herself, I take care of myself, we each have confidence in the other. Facing fatigue, I stuff candies in her mouth to give her some sugar.

“Do you think I’ll make it?”

“Of course!”

What else can I say? I wish to be reassuring. Catherine starts to worry about her “healthy” foot: restrained by the harness in which she is permanently suspended, she can feel frostbite coming on. The idea of serious frostbite, of amputation, haunts her. We must act quickly. The couloir is not difficult, the rope lengths follow one another rapidly. Thumbs-down—set up a belay. She plants an ice ax, a super human effort. Thumbs-up—the belay is set. I back down to join her and set up my belay. As soon as I am ready, she takes out her belay and lets herself down. In order to gain time and energy, she only uses her ice ax to secure herself—almost too sparingly once or twice When she gets going, she only has to shake her ax with a little force, and out it comes—once or twice, a bit too early.

“Hey, I wasn’t ready!” She must quickly lean on the head of the ax to keep it from coming out completely. . . .

At last we are on the flat terrain of the glacier. During the final few hundred meters, I am haunted by mistakes (“*This is not the time, we’re almost there*”). It is now 11 a.m. Catherine, sit-

ting in the shade, is cold. I have to go get a sled at the tent—two hours, there and back. She is afraid she might snap. She will hold on by moving constantly in order to avoid freezing, to avoid giving in. I run off, then run and walk, then walk, to get the sled and as much down (sleeping bags, duvet jackets) as possible, as well as some medication.

Catherine, wrapped up in the duvet, is shaking, but we are almost euphoric. In the tent, we take refuge in the warmth, we drink and eat and sleep. I set the alarm; I have to try and contact Patriot Hills tonight with the VHF. . . which is at base camp. *Merde*. I leave at 6 p.m., skiing down to base camp. There I try to make radio contact, but without success. I return with the radio and more supplies.

As soon as I arrive, I sense a new wind. It quickly swells to a storm during the next day, and we have yet to reach Patriot Hills. Without them, no rescue is possible.

Catherine is still in pain. We don't have any strong analgesics; even if we did, Catherine might not have taken any—it's critical that she hold on and not let go of herself. She settles for antibiotics.

Balance-sheet: the fracture, which we sprinkle with betadine before dressing and stabilize somewhat in a splint put together from our thermarest mattresses; a mangled elbow (quite an impressive butchery) receives the same treatment; some superficial facial wounds; a shoulder that looks somewhat out of whack but moves fine. We do not touch the more serious wounds once they have been dressed. The frostbite does not seem to be too serious.

The storm rages. I make snow walls around the tent and make something to eat while waiting for it to abate. On the evening of January 15, we are finally able to contact Patriot Hills. I stretch the wire antenna some 15 meters between two skis, fearing that the wind might somehow move them, breaking the antenna. I speak with the doctor, who simply recommends that we double the dose of antibiotics. Catherine is "doing fine."

In the meantime, the euphoria of rediscovered safety has left us. The wind is howling; it distorts the tent. During the night of the 15th and into the next morning, the hoops twist to the point of almost ripping the sheeting. I hold them in place for six hours to avoid their destruction. We spend frequent periods of time with our eyes fixed on the altimeter to watch for the slightest indication of improvement in the weather. Catherine is "doing fine," but we are afraid.



Back in Base Camp. Erik Decamp

The plane does not arrive until 4 p.m. on the 16th. It brings us back to Patriot Hills, where a doctor assumes responsibility for Catherine. From there she is evacuated the following morning to Punta Arenas, where her fracture is operated upon. . . . Six days have slipped away between the accident and the operation.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Ellsworth Mountains, Antarctica

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Viets, South Face, January 11, 1996 (1200 meters); "4111," South Face, January 13-15, 1996 (1500 meters, V 5.10 TD) Erik Decamp, Catherine Destivelle