

# A TIME TO LIVE, A TIME TO DIE

*Tragedy on the southeast ridge of Mount Everest*

by CHARLOTTE FOX

In August of 1995, Neal Beidleman, an acquaintance in Aspen, approached me with an idea: his friend, Scott Fischer, was putting together a trip the next spring to Mount Everest. At first I was completely put off. I had been on a couple of commercial climbing expeditions and preferred to mount my own, with my own friends. Mount Everest had never been a goal of mine, even though I'd already climbed two other 8000ers. I regarded it as too much of a circus and overly popular with "wanna-bes." Neal assured me that for him to even be involved as a guide on something this huge (logistically, as well as literally), he first made sure Scott intended to sign on only the most competent of clients. Well, shucks, as long as you put it that way, Neal. . . .

A couple of weeks later I ponied up a deposit. I thought, "Why not?" I'd turn 39 around summit day, and, if ever I were going to attempt to climb the highest mountain in the world, I reckoned it would have to be soon. And to tell the truth, I was not all that attracted to the idea of taking on the planning of an expedition of that magnitude. Winters in Aspen are exhausting enough; I would have my hands full skinning up to train and ski patrolling at Snowmass Ski Area five days a week from Christmas until the first day of spring, when we left for Nepal. I was happy to leave the logistics to Scott.

By the time I was ready to leave, my training partner, fellow patroller and sweetheart, Tim Madsen, had signed on, too. Though Tim had never climbed anything higher than a Colorado 14er, both Neal and I knew him as an exceptional athlete who was born and raised in the mountains around Aspen. He may not have had as an impressive climbing resume as many, but he had probably spent more days in the mountains over a lifetime than any of us. He would just have to see how well he acclimatized when he got there. Tim was willing to chance it, and on our recommendation, Scott became willing to give him a chance, too.

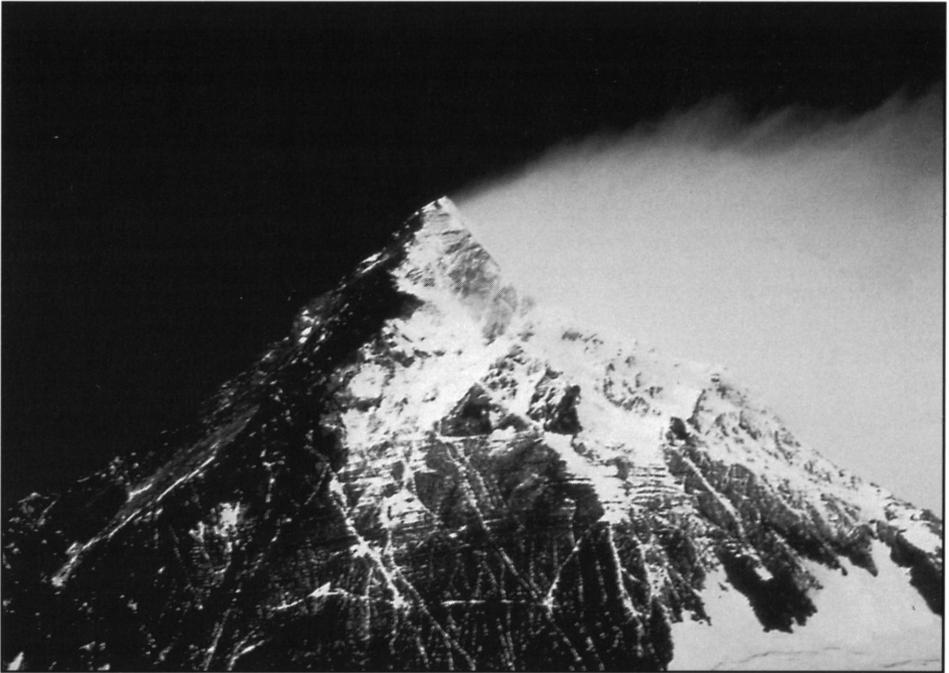
In Kathmandu we dealt with the usual logistical hassles and took care of last-minute shopping. Finally we were helicoptered into Syampoche, a tiny outpost above the well-known jumping-off point of Namche Bazaar. To many, Nepal's Khumbu region *is* the Himalaya. Even though the area is very affected by foreigners, to walk through villages, the names of which one has only seen on a map, amongst mountains that surpass legend, is still an incredible feeling. We took our time walking in, adjusting to camp life and new personalities, getting used to the ever-thinning air and allowing our senses to tune in to the rhythms of the mountains. Anticipation became reality and the classic view of Everest from Kala Pattar just a day before Base Camp sobered us up to what we had worked toward for almost a year.

There were 11 expeditions on the south side of Everest in the pre-monsoon season of 1996. The Nepalese government had promised to limit the number to four, but with seven more \$70,000 checks waiting to be put in their coffers, they couldn't say no. Organizing and executing our whole show were Scott, Neal, and the Russian high-altitude wizard Anatoli Boukreev. Included, too, was a merry band of climbing Sherpas, headed by rising altitude star Lobsang Jangbu Sherpa and camp staff sirdar Nima Sherpa. We lived in a tent city of some 500 people, including climbers and Sherpa staff. It was a circus after all!

The climb itself went as a classic expedition siege. As clients, we were expected to do whatever it took to prepare and save ourselves for the final push to the top. Weeks marched by. We

went through rounds of climbing ever higher on the mountain, recovering in Base Camp and drinking Starbucks coffee. The infamous Khumbu Icefall (fixed seasonally into a ladder highway by a staff of Sherpas who are paid by each expedition to use it) was proclaimed by the veterans as being in the best shape anyone could remember. Camps went in traditional spots, with Camp II even having a cook tent, eating tent, and resident cook. For most expeditions, Sherpas did the lion's share of the work, portering loads, fixing lines, and setting up camps. I mentioned to Neal that I felt awfully pampered. "This is what you signed on for, Charlotte," he replied. "Enjoy it for what it's worth."

Though the winter winds still raged high on the mountains, the April weather in the lower camps remained benevolent. Everyone seemed to be feeling and performing well, with minor glitches here and there—everyone, that is, except Tim. Every trip up on the mountain resulted in brain-splitting headaches that eventually ended in his not only going down to base camp, but walking a day down



*The southeast ridge of Mt. Everest above the South Col, as seen from Lhotse. Anatoli Boukreev*

to 14,000 feet to recuperate at the Himalayan Rescue Association Clinic at Pheriche. It was looking like "boy wonder" was starting to wonder why he ever decided to go suck air in Nepal. One other member of our team—Dale Kruse, also from Colorado—was being affected, too, and he had plenty of experience at altitude. So goes the game.

Climbers have been known to have egos to go with their strong personalities. As you can well imagine, this was certainly the case here. As the summit bid drew closer, people became more and more self-assured that they could "tick this thing." The expedition leaders were pumping up the clients, and the clients were pumping up themselves. "If Dick Bass could do it . . ."

I had been struggling with an unprecedented bout of exercise-induced asthma and a lung infection, but thanks to the miracle of modern medicine, I thought I had both under control. I



*The conga line at 7500 meters before the Yellow Band. Anatoli Boukreev*

believe in the theory that the more you climb at altitude the more your body “remembers” how to deal with it. Though I hadn’t spent a night at Camp III because of the infection, I hoped my past luck at altitude would get me there and beyond. In addition to his headaches, Tim had aided in the rescue of a very sick Sherpa, and had been no higher than Camp II. Nonetheless, he was going to try for the summit against our expedition doctor’s recommendation. Two of our group—Dale and Pete Schoening—decided not to make the bid due to health reasons. On May 6, the remaining nine of us left for the big push.

We worked our way up through Camp II with one rest day to Camp III, where the first fatal accident occurred. To avoid over-crowding of the route, all the expedition leaders held a meeting in base camp and decided who would go up when. It was determined that Rob Hall and Scott Fischer’s groups would go for the summit on May 10—traditionally a good weather day. Though they were not included, a small expedition of Tiawanese with Sherpas decided to try for the top that day as well. One of the Tiawanese went out to do his business on the morning of May 9 in only his inner boots. What resulted was a high-speed slide down the Lhotse Face into a crevasse. He was rescued by his team and brought down to Camp II, but died there of internal injuries.

The death was unbeknownst to the rest of us, who continued on through the Yellow Band, across the Geneva Spur to Camp IV at the South Col. That day, the jet stream blasted the upper mountain and we crawled gratefully into our quivering shelters with the queasy feeling one gets before any summit day. We were at around 26,200 feet—the “death zone.” We would spend only enough time at Camp IV to rest and hydrate. Most of us had gone on Os somewhere between Camps III and IV. Only if the wind died would we leave for the summit at midnight.

And die it did, as we had seen it do in the late afternoon and early evenings of the past few weeks. Our five-some in a North Face Himalayan Hotel took turns dressing, and after a couple of hours’ rest we emerged to a calm, cold evening bathed in the surreal light of a half moon. With the newly donned down suits and oxygen masks, it was difficult to tell who was whom anymore.

I set off up front with Neal; my focus was ahead in the light of my headlamp and drawn up to the bobbing beams of Rob Hall's team, who had left a half hour before us.

We quickly caught up to the Hall group and experienced frustration as we backed up behind the slower climbers. After we ascended the first fixed line and arrived at a natural bench, we were able to get around some of the slower ones.

Dawn came, and the conga line neared the Balcony. It was one step up, two steps back in the four inches-plus of snow on top of loose down-sloping shale. Occasionally, grunting up a small rock step completely took my breath away. In the growing morning light I was conscious of the fact that, though the going was hardly technical, I could step or slide off of the route to my destiny at any time. Just below the Balcony was an old, half-buried fixed line, the kind we would see more of further up. Things started to slow down.

At the Balcony we had our first change of oxygen (each of us carried a second bottle). Water, already freezing in insulated sleeves within our down jackets, was gulped, bladders emptied, and an occasional "Gu" choked down for nourishment. The route narrowed from the previous rock and snow face to a ridge and dog-legged right toward the summit. The top looked so close. The line moved on, but slowed again as we arrived at sections needing fresh fixed rope. Sherpas from both teams were to have left two hours before the clients the previous evening to take care of this, but for some reason had not. Neal and a Sherpa from Rob Hall's group fixed the first section. Then, eventually, it was up the ever-narrowing ridge to the South Summit. We were within reach of the summit! But staring toward the Hillary Step, my heart sank: in my dazed state, it looked daunting, and the drop-offs on either side of the ridge between the South Summit and the Hillary Step were even more so.

It turns out I had plenty of time to contemplate our next move. We waited again while more people arrived at our small sheltered nook under the South Summit. All were due for a last bottle of oxygen at this point (which we would use to summit and descend to the South Col) to be delivered by Sherpa staff. I recall some discussion there about the possibility of more rope to fix the narrow ridge and the Hillary Step. After waiting for more than an hour the oxygen bottles finally arrived and someone produced just enough rope for Anatoli to fix the Step; the ridge up to it had some old exposed lines that would have to suffice. One mis-step here and it was a one-way ticket into either Nepal or Tibet.

After more waiting for Anatoli and the Rob Hall "client," Jon Krakauer, to fix the line, the rest of us slowly moved off the South Summit. The snow on the ridge was funky and, when I pulled out my ax, I found I had punched a view through to Tibet. At last we huffed and puffed one by one through the strenuous, but not difficult, Step, and emerged onto the broad, slanting summit ridge. I remember Lobsang passing me. Further on, beneath the summit, he assisted Sandy Hill, who lay bewildered-looking in the snow not far from the top. In front of me, Mike Groom, a Hall guide, kept stopping and looking behind, keeping an eye on the slow-motion client Yasuko Namba, whom I had to pass on the narrow ridge before the Step. Martin Adams, another of my team, came by me on his way down and stuck his hand up with the five fingers splayed. "Five minutes, Charlotte, just five more minutes!" With this, I grinned behind my oxygen mask and inwardly rejoiced. We had taken nearly 14 hours to go 2,800 feet!

Then the never-ending ridge ended; there was a group of people on a small crest of snow. . . and nothing else. Though a stiff wind was blowing, the sky was a deep blue, and there was a 100-mile view all around. I felt more relief than elation that I had arrived. . . and a deep fear that this was not a place meant for humans. We were hanging it *waaaaay* out. I checked my watch: 2:15 p.m.—close enough to the 2 p.m. turn-around time I remember being agreed upon in camp.

When Tim arrived behind a slow pack, I told Neal I was going down. There wasn't much time for an extended celebration. But Neal wanted to keep our group together. Minutes ticked by as we waited for the last of our team to arrive, have their photographs taken, and shake hands all around. I didn't look at my watch again when we finally did leave and, because of the timeless feeling that accompanies high-altitude climbing, I have no idea how long we were on the summit.

It was on the way down that I first noticed clouds blowing up from below. We had seen this phenomenon often enough in the last month—the clouds rose in the afternoon from the humid lowlands of Nepal and rolled up the Khumbu Icefall toward the Lhotse Face. These clouds looked a little more black and menacing, but at least we were headed down. One by one, we climbed back down the Hillary Step, tiptoed across the narrowest part of the climb to the South Summit, and just when I thought we could really make some time to the Balcony, Sandy, just behind me, went from tired and slow to *stop*. She told me to leave her. I encouraged her to find the strength to keep going, the best reason being her son, Bo. She struggled, but collapsed again, clinging to a thin piece of line. “Charlotte, get out the hypodermic.”

Wow! I had forgotten that Ingrid Hunt, our expedition doctor, had given us all a shot of dexamethasone, a steroid effective in reducing cerebral edema and a last-ditch chance for survival in situations such as this. Sandy rolled over. I unzipped the rainbow zipper on her down suit, and though I'd never given a shot before, jammed that baby in right through her pile into the big muscle just over her buttocks as Ingrid taught us to do in Base Camp. Sandy didn't even flinch.

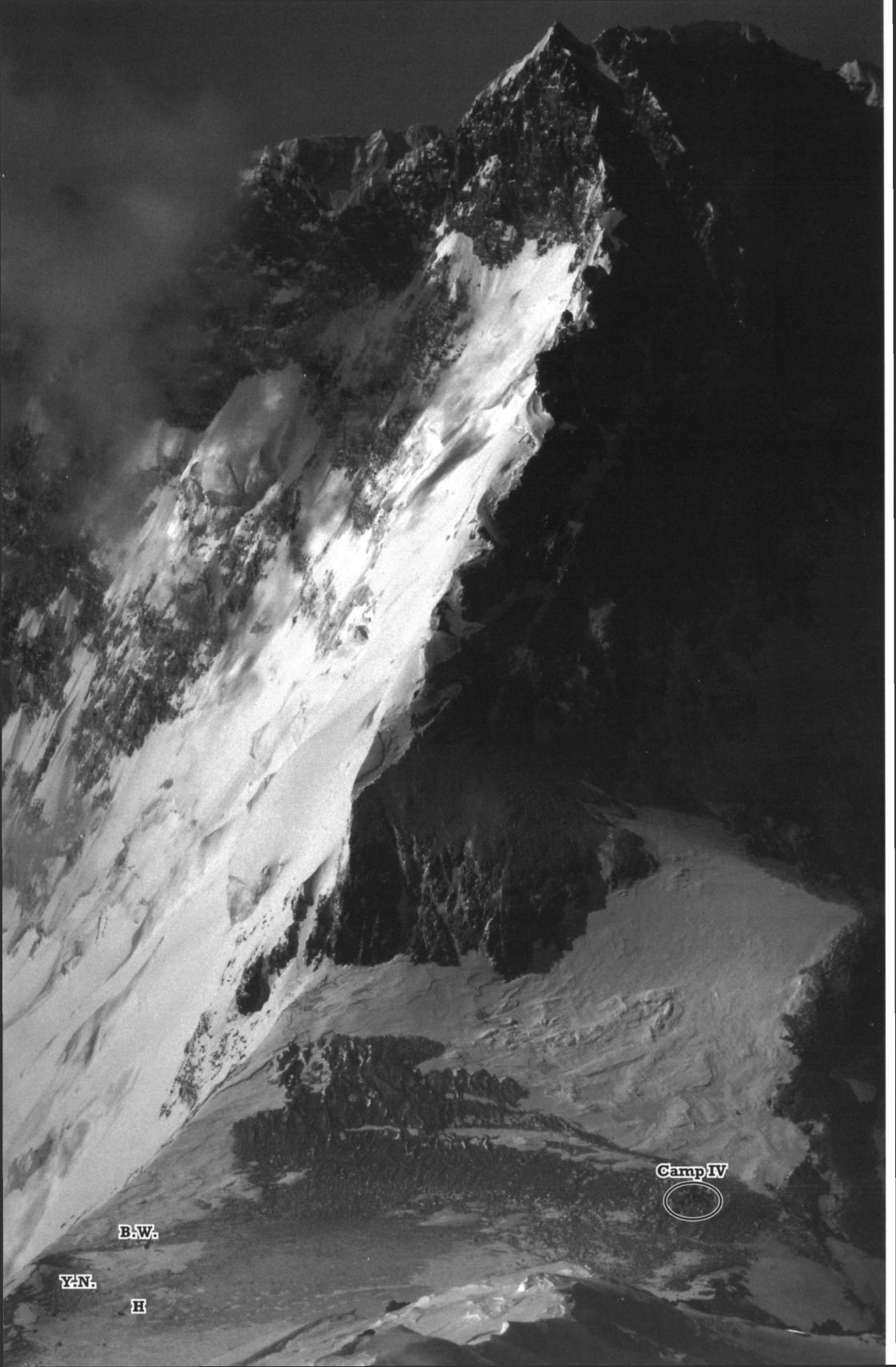
In five minutes or so Sandy recovered enough to be assisted down by Neal, who had by then caught up to us with most of the rest of our group. Only Scott remained behind with Lobsang. We passed Scott a few minutes below the summit while he was still on his way up and exchanged weak high fives. None of us knew he was hurting. All he said to Neal in passing was that he was “so tired.” Weren't we all! And at this point he was still moving—all that counts. Our little group continued its way down to the Balcony, where I caught up to Klev Schoening, who was just leaving to follow Martin down the mountain.

“Neal may need help with Sandy. Can you wait a few minutes?” I said to Klev. Behind Sandy and the rest of our friends we could see Scott, still stumbling along in the company of Lobsang. At this point I checked my watch and took the opportunity to change my headlamp battery. It was six p.m.—one hour until dark. We all plunged off the Balcony together into a surprising six to eight inches of new snow. The storm had been more serious than we realized. Suddenly, there was an alarming crack and flash—thunder and lightning, above 8000 meters. Terrifying.

At last we made our way to the final fixed line. Camp IV could be seen not far below us. But, as we were nearing the end of the rope, everyone in our group became backed up as Mike Groom attempted to assist Yasuko and teammate Beck Weathers. They were sitting in the snow, immobile. Neal proceeded to help Yasuko, while Mike took Beck. At this moment the storm closed in on us and sealed in the darkness of night.

I took one last look at the tents—so close—and then kept moving with the others. We spent an interminable time descending carefully in the darkness and increasing wind, spreading out individually in our search for camp. The ground flattened out; we were walking among oxygen bottles, but still no tents. Neal had the presence of mind to gather the dispersing people before anyone was lost.

Suddenly I felt myself close to an empty void. The ice dropped away into blackness and swirling snow. Neal sensed it, too, and screamed to everyone to back off and huddle down right



B.W.

Y.N.

H

Camp IV



where we were. We would try to outlast the storm in the hopes that it would break up early in the evening as it had in previous nights and we could find our way back to the tents.

Then began the longest night. It is estimated that the temperature dropped to around  $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$  and the winds funneling over the South Col between Lhotse and Everest increased to a fierce 70 miles per hour. We had had little sleep and not much to eat or drink for two days, we were out of oxygen, and we had just summited the highest mountain in the world. We were fried. How would we survive?

Klev and Tim, as well as Neal, had been keeping track of our group of 11 in the search for the tents. Now they got everyone together on the hard ice to conserve warmth and maintain a basic energy level with continued movement. The two began a cheerleading routine that kept many going through the long wait. "Charlotte, beat on Sandy's back!" Tim would yell at me. "Are you beating on Sandy's back? Answer me!"

At this point, my energy level began to wane. I was good to the tents from the summit, but could I make it through a night in this weather in my depleted state? I thought not. The effects of the dexamethasone were apparently wearing off of Sandy; her efforts to keep moving were slowing, as were mine. Finally, we just lay together in a heap and waited, I hoped, for that warm, fuzzy feeling that comes with hypothermia, and death.

Hours passed. Miraculously, the storm abated. Stars emerged from the spindrift and the hulks of Lhotse and Everest became evident. Klev shouted that he recognized where we were and where the tents should be. Half-frozen, we staggered to our feet and made an attempt to shuffle off. My knees kept buckling and I couldn't seem to make headway. If only I'd not given up hope and tried to keep my body warm and moving! I sank slowly into a heap again, telling Tim to go



May 12: Tim Madsen descends from Camp II while the winds still rage on the southwest face above. Charlotte Fox

to the tents. His reply was that he was feeling pretty good and would stay with me. The group moved off without us; they promised to send back help. Soon after, we heard Sandy calling out in the darkness. She wasn't doing well, and had to crawl back to Tim and me. Also present, and now ambulatory, were Yasuko and Beck.

Tim turned his attention to the four of us. With the hope that we were going to get out of this thing alive, Sandy and I took to slapping each other and working our arms and legs as never before. We had to be able to walk. My hood was still tightly drawn around my face as protection against the intensely blowing wind, so I was only dimly aware of Beck and Yasuko beside Sandy, Tim and me.

It must have been a couple of hours more of shaking, slapping and screaming into the wind from the pain of the cold that Anatoli suddenly appeared in my headlamp beam. He dropped a bottle of oxygen in front of Sandy and said, "Come with me." He happened to grab me first and I struggled to my feet, willing my legs to work this time. They did. My arm in his, I stumbled along beside him through the moonscape of the South Col until we were suddenly at the tents of Camp IV. I had the weird sensation of my eyes freezing inside my head; we were walking directly into the biting wind. Anatoli did not want me to stop to adjust my goggles. We weren't going to stop for anything. He returned to lead in Sandy, with Tim following behind.

Anatoli had made one foray out before he found us, and, after getting better directions from Neal back at the tents, had been successful thereafter. After three trips out to, as it turned out, the edge of the Kangshung Face, he left it to the other members of Rob Hall's team to help Beck and Yasuko back to the tents of Camp IV. He had done as much as he could, and, in the end, much more than anyone else. Tim told me that, while Anatoli's efforts to bring us in were truly heroic, he had figured out how to get us in himself. Anatoli beat him to it. I won't split hairs.

It was not until the next morning that I asked about Scott. Because of darkness and blowing ice, I hadn't been able to discern who was in our huddle. I was shocked to learn that Scott was still not far above us on the mountain, and that Beck and Yasuko lay near death at our bivy site.

Knowing that the fresher Sherpas were attempting to rescue Scott, it was all the rest of us could do to prepare ourselves to go down. The torpor was incredible; finding and putting on a boot took half an hour. Finally, supplied with new bottles of Os, we emerged from our cocoon into the face of that bitter wind and began our descent. It was a long day to Camp II, where more news came to us of the others still on the mountain and how rescues were going. The wind blew plumes of snow off the upper mountain. Things didn't look good.

Back in Base Camp on May 12, I took off my boots to find two blistered big toes. Everyone else also had suffered some frostbite from our evening out. We looked like a M.A.S.H. unit, with various appendages bandaged and press helicopters flying around above us, fresh on the scent of disaster. We watched amazed as Beck and the Tiawanese climber Makalu Gau were evacuated from Camp I at 20,000 feet by a Nepalese Army helicopter pilot\*.

The news trickled down that Rob Hall had perished at the South Summit while staying with his ill client Doug Hansen. Andy Harris apparently walked off the Lhotse Face in a cerebral edemic haze. (It was later revealed that Andy had been with Rob and Doug. Apparently, he walked off the South Summit area where Doug disappeared as well.) Makalu Gau was brought down by Sherpas after spending the night beside Scott. Scott was too far gone, incapacitated by cerebral edema, to be assisted down. After Makalu's evacuation on the afternoon of the 12th, Anatoli went up to check on Scott. He was dead. The Russian covered his face with his jacket and left him to lie forever on the mountain.

\*Lt. Col. Madan Khatri Chhetri made the highest recorded helicopter landing in Himalayan history with this rescue.

I helicoptered out of Base Camp a few days later with Mike Groom and his expedition doctor to Kathmandu. Mike had frostbitten his foot stumps—his toes had already been amputated from previous 8000-meter climbs—and neither one of us could walk out. In Kathmandu we met a frightening barrage of press that has scarcely let up to this day.

In short, logistical problems plagued the summit teams from the start. Lines were not fixed by Sherpas, who were to leave (and did not) two hours earlier than the clients. Slower climbers created congestion on the entire route. Oxygen bottles were not delivered on time to the South Summit by Sherpas. Leaving the summit late in the afternoon sealed the fate for many.

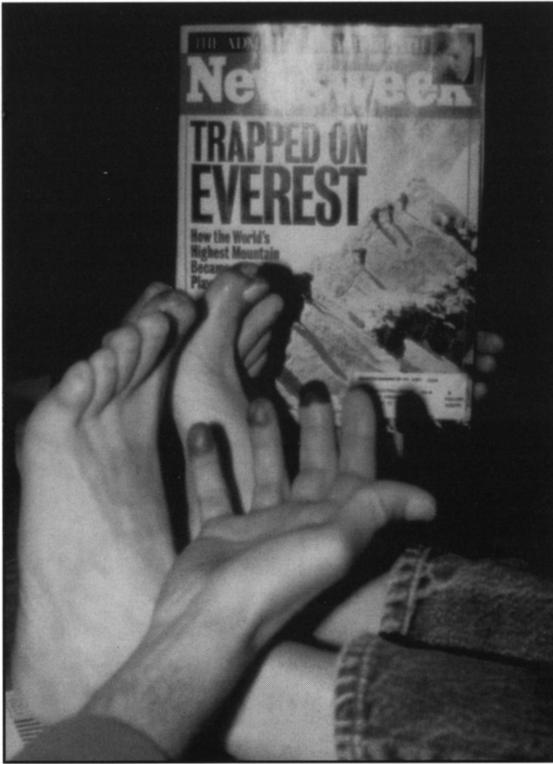
When things go bad at altitude, they go real bad real fast. Depleted oxygen, strength, and therefore, judgment, combined with nightfall, strong winds, and hypothermia, on top of many individuals' personal epics—all above 8000 meters—contributed to the number of deaths that night and into the next day.

There were many people at Everest Base Camp on the Nepalese side of the mountain in the spring of 1996, each with his or her own reasons to climb the South Col route to the summit. Perhaps, in the end, all that will be remembered is that many did not deserve to be there and the few who did were just in the business of bolstering egos to the tune of some \$65,000 each. It is not so much my purpose to rehash the various scenarios thrown out at the public as it is to offer an account from someone who was actually there. I have to stress that, when climbing at extreme altitudes, even on oxygen, perceptions of time and space are affected. Figure in that everyone has good days and bad days, and the fact that this is exaggerated up high. Add in also the fact that different people experience the same events differently at different times. Figure in, too, the press's contrived controversy, and you get anything and everything as to what "really happened."

Most of the climbers, even on the commercial expeditions, had some sort of financial or material backing. The three resident computer Web sites were part of this. They spurred a world-wide interest in mountaineering as there had never been before, allowing Everyman to be a part of an expedition to the highest point on earth. As ridiculed as some people were for the amount of energy they put into their Web sites, the sites were a hit. And, for better or worse, they largely precipitated the avalanche of press that occurred later. An audience was hooked on the story, so once the Web sites closed down in the aftermath of the tragedy, all the press had to do was take the reins—and the money—and run. But to make it interesting—the details of climbing a mountain apparently weren't interesting enough—the press needed to elaborate on fact to generate a more interesting story. And everyone had an angle. As you may have noticed.

It doesn't bother me that some of our Sherpas and guides did not use oxygen. They had enough experience at altitude to know their limitations. These are exceptional people. Climbing at altitude is more physiology than attitude, and one's decision to use oxygen is only realized through experience and judgment. On the other hand, I'm tired of hearing armchair mountaineers mock the use of oxygen. It may not be the purest form of mountaineering, but in lieu of style, you just may get to a high summit. And back.

In the end, the storm, the deaths, and the resulting bad press undermined what was a great day to most of us. A bunch of people went climbing, each with his or her own reasons. There were no heroes or villains. On our team, people helped out and filled in during the summit day and subsequent night to the best of their abilities. Everyone was down at some point and up at another



*The aftermath.* John Freeman

er. The team made an effort on everyone's behalf and then some, helping not only our own members, but Rob Hall's group and the Tiawanese. It is not any one person's fault that a domino effect of problems began, nor was it any one person's strength that saved the night.

It is humbling to still be here when the highly talented and experienced Scott and Rob remain forever on Chomolungma. But more than luck was involved; we had a fine team. It could have been so much worse. And I'm glad I stood on top of that hill on the first try, because I would hate to begin the obsession with the Mother Goddess that so many have.

I'm three for three on 8000ers. Pretty damn good odds. Time to go to some lower peaks to climb more technical routes with just a few friends. You can just as easily get killed there, but with so many mountains in this world, why not mix it up? Altitude isn't everything.

Except on Everest.

### *Summary of Statistics*

AREA: Nepal Himalaya

ROUTE: The Southeast Ridge of Mount Everest (8848 m), May 1-13, 1996

PERSONNEL: Scott Fischer, Martin Adams, Neal Beidleman, Anatoli Boukreev, Lene Gammelgaard, Dale Kruse, Tim Madsen, Sandy Hill, Klev Schoening, Pete Schoening, Charlotte Fox, Lobsang Jangbu Sherpa, Tashi Sherpa, Tenzing Sherpa, Pemba Sherpa, Nawang Dorje Sherpa, Nawang Sherpa (Logsang's father), Nawang Sherpa (Tenzing's uncle), Nawang Sherpa