Into Thin Air

by Jon Krakauer

I stood atop Mount Everest, gasping for air at the topmost limit of earth's atmosphere. Standing on the top of the world, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, put my shoulder against the wind, and stared at the vast view of earth below. I understood on some dim level that it was a spectacular sight. I'd been dreaming about this moment for many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just didn't have the energy to care.

It was the afternoon of May 10, 1996. I hadn't slept in 57 hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the last three days was a bowl of soup and a handful of peanut M&M's. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs, making it painful to breathe. Twenty-nine thousand twenty-eight feet up in the atmosphere, there was so little oxygen reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a child. I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired.

I'd arrived on the summit a few minutes after Anatoli Borkreev, a Russian guide with an American expedition, and just ahead of Andy Harris, a guide with the New Zealand-based mountain climbing team that I was a part of. I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreev and then turned and started down. My watch read 1:17 P.M. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

After a few steps, I paused to take another photo, this one looking down the Southeast Ridge, the route we had climbed. Then I saw something that until that moment had escaped my attention. To the south, where the sky had been perfectly clear just an hour earlier, a blanket of clouds now hid the peaks of the other smaller mountains surrounding Mount Everest.

Days later—after six bodies had been found, and after surgeons had amputated the right hand of my teammate Beck Weathers—people would ask why, if the weather had begun to get worse, had climbers on the upper mountain not seen the signs of coming disaster? Why did experienced Himalayan guides keep moving upward, leading a group of amateurs, each of whom had paid as much as $65,000 to be taken safely up Everest, into an apparent death trap?

I couldn't think about these things now. I needed to get down fast.

It was after 2:30 PM when I made it down to the South Summit. By now, mist was wrapping across the top of Mount Everest's sister peak, 27,000-foot Lhotse, and fog was lapping at the lower part of Everest's summit pyramid. No longer did the weather look so good. I grabbed a fresh oxygen cylinder and hurried down into the cloud. Moments after I dropped below the South Summit, it began to snow lightly and the visibility went to hell.

Four hundred feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under a blue sky, my "compadres" were wasting time, celebrating their arrival at the top of the

planet with photos and high-fives, all the while using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing near. None of them suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter.

How had these minimally qualified climbers gotten themselves into this mess? As a matter of fact, how had I?

Secretly, I had dreamed of climbing Everest from childhood, and as the years went by, it began to seem that this impossible dream might come true. By the early 1980s, Everest's easiest route—the Southeast Ridge, had been climbed more than a hundred times. Then, in 1985, the gates were flung wide open when Dick Bass, a wealthy 55-year-old Texan with limited climbing experience, was taken to the top of Everest by an extraordinary young climber named David Breashears. In climbing Everest, Bass became the first person to ascend all of the so-called Seven Summits, a feat that earned him worldwide renown and spurred a swarm of other amateur climbers to think about Everest. Bass showed that Everest was within the realm of possibility for regular guys. “Assuming you're reasonably fit and have a good income, I think the biggest obstacle is probably taking time off from your job and leaving your family for two months,” Bass said.

For a great many climbers, the record shows, stealing time away from the daily grind has not been an insurmountable obstacle; nor has the big outlay of cash. Over the past

half-decade, the traffic on Everest, has grown at an astonishing rate. And to meet demand, the number of commercial enterprises offering guided ascents of these mountains has multiplied. In the spring of 1996, 30 separate expeditions were on the slopes of Everest, at least eight of them organized as moneymaking companies.

The increase in commercial expeditions was a touchy issue. Traditionalists were offended that the world's highest summit was being sold to rich amateurs who, if denied the services of guides, would have difficulty making it to the top of Mount Shasta. The critics were the real climbers -- opposed to amateur climbers and the businesses that dragged these amateurs to the top of a peak they could never reach on their own.

Such critics also point out that, thanks to the commercialization of Everest, the peak has now even been dragged into the swamp of American law. Having paid great sums of money to be escorted up Everest, some climbers have then sued their guides after they failed to reach the summit.

"Occasionally you'll get a client who thinks he's bought a guaranteed ticket to the summit," complains Peter Athans, a highly respected guide who's made eleven trips to Everest and reached the top four times. "Some people don't understand that an Everest expedition can't be run like a commuter train. We can’t guarantee that a customer will get to the summit. These lawsuits are unfair.”

For the most part, Athans is right. But not every Everest lawsuit is unfair. Inept or disreputable companies have on more than one occasion failed to deliver to climbers crucial support - oxygen, for instance - as promised. On some expeditions, guides have

gone to the summit without any of their clients, leading the bitter clients to conclude that they were brought along simply to pick up the tab for ambitious professional climbers who otherwise could not afford an Everest expedition. Sometimes, it is simple theft. In 1995, the leader of one commercial expedition ran away with tens of thousands of dollars of his clients' money before the trip even got off the ground.

To a certain degree, climbers shopping for an Everest expedition get what they pay for. This year, Rob Hall’s company, Adventure Consultants, charged $65,000 a head, not including airfare or personal equipment, to take people up the Southeast Ridge route. Although no commercial guide service charged more, Hall, a lanky 35-year-old with a biting wit, had no difficulty booking clients, thanks to his phenomenal success rate: He'd put 39 climbers on the summit between 1990 and 1995.

Hall was so good at what he did that he caught the attention of ***Outsider Magazine***. That publication wanted to do a feature on how the new commercial expeditions bring unskilled amateur climbers up the heights of Mount Everest. The magazine decided to send a writer up with Hall’s team to report on the phenomenon. To my surprise, I was asked to write the piece. When the call came to join Hall's expedition, I said, “Yes,” without even hesitating to catch my breath. Boyhood dreams die hard, I discovered, and I immediately set out to scale Mount Everest with Rob Hall’s expedition.

And there I was. On April 10, 1996, after ten days of hiking through the steep, walled canyons and flowery forests of northern Nepal, I walked into Everest Base Camp. My altimeter read 17,600 feet.

Situated at the entrance to a magnificent natural amphitheater formed by Everest and its two sister peaks, Lhotse and Nuptse, was a small city of tents sheltering 240 climbers and Sherpas from 14 expeditions, all of it sprawled across a bend in the Khumbu Glacier. The slopes above camp were draped with hanging glaciers, from which immense avalanches fell, thundering down at all hours of the day and night. To the east, pinched between the Nuptse wall and the West Shoulder of Everest, the Khumbu Icefall spilled to within a quarter-mile of the tents in a chaos of pale blue ice-blocks.

In stark contrast to the harsh qualities of the environment stood our campsite and all its creature comforts, including a nineteen person staff. Our mess tent, a huge canvas structure, was wired with a stereo system and solar-powered electric lights. A communications tent housed a satellite phone and fax. There was a hot shower. A cook boy came to each client's tent in the mornings to serve us steaming mugs of tea in our sleeping bags. Fresh bread and vegetables arrived every few days on the backs of yaks.

In many ways, Rob Hall's *Adventure Consultants* site served as a sort of town hall for Base Camp, largely because nobody on the mountain was more respected than Hall, who was on Everest for his eighth time. Whenever there was a problem—a labor dispute with the Sherpas, a medical emergency, a critical decision about climbing strategy—people came to him for advice. And Hall, always generous, offered his accumulated wisdom freely to the very rivals who were competing with him for clients, most notably Scott Fischer.

Fischer's *Mountain Madness* camp, distinguished by a huge *Starbucks Coffee* banner that hung from a chunk of granite, was a mere five minutes' walk down the glacier.

Fischer and Hall were competitors, but they were also friends, and there was a good deal of socializing between the two teams. His mess tent wasn't as well equipped as ours, but Fischer was always quick to offer a cup of fresh-brewed coffee to any climber or trekker who poked a head inside the door.

The forty year old Fischer was a big friendly man with a blond ponytail and manic energy. He'd grown up in New Jersey and had fallen in love with climbing after taking a mountaineering course as a fourteen year old. In his early years, during which he became known for a wild-man style, he'd survived a number of climbing accidents, including twice smashing into the ground from a height of more than seventy feet. Fischer's wild-man approach to his own life was reflected in his free-spirit approach to guiding Everest. In striking contrast to Hall - who insisted that his clients climb as a group at all times under the close watch of his guides - Fischer encouraged his clients to be independent, to move at their own pace, to go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

Both Hall and Fischer were under considerable pressure this climbing season. The previous year, Hall had for the first time failed to get anybody to the top of Everest. Another dry spell would be very bad for business. Meanwhile Fischer, who had climbed the peak without oxygen, but had never guided the mountain, was still trying to get established in the Everest business. He needed to get clients to the summit, especially a high-profile one like Sandy Hill Pittman, the New York City big-shot writer who was filing daily diaries on an *NBC* World Wide Web site. Her reports to NBC would serve as a kind of report card to the world of Fischer’s performance in guiding amateur climbers. She would also have an opportunity to file reports about the veteran Hall. Both men would be in the media spotlight, so both men were burdened by the necessity of success

in this most uncertain of professions.

The lower slopes of Everest were crowded that year, but they were no less raw for that. The harshness of it all was overwhelming. Despite the many trappings of civilization at Base Camp, there was no forgetting that we were more than three miles above sea level. It seemed like there was no air to gasp in from that bluest of mountain skies. Walking to the mess tent at mealtime left me wheezing to catch my breath. If I sat up too quickly, my head reeled and dizziness set in. I developed a dry, hacking cough that would steadily worsen over the next six weeks. Cuts and scrapes refused to heal. I was rarely hungry, a sign that my oxygen-deprived stomach had shut down and my body had begun to eat away at itself. My arms and legs gradually began to wither to toothpicks, and by expedition's end I would weigh 25 pounds less than when I left Seattle.

Some of my teammates did even worse than I did in the thin air. At least half of them suffered from various stomach problems that kept them racing to the latrine. My new friend, Doug Hansen, was plagued by an unending headache for most of his first week at Base Camp. It felt, as he put it, "like somebody's driven a nail between my eyes."

This was Hansen's second time on Everest with Hall. Unlike the majority of climbers, he was not rich. He'd paid for the expedition by working at a Seattle-area post office by night and on construction jobs by day. The year before, he'd been forced to turn around 330 vertical feet below the summit because of deep snow and the late hour. "The summit looked sooooo close," Hansen recalled with a painful laugh. "Believe me, there hasn't been a day since that I haven't thought about it." Hansen had been talked into returning

this year by Hall, who felt sorry that Hansen had been denied the summit and who had significantly discounted Hansen's fee to get him to give it another try.

As a newcomer to altitude—I'd never been above 17,000 feet—I worried about how I'd perform higher on the mountain, especially in the so-called “Death Zone” above 25,000 feet. I had done some fairly extreme climbs over the years in Alaska, Canada, and the Alps. I'd spent considerably more time on technical rock and ice than most of the other clients and many of the guides. But technical climbing expertise counted little on Everest’s relatively easy slopes; experience at extreme altitude counted for a lot. And I'd spent less time at high altitude - none, to be precise - than most other climbers here. By any reasonable assessment, I was unqualified to attempt the highest mountain in the world.

This didn't seem to worry Hall. After seven Everest expeditions he'd fine-tuned a remarkably effective method of acclimatization. In the next six weeks, we would make three trips above Base Camp, climbing about 2,000 feet higher each time. After that, he insisted, our bodies would be sufficiently adapted to the altitude to permit safe passage to the 29,000 foot summit. "It's worked 39 times so far, pal," Hall assured me with a grin. Nothing to worry about, mate.”

That was the kind of reassuring remark an amateur like myself depends on from a professional guide. But peace of mind comes from more than that. It comes from the kind of experience and expertise a man like Hall can provide. And while many old-school mountaineers look with suspicion on the kind of business operated by men like Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, no one denies that these men are supremely qualified to do

the jobs they do.

There is a certain irony in these complaints issued by old-schoolers. Most of the recent debate about Everest has focused on the safety of commercial expeditions like the ones led by Hall and Fischer. But the least experienced, least qualified climbers on the mountain this past season were not commercially guided clients; rather, they were members of traditionally structured, noncommercial expeditions. One such group was a collection of amateurs from Taiwan. This expedition did not know what the hell it was doing. One example should make it clear.

While descending the lower Icefall on April 13, I overtook a pair of slower climbers outfitted with bad clothing and gear. Almost immediately, it became apparent that they weren't very familiar with the standard tools and techniques of glacier travel. The climber in back repeatedly snagged his crampons and stumbled. Waiting for them to cross a gaping crevasse bridged by two rickety ladders lashed end to end, I was shocked to see them go across together, almost breaking the ladders with their combined weight! It was a needlessly dangerous act. An awkward attempt at conversation revealed that they were members of that Taiwanese expedition.

The bad reputation of the Taiwanese had preceded them to Everest. In the spring of 1995, the team had traveled to Alaska to climb Mount McKinley as a shakedown for their attempt on Everest in 1996. Nine climbers reached the summit of McKinley, but seven of them were caught by a storm on the descent, became disoriented, and spent a night in the open at 19,400 feet, initiating a costly, hazardous rescue by the National Park Service. They were not qualified to climb Everest.

The leader of the expedition, Ming Ho Gau -- nicknamed "Makalu" -- had to be assisted down the upper mountain. "As they were bringing him down, Makalu was yelling, 'Victory! Victory! We made summit!' to everyone he passed, as if the disaster hadn't even happened." He was a fool. When these survivors of the McKinley disaster showed up on Everest in 1996, Makalu Gau was again their leader.

In truth, their presence was a matter of grave concern to just about everyone on the mountain. The fear was that the Taiwanese would suffer an accident that would force other expeditions to come to their aid, risking further lives and possibly costing climbers a shot at the summit.

But the Taiwanese were by no means the only group that was unqualified.

The South Africans were even less qualified to climb the highest peaks in the world, but no one seemed to care. This expedition was well funded - sponsored by a major newspaper - and the source of great national pride for that country of rolling hills and small mountains. They were led by a smooth-talking former military officer named Ian Woodall. Woodall was looking to make a name for himself as a leader, and it didn't matter to him that he was leading a group largely unqualified for the climb. Later we would learn that Woodall had lied about his climbing record. He'd never climbed anywhere near 25,000 feet, as he claimed. In fact, he hadn't climbed much of anything. Woodall had also lied about expedition finances and even lied about who was named on the official climbing permit.

Despite the lack of experienced climbers in his expedition, Woodall refused to coordinate his group's plans with the other groups on the mountain. None of the four climbers on the South African team had more than minimal high-mountain experience. At least two of them didn't even know how to put their crampons on.

These two inexperienced expeditions - the Taiwanese, and especially the South Africans - were frequent topics of discussion around the dinner table in our mess tent. "With so many incompetent people on the mountain," Hall frowned one evening in late April, "I think it's pretty unlikely that we'll get through this climb without something bad happening."

Despite this prediction, our team couldn't help but be encouraged at our own progress as we continued our adaptive training for high altitude climbing. We had already successfully completed two acclimatizing climbs. For our third and final acclimatization trip, we spent four nights at 21,300-foot Camp Two and a night at 24,000-foot Camp Three. We did so without incident. Then on May 1, our whole team descended to oxygen-rich Base Camp to regain our strength before we made the final summit push. Much to my surprise, Hall's acclimatization plan seemed to be working. After three weeks, I felt like I was finally adapting to the altitude.

From the beginning, Hall had planned that May 10 would be our summit day. There was good reason for selecting this date. The great monsoon weather pattern of Asia brings enormous rains to the Indian subcontinent by late Spring. These drenching rains become great snowstorms in the high reaches of the Himalayas. The trick for climbers is to climb Everest as late in the year as possible to catch the relatively warm Spring

weather before that warmth brings in the monsoon rains of summer. This annual flow of the monsoon made it likely that the most favorable weather of the year would fall on or near May 10. If this year was like past years, for a few days between the departure of the wind and the arrival of the monsoon storms, we would be presented with a brief window of clear, calm weather during which a summit assault would be possible.

Unfortunately, these annual weather patterns were no secret, and every expedition had its sights set on the same window of opportunity. Hoping to avoid dangerous gridlock on the summit ridge, Hall held a powwow in the mess tent with leaders of the expeditions in Base Camp. On May 8 or 9, the much publicized IMAX expedition would climb to the top, hoping to film the mountain in splendid 70 millimeter high definition. Headed by David Breashears, the film crew hoped to wrap up an almost completed motion picture about Everest with footage from the top.

Our team, it was decided, would share a summit date of May 10 with Fischer's group. Ian Woodall would not cooperate with our plans. Woodall declared that the South Africans would go to the top whenever they pleased - probably on the tenth - and anyone who didn't like it could "bugger off."

Hall, ordinarily extremely slow to anger, flew into a rage over Woodall's refusal to cooperate. "I don't want to be anywhere near the upper mountain when those fools are up there," he shouted. But there was nothing he or anybody else could do to alter the plans of uncooperative competitors.

However troubling these problems were, the great event of an Everest summit was

drawing near, and we could hardly contain our excitement at the thrills to come.

As May 10 approached, we began our ascent from Base Camp. Andy Harris, a junior guide on the expedition, was especially happy. "It feels great to be on our way to the summit, yeah?" Harris said as we pulled into Camp Two. The midday sun was reflecting off the walls of those three great sister peaks - Nuptse, Lhotse, and Everest - and the entire ice-coated valley seemed to have been changed into a huge solar oven. The warmth encouraged us. We were finally ascending the mountain for real, heading straight toward the top.

As a junior guide on the expedition, and the only one who'd never been to Everest (indeed, he'd never been above 23,000 feet), Harris took his orders from Hall. Built like an NFL quarterback and strikingly good-natured, he was usually assigned to the slower clients at the back of the pack. For much of the expedition, he had been laid low with stomach ailments; but he was finally getting his strength back, and he was eager to prove himself to his more experienced co-workers.

Harris was always an optimist. After a particularly hard climb one day, he said to me, "I think we're actually gonna knock this big bastard off," There was a huge smile on his face as he stood pointing up at the summit.

Harris had a joyous outlook on life - a product of his good fortune. He worked as a much-in-demand helicopter-skiing guide in the winter. During the summer, he guided climbers in New Zealand's Southern Alps. With success leading to modest fame, he had just launched a promising helicopter hiking business, in which he would deposit amateur

outdoorsmen deep within the New Zealand mountain forests, plucking them out of trouble and into a comfortable hotel when they had worn themselves down by a wilderness they were not trained to deal with. He loved the outdoors, but his greatest joy was leading folks up mountains. "Yeah," he'd marveled, "it's kind of amazing, really. My life seems to be working out pretty well."

Still, Everest is no place for naïve optimism. Harris, Hall, and I spent the day watching the climbers go by, and the things we saw reminded us of the uncertainties of Everest. Late in the day, a solo climber, passed Camp Two on his way down the mountain, looking completely worked and worn. Three days earlier, under clear skies, he'd made it to just below the South Summit and was no more than an hour from the top when he decided to turn around. He had been climbing without supplemental oxygen, the hour had been late—2 P.M., to be exact—and he'd believed that if he'd kept going, he'd have been too tired to descend safely. And so he retreated from the final climb to the top.

"To turn around that close to the summit!" Hall said, shaking his head in amazement. “That showed incredibly good judgment on his part. I'm impressed."

“Why?” I asked.

“Sticking to your predetermined turn-around time—that’s the most important rule on the mountain.

Over the previous month, Rob Hall had lectured us repeatedly on this point. Our turn-around time, he said, would probably be 1 P.M., and no matter how close we were to the

top, we were to stick to it.

"With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill," Hall said. "The trick is to get back down alive."

This thinking was a perfect expression of Rob’s attitude. Hall was in general an easygoing guy, but his nice-guy personality masked an intense desire to succeed—which to him was defined in the fairly simple terms of getting as many clients as possible safely to the summit. He also paid careful attention to the details: the health of the Sherpas, the efficiency of the solar-powered electrical system, the sharpness of his clients' crampons. He loved being a guide, and it pained him that some celebrated climbers didn't give his profession the respect he felt it deserved.

It was with this Rob Hall - the best possible leader - that we were on our way. The great Scott Fischer and his expedition would be near us as we climbed. David Breshear’s skilled IMAX climbing team would be waiting to film us at the top. Surrounded by this kind of skill, life looked good.

On May 8, our team and Fischer's left Camp Two and started climbing the Lhotse Face, a vast slope of steel-hard ice rising from the head of the Western Cwm. Hall's Camp Three, two-thirds of the way up this wall, was set on a narrow ledge that had been chopped into the face of the ice cliff by our Sherpas. It was a spectacular -- but a dangerous -- camp. A hundred feet below, no less exposed, were the tents of most of the other teams, including Fischer's, the South Africans, and the Taiwanese.

It was here that we had our first encounter with death on the mountain. At 7:30 A.M. on May 9, as we were pulling on our boots to ascend to Camp Four, a 36-year-old steelworker from the Taiwanese team crawled out of his tent to relieve himself, wearing only the smooth-soled liners of his mountaineering boots on his feet—a rather serious mistake. As he walked along the slope, he lost his footing on the slick ice and went hurtling down the Lhotse Face, coming to rest, head-first, in a crevasse.

Over the preceding six weeks, there had been several serious accidents, but this one was fatal. The death caused a momentary depression over the mountain. But 33 climbers at the South Col would be leaving camp for the summit in a few short hours, and the gloom was quickly shoved aside by nervous anticipation of the challenge to come. Most of us were simply wrapped too tightly in the grip of summit fever to think about the death of someone in our midst.

Climbing with oxygen for the first time, we reached the South Col, our launching pad for the summit assault, at one o'clock that afternoon. A flat area of ice and wind swept boulders, the Col sits at 26,000 feet above sea level, between the upper slopes of Lhotse, the world's fourth-highest mountain, and Everest. About four football fields long by two across, the Col is bounded on the east by the Kangshung Face, a 7,000-foot cliff, and on the west by the 4,000-foot Lhotse Face. It is one of the coldest, most terrible places I have ever experienced.

I was the first Western climber to arrive. When I got there, four Sherpas were struggling to set up our tents in a 50 mph wind. I helped them put up my shelter, anchoring it to some discarded oxygen canisters wedged beneath the largest rocks I could

lift. Then I dove inside to wait for my teammates.

It was nearly 5 P.M. when the last of our group made camp. The final stragglers in Fischer's group came in even later, which didn't speak well for the summit bid, scheduled to begin at 1AM - in six short hours. Everyone retreated to their nylon dome tents the moment they reached the Col and did their best to nap, but the machine-gun rattle of the wind-driven flapping tents and the anxiety over what was to come made sleep out of the question for most of us.

Surrounding me on that wind-swept plateau were some three dozen people, huddled in tents pitched side by side. Yet an odd sense of isolation hung over the camp. Up here, in this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from everyone around me—emotionally, spiritually, physically. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realize. Although we would leave camp in a few hours as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I really hoped Doug Hansen would get to the top, for instance; yet if he were to turn around, I knew I would not help him down -- I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on to the top for my own glory. In another time and place, this idea of human selfishness would have been depressing, but I was too busy with the weather to think about it.

At 7 P.M. the wind stopped. The temperature was 15 below zero, but the still air made conditions excellent for the climb. Now we would go to the top of the world. Rob Hall had timed our summit attempt perfectly. The tension was strong as we sipped tea, delivered to us in our tents by Sherpas, and readied our gear. Nobody said much. All of

us had suffered greatly to get to this moment. I had eaten little and slept not at all since leaving Camp Two two days earlier. Damage to my ribs made each cough feel like a stiff kick and brought tears to my eyes. But if I wanted a chance at the summit, I had no choice but to ignore my problems as much as possible and climb.

Finally, at 11:35 PM, we were away from the tents. I strapped on my oxygen mask and ascended into the darkness. There were fifteen of us in Hall's team: guides Hall, Harris, and Mike Groom, an Australian with impressive Himalayan experience; Sherpas Ang Dorje, Lhakpa Chhiri, Nawang Norbu, and Kami; and clients Hansen, Namba, Beck Weathers, Stuart Hutchinson (a Canadian doctor), John Taske (an Australian doctor), Lou Kasischke (a lawyer from Michigan), Frank Fischbeck (a publisher from Hong Kong), and me.

Scott Fischer's group—guides Fischer, Boukreev, and Neal Beidleman; five Sherpas; and clients Charlotte Fox, Tim Madsen, Klev Schoening, Sandy Hill, Lene Gammelgaard, and Martin Adams—left the South Col at midnight.

And then there was the Taiwanese team. Shortly after Fischer set out, Makalu Gau started up with three Sherpas, ignoring his promise that no Taiwanese would make a summit attempt on May 10. Thankfully, the South Africans had failed to make it to Camp Four and were nowhere in sight.

The night had a cold beauty that intensified as we ascended. More stars than I had ever seen filled the frozen sky. Far to the southeast, enormous thunderheads drifted over Nepal, illuminating the heavens with bursts of orange and blue lightning. A huge moon

rose over the shoulder of 27,000 foot peaks, washing the slope beneath my boots in ghostly light, eliminating the need for a headlamp. I led the way throughout the night with Ang Dorje—our "sirdar," or head Sherpa—and at 5:30, just as the sun was edging over the horizon, I reached the crest of the Southeast Ridge. Three of the world's five highest peaks stood out in jagged relief against the pastel dawn. My altimeter read 27,500 feet.

Rob Hall had instructed us to climb no higher until the whole group gathered at this level spot known as the Balcony, so I sat down on my pack to wait. Cold and restless, I sat in the snow as the crowd passed. When Hall and Weathers finally arrived at the back of the herd, I'd been sitting for more than 90 minutes. By now, Fischer's group and the Taiwanese team had caught and passed us. I was angry about wasting so much time and at falling behind everybody else. But I understood Hall's reasons: he wanted everyone together where he could watch out for our safety. I kept quiet and played the part of the obedient client.

To my mind, the rewards of climbing come from its emphasis on self-reliance, on making critical decisions and dealing with the consequences, on personal responsibility. When you become a client, I discovered, you give up all that. For safety's sake, the guide always calls the shots. So I waited.

One of the first people I passed when I started moving again was Scott Fischer's sirdar, Lobsang Jangbu, kneeling in the snow over a pile of vomit. Both Lobsang and Boukreev had asked for and been granted permission by Fischer to climb without supplemental oxygen, a highly questionable decision that significantly affected the performance of both men, but especially Lobsang. His feeble state, moreover, had been compounded by his

insistence on "short-roping" the celebrity amateur, Sandy Pittman, on summit day.

"Short roping" is a technique designed to help inexperienced climbers reach altitudes higher than they could achieve by their own efforts. A strong and experienced climber - usually an assistant expedition guide or a well seasoned Sherpa - binds himself to a weak client and literally pulls the rookie up the mountain on a short rope. It's an amazing feat of strength, but the process serves to highlight the weak climbing of the client as well as the artificiality of these commercial Everest "conquests."

The big question was why Lobsang would do it. He was a gifted high-altitude climber who'd summited Everest twice before without oxygen. Sporting a long black ponytail and a gold tooth, he was flashy, self-assured, and very appealing to the clients, not to mention crucial to their summit hopes. As Fischer's head Sherpa, he was expected to be at the front of the group this morning, putting in the route. But just before daybreak, I looked down to see Lobsang hitched to Hill by her three-foot safety rope. The Sherpa, huffing and puffing loudly, was hauling the rich New York celebrity up the steep slope like a horse pulling a plow.

This New York celebrity, Sandy Hill, was on a widely publicized quest to ascend Everest. She'd failed to make it to the top on two previous expeditions; this time she was determined to succeed. Her daily web reports to the worldwide press were eagerly watched, and not only by the viewing public. This climb could make her a television star. And she could in turn make Scott Fischer a mountain-climbing star. Fischer was more than aware that *her* success on Everest was tied up with *his* success in the community of commercial Everest climbing. But she could make him famous *only* if she got to the top.

Did Scott *tell* Lobsang to carry her up the mountain?

We will never know.

Fischer *did* know that Lobsang was short-roping Hill, yet he did nothing to stop it. Some people have thus concluded that Fischer ordered Lobsang to do it: Hill had been moving slowly when she started out on summit day, and Fischer would have worried that, if Hill failed to reach the summit, he would be denied an advertising success.

But two other clients on Fischer's team speculate that Lobsang was short-roping her because she'd promised *him* a hefty cash bonus if she reached the top. (A few thousand dollars would mean a lot to a Sherpa -- it might mean a new motorcycle or a chance to send a child to school in that poor of country.) Sandy Hill has denied this charge, insisting that she was hauled up against her wishes. Which begs a question: why didn't she unfasten the rope, which would have required nothing more than reaching up and unclipping a single carabiner?

"I have no idea why Lobsang was short-roping Sandy," confesses the guide, Neil Beidleman. "He lost sight of what he was supposed to be doing up there, of what the priorities were." It didn't seem like a particularly serious mistake at the time. A little thing. But it was one of many little things - building slowly, building unnoticed, but building steadily toward disaster.

As I watched these little horrors unfold, a deadly fascination with this terrible mountain

grew within me.

As we trudged on, I became ever more interested in the lack of air at this altitude. A human plucked from sea level and dropped on the summit of Everest would lose consciousness within minutes and quickly die. A well-acclimatized climber can function at that altitude with supplemental oxygen, but not well, and not for long. The body becomes far more likely to suffer swelling of the brain, heart attack, hypothermia, or frostbite. The stories we often hear about climbers who ascend Everest without oxygen are misleading. There are, perhaps two dozen perfectly acclimatized athletes capable of crawling to the top without gas. What they do comes from a rare ability, and even for them it’s a dangerous feat. Oxygen provisions are essential for ordinary and even superior climbers.

We *did* have oxygen provisions, but they were limited. Each member of our team was carrying two orange, seven-pound oxygen bottles. A third bottle would be waiting for each of us at the South Summit on our descent, stashed there by Sherpas. At a conservative flow rate of two quarts of oxygen per minute, each bottle would last between five and six hours. By 4 or 5 P.M., about 18 hours after starting to climb, everyone's gas would be gone.

Hall understood this danger well. Andhe knew that others dangers threatened to add to this one.

The problem of ropes, for instance. The fact that nobody had summited this season prior to our attempt concerned him, because it meant that no fixed ropes had been

installed on the upper Southeast Ridge, the most exposed part of the climb. To solve this problem, Hall and Fischer had agreed before leaving Base Camp that on summit day the two sirdars—Ang Dorje from Hall's team and Lobsang from Fischer's—would leave Camp Four 90 minutes ahead of everybody else and put in the fixed rope lines before any clients reached the upper mountain. "Rob made it very clear how important it was to do this," recalls Beidleman. "He wanted to avoid a bottleneck at all costs."

For some reason, however, the Sherpas hadn't set out ahead of us on the night of May 9. When Ang Dorje and I reached the Balcony, we were an hour in front of the rest of the group, and we could have easily moved on and installed the ropes. But Hall had explicitly forbidden me to go ahead, and Lobsang was still far below, short-roping Pittman. There was nobody to go and work with Ang Dorje.

This Ang Dorje was a quiet, moody young man who regarded Lobsang as a lazy show-off. Ang had been working extremely hard, well beyond the call of duty, for six long weeks. Now, it seemed he was tired of doing more than his share. As if to say, “If Lobsang isn't going to fix ropes, neither am I, Ang Dorje sat down with me to wait, an angry look on his face.

Sure enough, not long after everybody caught up with us and we continued climbing, a bottleneck occurred when our group encountered a series of giant rock steps at 28,000 feet. Clients huddled at the base of this obstacle for nearly an hour while Beidleman, standing in for the absent Lobsang, laboriously ran the rope out.

Here, the impatience and technical inexperience of Yasuko Namba nearly caused a

disaster. A businesswoman who liked to joke that her husband did all the cooking and cleaning, Namba had become famous back in Japan for her quest for Everest; it had turned her into a minor celebrity. She was usually a slow, tentative climber, but today, with the summit squarely in her sights, she seemed energized as never before. She'd been pushing hard all morning, jostling her way toward the front of the line. Now, as Beidleman clung precariously to the rock 100 feet above, the overeager Namba clamped her ascender onto the dangling rope before the guide had anchored his end of it. Just as she was about to put her full body weight on the rope—which would have pulled Beidleman off—guide Mike Groom intervened and gently scolded her.

The line continued to grow longer, and so did the delay. By 11:30 A.M., three of Hall's clients—Hutchinson, Taske, and Kasischke—had become worried about the lagging pace. Stuck behind the sluggish Taiwanese team, Hutchinson now says, "It seemed increasingly unlikely that we would have any chance of summiting before the 1 P.M. turn-around time dictated by Rob Hall."

And then these men did something remarkable. After a brief discussion, they turned their back on the summit and headed down the mountain with the assistant Sherpas. Earlier, Fischbeck, one of Hall's strongest clients, had also turned around. Why? The decision must have been supremely difficult for at least some of these men, especially Fischbeck, for whom this was a fourth attempt on Everest. They'd each spent as much as $70,000 to be up here and had endured weeks of misery. All were hard driving businessmen, unaccustomed to losing and even less to quitting. And yet, faced with a tough decision, they made the cool and reasoned decision that it was too late to reach the top and safely descend. They were among the few who made the decision. Unlike some

less experienced climbers on that terrible day, they descended to safety, disappointed but alive.

The others trudged upward. There was a second, even worse, bottleneck at the South Summit, which I reached at about 11 A.M. The Hillary Step was just a stone's throw away, and slightly beyond that was the summit itself. Dumb with awe and exhaustion, I took some photos and sat down with Harris, Beidleman, and Boukreev to wait for the Sherpas to fix ropes along the spectacular summit ridge.

A stiff breeze raked Everest's ridge crest, blowing a plume of snow into Tibet, but overhead the sky was a brilliant blue. Lounging in the sun at 28,700 feet inside my thick down suit, gazing across the Himalayas in an oxygen-starved stupor, I completely lost track of time. Nobody paid much attention to the fact that the Sherpas, Ang Dorje and Nawang Norbu, were sharing a thermos of tea beside us and seemed to be in no hurry to go higher.

Around noon, Beidleman finally asked, "Hey, Ang, are you going to fix the ropes, or what?"

Ang Dorje's reply was a quick, unequivocal "No.

Perhaps it was because neither Lobsang nor any of Fischer's other Sherpas was there to share the work, but Ang refused to take the responsibility himself. Shocked into doing the job ourselves, Beidleman, Boukreev, Harris, and I collected all the remaining rope, and Beidleman and Boukreev started stringing it along the most dangerous sections of the summit ridge. We did it, but by then more than an hour had trickled away, and it was

getting late.

The process of setting up the ropes was agonizingly slow, the way things proceed in a dream. Lack of oxygen turned the work into a hellish drudgery. Bottled oxygen does not make the top of Everest feel like sea level. Ascending above the South Summit with my regulator delivering two quarts of oxygen per minute, I had to stop and draw three or four heaving lungfulls of air after each painful step. The systems we were using delivered a mix of compressed oxygen and ordinary air that made 29,000 feet feel like 26,000 feet - not that much of an improvement.

Climbing along the edge of the summit ridge, sucking gas into my ragged lungs, I enjoyed a strange, unwarranted sense of calm. The world beyond the rubber mask was incredibly bright and clear, but it seemed not quite real, as if a movie were being projected in slow motion across the front of my goggles. I felt drugged, disengaged, cut off from the external world. I had to remind myself over and over that there was 7,000 feet of cliff on either side, that everything was at stake here, and that I would pay for a single wrong step with my life.

Plodding slowly up the last few steps to the summit, I had the sensation of being underwater, of moving at quarter-speed. And then I found myself atop a slender wedge of ice decorated with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminum survey pole, with nowhere higher to climb. A string of flags snapped furiously in the wind. To the north, down a side of the mountain I had never seen, the brown dry Tibetan plateau stretched to the horizon. This tiny platform -- the size of a living room -- was the summit of Mount Everest.

Reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation. Against long odds, after all, I had just attained a goal I'd wanted since childhood. But the summit was really only the halfway point. Any impulse I might have felt toward self-congratulation was immediately extinguished by knowledge of the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead. As I turned to go down, I experienced a moment of alarm: a glance at my watch showed that it was after 1 pm; my regulator showed that my oxygen was almost gone.

I started down the ridge as fast as I could move, hoping to descend to camp before I became exhausted; but I soon hit the traffic jam at the Hillary Step, which was when my gas began to run out. My exhaustion gave rise to fear. I passed the ascending climbers, frantic to get down to camp. When Rob Hall came by, I masked my rising panic and thanked him for getting me to the top of Everest. "Yeah, it's turned out to be a pretty good expedition," he replied. "I only wish we could have gotten more clients to the top." Hall was clearly disappointed that five of his eight clients had turned back earlier in the day, while all six of Fischer's clients were still plugging toward the summit.

Soon after Hall passed, the Hillary Step finally cleared of human traffic. Dizzy, fearing that I would black out, I made my way tenuously down the fixed lines. Then, 50 feet above the South Summit, the rope ended, and I hesitated to go farther without gas.

Over at the South Summit I could see Harris sorting through a pile of oxygen bottles. "Yo, Andy!" I yelled. "Could you bring me a fresh bottle?"

"There's no oxygen here!" the guide shouted back. "These bottles are all empty!" I nearly lost my cool. I had no idea what to do. Just then, Hall's other guide, Mike Groom, came past on his way down from the summit. He had climbed Everest in 1993 without supplemental oxygen and wasn't overly concerned about going without. He gave me his bottle, and we quickly scrambled down to the South Summit.

When we got there, an examination of the oxygen supply area revealed right away that there were six full bottles. Harris, however, refused to believe it. He kept insisting that they were all empty, and nothing Groom or I said could convince him otherwise. Right then it should have been obvious that Harris was acting irrationally and had slipped well beyond routine oxygen starvation, but I was so dull minded myself that it simply didn't register. Harris, after all, was the all-powerful, all-knowing guide, there to look after me and the other clients; the thought never entered my own crippled mind that he might in fact be dulled by oxygen starvation - that he might urgently need help from me.

As Harris continued to insist that there were no full bottles, Groom looked at me quizzically. I looked back and shrugged. Turning to Harris, I said, "No big deal, Andy." Then I grabbed a new oxygen canister, screwed it onto my regulator, and headed down the mountain. Given what unfolded over the next three hours, my failure to see that Harris was in serious trouble was a mistake that's likely to haunt me for the rest of my life.

At 3 P.M., within minutes of leaving the South Summit, I descended into clouds ahead of the others. Snow started to fall. In the diminishing light, it became hard to tell where the mountain ended and where the sky began. It would have been very easy to blunder

off the edge of the ridge and never be heard from again. The lower I went, the worse the weather became.

When I reached the Balcony again, about 4 P.M., I encountered Beck Weathers standing alone, shivering violently. Years earlier, Weathers had undergone eye surgery to correct his vision. A side effect, which he discovered on Everest and consequently hid from Hall, was that in the low air pressure at high altitude, his eyesight failed. Nearly blind when he'd left Camp Four in the middle of the night but hopeful that his vision would improve at daybreak, he stuck close to the person in front of him and kept climbing.

Upon reaching the Southeast Ridge shortly after sunrise, Weathers had confessed to Hall that he was having trouble seeing, at which point Hall declared, "Sorry, pal, you're going down. I'll send one of the Sherpas with you."

Weathers countered that his vision was likely to improve as soon as the sun crept higher in the sky. Hall said he'd give Weathers 30 minutes to find out—after that, he'd have to wait there at 27,500 feet for Hall and the rest of the group to come back down. Hall didn't want Weathers descending alone.

"I'm dead serious about this," Hall admonished his client. "Promise me that you'll sit right here until I return."

"I crossed my heart and hoped to die," Weathers recalls now, "and promised I wouldn't go anywhere." Shortly after noon, the cautious businessmen who had turned around

before reaching the top -- Hutchinson, Taske, and Kasischke -- passed by with their Sherpa escorts. They offered to help Weathers down, but he chose not to accompany them. "The weather was still good," he explains, "and I saw no reason to break my promise to Rob."

By the time I encountered Weathers, however, conditions were turning ugly. "Come down with me," I begged. "I'll get you down, no problem." He was nearly convinced, until I made the mistake of mentioning that Groom was on his way down, too. In a day of many mistakes, this would turn out to be a crucial one.

"Thanks anyway," Weathers said. "I'll just wait for Mike. He's got a rope; he'll be able to short-rope me." Secretly relieved that I wouldn't have to take the chance of helping a fllow human being, I hurried toward the South Col, 1,500 feet below.

These lower slopes proved to be the most difficult part of the descent. Six inches of powder snow blanketed outcroppings of loose rock. Climbing down them demanded unending concentration, an all but impossible feat in my current mental state. By 5:30, however, I was finally within 200 vertical feet of Camp Four, and only one obstacle stood between me and safety: a steep bulge of rock-hard ice that I'd have to descend without a rope. But the weather had deteriorated into a full-scale blizzard. Snow pellets born on 70-mph winds stung my face; any exposed skin was instantly frozen. The tents, no more than 200 horizontal yards away, were barely visible through the whiteout. There was zero margin for error. Worried about making a critical blunder, I sat down to marshal my energy.

Suddenly, Harris appeared out of the gloom and sat beside me. At this point there was no mistaking that he was in appalling shape. His cheeks were coated with an armor of frost, one eye was frozen shut, and his speech was slurred. He was frantic to reach the tents. After briefly discussing the best way to negotiate the ice, Harris started scooting down on his butt, facing forward. "Andy," I yelled after him, "it's crazy to try it like that!" He yelled something back, but the words were carried off by the screaming wind. A second later he lost his balance and was rocketing down the ice on his back. I lost sight in the haze.

Then I saw. Two hundred feet below, I could make out Harris's motionless form. I was sure he'd broken at least a leg, maybe his neck. But then he stood up, waved that he was OK, and started stumbling toward camp, which was for the moment in plain sight, 150 yards beyond.

I could see three or four people shining lights outside the tents. I watched Harris walk across the flats to the edge of camp, a distance he covered in less than ten minutes. When the clouds closed in a moment later, cutting off my view, he was within 30 yards of the tents. I didn't see him again after that, but I was certain that he'd reached the security of camp, where Sherpas would be waiting with blankets and hot tea. Sitting out in the storm, with the ice bulge still standing between me and the tents, I felt the pain of envy. I was angry that my guide hadn't waited for me. I carried on alone, down the treacherous ice slope.

Twenty minutes later I was in camp. I fell into my tent with my crampons still on, zipped the door tight, and sprawled across the frost-covered floor. I was drained, more

exhausted than I'd ever been in my life. But I was safe. Andy was safe. The others would be coming into camp soon. We'd done it. We'd climbed Mount Everest.

It would be many hours before I learned that everyone had in fact not made it back to camp—that one teammate was already dead and that 23 other men and women were caught in a desperate struggle for their lives atop a storming, raging Everest.

Here’s what happened up top. Neal Beidleman waited on the summit from 1:25 until 3:10 as Fischer's clients appeared over the last rise, one by one. The lateness of the hour worried him. After Gammelgaard, the last of them, arrived with Lobsang, "I decided it was time to get the hell out of there," Beidleman says, "even though Scott hadn't shown yet." Twenty minutes down the ridge, Beidleman - with Gammelgaard, Pittman, Madsen, and Fox in tow - passed Fischer, still on his way up. "I didn't really say anything to him," Beidleman recalls. "He just sort of raised his hand. He looked like he was having a hard time, but he was Scott, so I wasn't particularly worried. I figured he'd tag the summit and catch up to us pretty quick to help bring the clients down. But he never showed up."

When Beidleman's group got down to the South Summit, Pittman collapsed. Fox, the most experienced client on the peak, gave her an injection of a powerful steroid, dexamethasone, which temporarily negates the symptoms of altitude sickness. Beidleman grabbed Pittman by her harness and started dragging her down behind him.

"Once I got her sliding," he explains, "I'd let go and slip along down in front of her. Every 150 feet I'd stop, wrap my hands around the fixed rope, and brace myself to arrest her slide with a body block. The first time Sandy came barreling into me, the points of

her crampons sliced into my down suit. Feathers went flying everywhere." Fortunately, after about 20 minutes the injection revived Pittman, and she was able to resume the descent under her own power.

As darkness fell and the storm intensified, Beidleman and five of Fischer's clients overtook Groom, who was bringing down Weathers, on a short rope, and Namba. "Beck was so hopelessly blind," Groom reports, "that every ten meters he'd take a step into thin air and I'd have to catch him with the rope. It was bloody nerve-racking."

Five hundred feet above the South Col, where the steep shale gave way to a gentler slope of snow, Namba's oxygen ran out and the Japanese woman sat down, refusing to move. "When I tried to take her oxygen mask off so she could breathe more easily," says Groom, "she'd insist on putting it right back on. No amount of persuasion could convince her that she was out of oxygen, that the mask was actually suffocating her."

Beidleman, realizing that Groom had his hands full with Weathers, started dragging Namba down toward Camp Four. They reached the broad, rolling expanse of the South Col around 8 P.M., but by then it was pitch black, and the storm had grown into a hurricane. The wind chill was in excess of 70 below. Only three or four headlamps were working, and everyone's oxygen was long gone. Visibility was down to a few feet. No one had a clue how to find the tents. Two Sherpas came out of the darkness, but they were lost as well.

For the next two hours, Beidleman, Groom, the two Sherpas, and seven clients staggered blindly around in the storm, growing ever more exhausted and hypothermic,

hoping to blunder across the camp. "It was total chaos," says Beidleman. "People are wandering all over the place; I'm yelling at everyone, trying to get them to follow a single leader. Finally, probably around ten o'clock, I walked over this little rise, and it felt like I was standing on the edge of the earth. I could sense a huge void just beyond."

The group had unwittingly strayed to the easternmost edge of the Col, the opposite side from Camp Four, right at the lip of the 7,000-foot Kangshung Face. "I knew that if we kept wandering in the storm, pretty soon we were going to lose somebody over that cliff," says Beidleman. "I was exhausted from dragging Yasuko. Charlotte and Sandy were barely able to stand. So I screamed at everyone to huddle up right there and wait for a break in the storm."

The climbers hunkered in a pathetic cluster on a windswept patch of ice. "By then the cold had about finished me off," says Fox. "My eyes were frozen. The cold was so painful, I just curled up in a ball and hoped death would come quickly."

Three hundred and fifty yards to the west, while this was going on, I was shivering uncontrollably in my tent, even though I was zipped into my sleeping bag and wearing my down suit and every other stitch of clothing I had. The gale was threatening to blow the tent apart. Unaware of the tragedy unfolding outside and completely out of bottled oxygen, I drifted in and out of sleep, delirious from exhaustion, dehydration, and the effects of oxygen depletion.

At some point, Stuart Hutchinson shook me and asked if I would go outside with him to bang on pots and shine lights, in the hope of guiding any lost climbers in, but I was too

weak and incoherent to respond. Hutchinson, who had got back to camp at 2 P.M. and was less debilitated than those of us who'd gone to the summit, then tried to wake up clients and Sherpas in the other tents. Everybody was too cold, too exhausted. So Hutchinson went out into the storm alone.

Stuart Hutchinson was a client, not a guide; but when the moment came, he did what had to be done. He went out six times that night to look for the missing climbers, but the blizzard was so fierce that he never dared to venture more than a few yards from the tents. "The winds were ballistically strong," says Hutchison. "The blowing snow felt like a sandblaster."

Just before midnight, out among the climbers shivering on the Col, Beidleman noticed a few stars overhead. The wind was still whipping up a furious ground blizzard, but far above, the sky began to clear, revealing the huge silhouettes of Everest and Lhotse. From these reference points, Klev Schoening, a client of Fischer's, thought he'd figured out where the group was in relation to the tents. After a shouting match with Beidleman, Schoening convinced the guide that he knew the way.

Beidleman tried to coax everyone to their feet and get them moving in the direction indicated by Schoening, but Fox, Namba, Pittman, and Weathers were too feeble to move more than a few steps. So Beidleman assembled those who were able to walk, and together with Groom, they stumbled off into the storm to get help; they left behind the four incapacitated clients - and Tim Madsen. Madsen, unwilling to abandon Fox, his girlfriend, volunteered to look after everybody until a rescue party arrived.

The tents lay about 350 yards down the slope to the west. When Beidleman, Groom, and the clients got there, they were met by Boukreev. Beidleman told the Russian where to find the five clients who'd been left out in the elements, and then all four climbers collapsed in their tents.

Boukreev had returned to Camp Four at 4:30 P.M., before the worst of the storm, having rushed down from the summit without waiting for clients—extremely questionable behavior for a guide. A number of Everest veterans have speculated that if Boukreev had been present to help Beidleman and Groom bring their clients down, the group might not have got lost on the Col in the first place. One of the clients from that group has nothing but contempt for Boukreev, insisting that when it mattered most, the guide had "cut and run."

Boukreev argues that he hurried down ahead of everybody else for a good reason: "It is much better for me to be at South Col, ready to carry up oxygen if clients run out." This is a difficult rationale to understand. In fact, Boukreev's impatience on the descent more plausibly resulted from the fact that he wasn't using bottled oxygen and was relatively lightly dressed and therefore had to get down quickly: Without gas, he was much more susceptible to the dreadful cold. If this was indeed the case, Fischer was as much to blame as Boukreev, because he gave the Russian permission to climb without gas in the first place.

Whatever blame may be directed at Boukreev's hasty descent, he redeemed himself that night after Beidleman staggered in. Plunging repeatedly into the face of the hurricane, he single-handedly brought back Fox, Pittman, and Madsen. But Namba and

Weathers, he reported, were dead. When Beidleman was informed that Namba hadn't made it, he broke down in his tent and wept for 45 minutes.

Stuart Hutchinson shook me awake at 6:00 A.M. on May 11. "Andy's not in his tent," he told me somberly, "and he doesn't seem to be in any of the other tents, either. I don't think he ever made it in."

"Andy's missing?" I asked. "No way. I saw him walk to the edge of camp with my own eyes." Shocked, horrified, I pulled on my boots and rushed out to look for Harris. The wind was still fierce, knocking me down several times, but it was a bright, clear dawn, and visibility was perfect. I searched the entire western half of the Col for more than an hour, peering behind boulders and poking under shredded, long-abandoned tents, but found no trace of Harris. A surge of adrenaline seared my brain. Tears welled in my eyes, instantly freezing my eyelids shut. How could Andy be gone? Andy was a guide and a leader. Andy was a strongman. It couldn't be so.

I went to the place where Andy Harris had slid down the ice bulge and methodically retraced the route he'd taken toward camp, which followed a broad, almost flat ice gully. At the point where I last saw him when the clouds came down, a sharp left turn would have taken Harris 40 or 50 feet up a rocky rise to the tents.

I saw, however, that if he hadn't turned left but instead had continued straight down the gully - which would have been easy to do in a whiteout, even if one wasn't exhausted and stupid with altitude sickness - he would have quickly come to the westernmost edge of the Col and a 4,000 foot drop to the floor of the Western Cwm. Standing there, afraid to

move any closer to the edge, I noticed a single set of faint crampon tracks leading past me toward the abyss. Those tracks, I feared, were Harris's.

I returned to my tent just in time to overhear a radio call between Base Camp and Hall—who, I learned to my horror, was up on the summit ridge and calling for help. Beidleman then told me that Weathers and Namba were dead and that Fischer was missing somewhere on the peak above. An aura of morbid unreality had descended over the mountain, casting the morning in a nightmarish hue.

Failure heaped on failure: our radio batteries died, cutting us off from the rest of the mountain. Alarmed that they had lost contact with us, climbers at Camp Two called the South African team, which had arrived on the South Col the previous day. When Ian Woodall was asked if he would loan his radio to us, he refused.

It was only later that I learned the whole story of what happened. After reaching the summit around 3:30 P.M. on May 10, Scott Fischer had headed down with Lobsang, who had waited for Fischer on the summit while Beidleman and their clients descended. They got no farther than the South Summit before Fischer began to have difficulty standing and showed symptoms of severe hypothermia and cerebral edema. According to Lobsang, Fischer began "acting like crazy man." “ Scott is saying to me, 'I want to jump down to Camp Two.' He is saying many times." Pleading with him not to jump, Lobsang started short-roping Fischer, who outweighed him by some 70 pounds, down the Southeast Ridge. A few hours after dark, they got into some difficult mixed terrain 1,200 feet above the South Col, and Lobsang was unable to drag Fischer any farther.

Lobsang anchored Fischer to a snow-covered ledge and was preparing to leave him there when three tired Sherpas showed up. They were struggling to bring down Makalu Gau, the leader of the inexperienced Taiwanese team. He was as debilitated as Fischer. The Sherpas sat the Taiwanese leader beside the American leader, tied the two semiconscious men together, and around 10 P.M. descended into the night to get help.

Meanwhile, Hall and Hansen were still on the frightfully exposed summit ridge, engaged in a grim struggle of their own. The 46-year-old Hansen, whom Hall had turned back just below this spot exactly a year earlier, had been determined to bag the summit this time around. "I want to get this thing done and out of my life," he'd told me a couple of days earlier. "I don't want to have to come back here."

Indeed, Hansen had reached the top this time, though not until after 3 P.M., well after Hall's pre-determined turn-around time. Given Hall's conservative nature, many people wonder why he didn't turn Hansen around when it became obvious that he was running late. It's not far-fetched to speculate that because Hall had talked Hansen into coming back to Everest this year, it would have been especially hard for him to deny Hansen the summit a second time - especially when all of Fischer's clients were still marching blithely toward the top.

"It's very difficult to turn someone around high on the mountain," cautions Guy Cotter, a New Zealand guide who summited Everest with Hall in 1992 and was guiding the peak for him in 1995 when Hansen made his first attempt. "If a client sees that the summit is close and they're dead-set on getting there, they're going to laugh in your face and keep going up."

In any case, for whatever reason, Hall had not turned Hansen around. Instead, after reaching the summit at 2:10 P.M., Hall apparently waited for more than an hour for Hansen to arrive and then headed down with him. Soon after they began their descent, just below the top, Hansen apparently ran out of oxygen and collapsed. "Pretty much the same thing happened to Doug in '95," says Ed Viesturs, an American who guided the peak for Hall that year. "He was fine during the ascent, but as soon as he started down he lost it mentally and physically. He turned into a real zombie, like he'd used everything up."

At 4:31 P.M., Hall radioed Base Camp to say that he and Hansen were above the Hillary Step and urgently needed oxygen. Two full bottles were waiting for them at the South Summit; if Hall had known this he could have retrieved the gas fairly quickly and then climbed back up to give Hansen a fresh tank. But Harris, in the throes of his oxygen-starved dementia, overheard the 4:31 radio call while descending the Southeast Ridge and broke in to tell Hall—incorrectly, just as he'd told Groom and me—that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty. So Hall stayed with Hansen and tried to bring the helpless client down without oxygen, but could get him no farther than the top of the Hillary Step.

Cotter, a very close friend of both Hall and Harris, happened to be a few miles from Everest Base Camp at the time, guiding an expedition on nearby Mount Pumori. Overhearing the radio conversations between Hall and Base Camp, he called Hall at 5:36 and again at 5:57, urging his mate to leave Hansen and come down alone. "I know I sound like the bastard for telling Rob to abandon his client," confesses Cotter, "but by

then it was obvious that leaving Doug was his only choice." Hall, however, wouldn't consider going down without Hansen.

There was no further word from Hall until the middle of the night. At 2:46 A.M. on May 11, Cotter woke up to hear a long, broken transmission, probably unintended: Hall was wearing a remote microphone clipped to the shoulder strap of his backpack, which was occasionally keyed on by mistake. In this instance, says Cotter, "I suspect Rob didn't even know he was transmitting. I could hear someone yelling—it might have been Rob, but I couldn't be sure because the wind was so loud in the background. He was saying something like 'Keep moving! Keep going!' presumably to Doug, urging him on."

If that was indeed the case, it meant that in the wee hours of the morning Hall and Hansen were still struggling from the Hillary Step toward the South Summit, taking more than 12 hours to traverse a stretch of ridge typically covered by descending climbers in half an hour.

Hall's next call to Base Camp was at 4:43 A.M. He'd finally reached the South Summit but was unable to descend farther, and in a series of transmissions over the next two hours he sounded confused and irrational. "Andy was with me last night," Hall insisted, when in fact Harris had reached the South Col at sunset. "But he doesn't seem to be with me now. He was very weak." What Hall was thinking nobody knows.

Mackenzie asked him how Hansen was doing. "Doug," Hall replied, "is gone." That was all he said, and it was the last mention he ever made of Hansen.

On May 23, when Breashears and Viesturs, of the IMAX team, reached the summit, they found no sign of Hansen's body but they did find an ice ax planted about 50 feet below the Hillary Step, along a highly exposed section of ridge where the fixed ropes came to an end. It is quite possible that Hall managed to get Hansen down the ropes to this point, only to have him lose his footing and fall 7,000 feet down the sheer Southwest Face, leaving his ice ax jammed into the ridge crest where he slipped.

Although Hall somehow survived the night, his the radio calls to Base Camp early on May 11 disclosed that something was wrong with his legs, that he was no longer able to walk and was shaking uncontrollably. This was very disturbing news to the people down below, but it was amazing that Hall was even alive after spending a night without shelter or oxygen at 28,700 feet in hurricane-force wind and minus-100-degree windchill.

At 5 A.M., Base Camp patched through a call on the satellite telephone to Jan Arnold, Hall's wife, seven months pregnant with their first child in New Zealand. Arnold, a respected physician, had summited Everest with Hall in 1993 and entertained no illusions about the gravity of her husband's predicament. "My heart really sank when I heard his voice," she recalls. "He was slurring his words markedly. He sounded like he was just floating away. I'd been up there; I knew what it could be like in bad weather. Rob and I had talked about the impossibility of being rescued from the summit ridge. As he himself had put it, 'You might as well be on the moon.'"

By that time, Hall had located two full oxygen bottles, and after struggling for four hours trying to get the ice out of his oxygen mask, around 8:30 A.M. he finally started breathing the life-sustaining gas. Several times he announced that he was preparing to

descend, only to change his mind and remain at the South Summit. The day had started out sunny and clear, but the wind remained fierce, and by late morning the upper mountain was wrapped with thick clouds. Climbers at Camp Two reported that the wind over the summit sounded like a squadron of 747s, even from 8,000 feet below.

About 9:30 A.M., Ang Dorje and Lhakpa Chhiri ascended from Camp Four in a brave attempt to bring Hall down. At the same time, four other Sherpas went to rescue Fischer and Gau. When they reached Fischer, the Sherpas tried to give him oxygen and hot tea, but he was unresponsive. Though he was breathing—barely—his eyes were fixed and his teeth were clenched. Believing he was as good as dead, they left him tied to the ledge and started descending with Gau, who after receiving tea and oxygen, and with considerable assistance, was able to move to the South Col.

Higher on the peak, Ang Dorje and Lhakpa Chhiri climbed to 28,000 feet, but the murderous wind forced them to turn around there, still 700 feet below Hall.

Throughout that day, Hall's friends begged him to make an effort to descend from the South Summit under his own power. At 3:20 P.M., after one such transmission from Cotter, Hall began to sound annoyed. "Look," he said, "if I thought I could manage the knots on the fixed ropes with me frostbitten hands, I would have gone down six hours ago, pal. Just send a couple of the boys up with a big thermos of something hot—then I'll be fine."

At 6:20 P.M., Hall was patched through a second time to Arnold in Christchurch. "Hi, my sweetheart," he said in a slow, painfully distorted voice. "I hope you're tucked up in a

nice warm bed. How are you doing?"

"I can't tell you how much I'm thinking about you!" Arnold replied. "You sound so much better than I expected.... Are you warm, my darling?"

"In the context of the altitude, the setting, I'm reasonably comfortable," Hall answered, doing his best not to alarm her.

"How are your feet?"

"I haven't taken me boots off to check, but I think I may have a bit of frostbite."

"I'm looking forward to making you completely better when you come home," said Arnold. "I just know you're going to be rescued. Don't feel that you're alone. I'm sending all my positive energy your way!"

Before signing off, Hall told his wife, "I love you. Sleep well, my sweetheart. Please don't worry too much."

These would be the last words anyone would hear him utter. Attempts to make radio contact with Hall later that night and the next day went unanswered. Twelve days later, when Breashears and Viesturs climbed over the South Summit on their way to the top, they found Hall lying on his right side in a shallow ice-hollow, his upper body buried beneath a drift of snow.

Early on the morning of May 11, when I returned to Camp Four after searching in vain for Andy Harris, Hutchison again rose to the occasion. Standing in for the guide, Groom, who was unconscious in his tent, Stuart Hutchinson organized a team of four Sherpas to locate the bodies of our teammates, Weathers and Namba. The Sherpa search party, headed by Lhakpa Chhiri, departed ahead of Hutchison, who was so exhausted and befuddled from his hours of effort that he forgot to put his boots on and left camp in his light, smooth-soled liners. Only when Lhakpa Chhiri pointed out the blunder did Hutchison return for his boots. Following Boukreev's directions, the Sherpas had no trouble locating the two bodies at the edge of the Kangshung Face.

The first body turned out to be Namba, but Hutchison couldn't tell who it was until he knelt in the howling wind and chipped a three-inch-thick layer of ice from her face. To his shock, he discovered that she was still breathing. Both her gloves were gone, and her bare hands appeared to be frozen solid. Her eyes were dilated. The skin on her face was the color of porcelain. "It was terrible," Hutchinson recalls. "I was overwhelmed. She was very near death. I didn't know what to do."

He turned his attention to Weathers, who lay 20 feet away. His face was also caked with a thick armor of frost. Balls of ice the size of grapes were matted to his hair and eyelids. After clearing the frozen shell from Weathers' face, Hutchinson discovered that he, too, was still alive: "Beck was mumbling something, I think, but I couldn't tell what he was trying to say. His right glove was missing and he had terrible frostbite. He was as close to death as a person can be and still be breathing."

Badly shaken, Hutchinson went over to the Sherpas and asked Lhakpa Chhiri's advice.

Lhakpa Chhiri, an Everest veteran respected by Sherpas and Westerners alike for his mountain savvy, urged Hutchison to leave Weathers and Namba where they lay. Even if they survived long enough to be dragged back to Camp Four, they would certainly die before they could be carried down to Base Camp, and attempting a rescue would needlessly jeopardize the lives of the other climbers on the Col, most of whom were going to have enough trouble getting themselves down safely.

Hutchison decided that Chhiri was right. There was only one choice, however difficult: Let nature take its inevitable course with Weathers and Namba, and save the group's resources for those who could actually be helped. It was a classic act of drastic moral choice. When Hutchison returned to camp at 8:30 A.M. and told the rest of us of his decision, nobody doubted that it was the correct thing to do.

Later that day a rescue team headed by two of Everest's most experienced guides, Pete Athans and Todd Burleson, who were on the mountain with their own clients, arrived at Camp Four. Burleson was standing outside the tents about 4:30 P.M. when he noticed someone lurching slowly toward camp. The person's bare right hand, naked to the wind and horribly frostbitten, was outstretched in a weird, frozen salute. Whoever it was reminded Athans of a mummy in a low-budget horror film. That mummy turned out to be none other than Beck Weathers, somehow risen from the dead.

He lurched into camp.

A couple of hours earlier, a light must have gone on in the core of Weathers's brain, and he regained consciousness. "Initially I thought I was in a dream," he recalls. "Then I

saw how badly frozen my right hand was, and that helped bring me around to reality. Finally I woke up enough to recognize that I was in deep shit and the cavalry wasn't coming so I better do something about it myself."

Although Weathers was blind in his right eye and able to focus his left eye within a radius of only three or four feet, he started walking into the teeth of the wind, deducing correctly that camp lay in that direction. If he'd been wrong, he would have stumbled immediately down the Kangshung Face, the edge of which was a few yards in the opposite direction. Ninety minutes later he encountered "some unnaturally smooth, bluish-looking rocks" - which turned out to be the tents of Camp Four.

The next morning, May 12, Athans, Burleson, and climbers from the IMAX team short-roped Weathers down to Camp Two. On the morning of May 13, in a hazardous helicopter rescue, Beck Weathers and Makalu Gau were evacuated from the top of the icefall on a helicopter piloted by the Nepalese army. A month later, a team of Dallas surgeons would amputate Weathers's dead right hand just below the wrist and use skin grafts to reconstruct his left hand.

After helping to load Weathers and Gau into the rescue chopper, I sat in the snow for a long while, staring at my boots, trying to get some grip, however tenuous, on what had happened over the preceding 72 hours. Then, nervous as a cat, I headed down into the Icefall for one last trip through the maze of decaying seracs. I reached the base of Everest, wondering why it all had gone so wrong.

I'd always known, in the abstract, that climbing mountains was a dangerous pursuit.

But until I climbed in the Himalayas that spring, I'd never actually seen death at close range. And there was so much of it: Including three members of an Indo-Tibetan team who died on the north side just below the summit in the same May 10 storm and an Austrian killed some days later, 11 men and women lost their lives on Everest in May 1996, a tie with 1982 for the worst single-season death toll in the peak's history.

Of the six people on my team who reached the summit, four are now dead—people with whom I'd laughed and vomited and held long, intimate conversations. My actions—or failure to act—played a direct role in the death of Andy Harris. And while Yasuko Namba lay dying on the South Col, I was a mere 350 yards away, lying inside a tent, doing absolutely nothing. The stain this has left on my psyche is not the sort of thing that washes off after a month or two of grief and guilt-ridden self-reproach.

With so many barely qualified climbers rushing to Everest these days, a lot of people believe that a tragedy of this size was overdue. But nobody imagined that an expedition led by Hall would be at the center of it. Hall ran the tightest, safest operation on the mountain. So what happened? How can it be explained, not only to the loved ones left behind, but to the public?

Pride surely had something to do with it. Hall had become so good at running climbers of varying abilities up and down Everest that he may have become a little cocky. He'd bragged on more than one occasion that he could get almost any reasonably fit person to

the summit, and his record seemed to support this. He'd also demonstrated a remarkable ability to manage adversity.

In 1995, for instance, Hall and his guides not only had to cope with Hansen's problems high on the peak, but they also had to deal with the complete collapse of another client, the celebrated French alpinist Chantal Mauduit, who was making her seventh stab at Everest without oxygen. Mauduit passed out stone cold at 28,700 feet and had to be dragged and carried all the way from the South Summit to the South Col "like a sack of potatoes," as Guy Cotter put it. But he made it. After everybody came out of that summit attempt alive, Hall may well have thought there was little he couldn't handle.

Before this year, however, Hall had had uncommonly good luck with the weather, and one wonders whether it might have affected his judgment. "Season after season," says David Breashears, who has climbed Everest three times, "Rob had brilliant weather on summit day. He'd never been caught by a storm high on the mountain." In fact, the gale of May 10, though violent, was nothing extraordinary; it was a fairly typical Everest storm. If it had hit two hours later, it's likely that nobody would have died. On the other hand, if it had arrived even one hour earlier, the storm could easily have killed 18 or 20 climbers—me among them.

Indeed, the clock had as much to do with the tragedy as the weather, and ignoring the clock can't be passed off as an act of God. Delays at the fixed lines could easily have been avoided. Carefully planned turn-around times were ignored. That may have been influenced to some degree by the rivalry between Fischer and Hall. Fischer had a charismatic personality, and that charisma had been brilliantly marketed. Fischer was

trying very hard to eat into Hall's business, and Hall knew it. In a certain sense, they may have been playing a game chicken up there, each guide plowing ahead with one eye on the clock, waiting to see who was going to blink first and turn around.

Shocked by the death toll, people have been quick to suggest policies and procedures intended to ensure that the catastrophes of this season won't be repeated. But guiding Everest is a very loosely regulated business, administered by a Third World bureaucracy that is spectacularly ill-equipped to assess qualifications of guides or clients, in a nation that has a vested interest in issuing as many climbing permits as the market will support.

If the truth be told, a little education is probably the most that can be hoped for. Everest would without question be safer if clients truly understood the risks they face - the thinness of the margin by which human life is maintained above 25,000 feet. People with Everest dreams need to keep in mind that when things go wrong up in the Death Zone - and sooner or later they always do - the strongest guides in the world may be powerless to save their clients' lives. Indeed, as the events of 1996 demonstrated, the strongest guides in the world are sometimes powerless to save even their own lives.

Climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. It is an activity that idealizes risk-taking; its most celebrated figures have always been those who stuck their necks out the farthest and managed to get away with it. Climbers, as a species, are simply not distinguished by an excess of common sense. And that holds especially true for Everest climbers: When presented with a chance to reach the planet's highest summit, people are surprisingly quick to abandon prudence altogether. "Eventually," warns Tom Hornbein, 33 years after his ascent of the West Ridge, "what

happened on Everest this season is certain to happen again.