

Trapped Near the Summit

Rob Hall, Doug Hanson, Scott Fischer, Makalu Gau

Scott Fischer ascended to the summit around 3:40 on the afternoon of May 10 to find his devoted friend and sirdar, Lopsang Jangbu, waiting for him. The Sherpa pulled his radio from inside his down jacket, made contact with Ingrid Hunt at Base Camp, then handed the walkie-talkie to Fischer. "We all made it," Fischer told Hunt, 11,400 feet below. "God, I'm tired."

A few minutes later, Makalu Gau arrived with two Sherpas. Rob Hall was there, too, waiting impatiently for Doug Hanson to appear as a rising tide of cloud lapped ominously at the summit ridge.

According to Lopsang, during the fifteen or twenty minutes Fischer spent on the summit, he complained repeatedly that he wasn't feeling well - something the congenitally stoic guide almost never did. "Scott tell to me, I am too tired. I am sick, also, need medicine for stomach," the Sherpa recalls. "I gave him tea, but he drank just a little bit, just half cup. So I tell to him, 'Scott, please, we go fast down.' So we come down then."

Fischer started down first, about 3:55. Lopsang reports that although Scott had used supplemental oxygen during the entire ascent, and his third canister was more than three-quarters full when he left the summit, for some reason he took his mask off and stopped using it.

Shortly after Fischer left the top, Gau and his Sherpas departed as well, and finally Lopsang headed down, leaving Hall alone on the summit awaiting Hansen. A moment after Lopsang started down, about 4:00, Hansen at last appeared, toughing it out, moving painfully, slowly over the last bump on the ridge. As soon as he saw Hansen, Hall hurried down to meet him. Hall's obligatory turn-around time had come and gone a full two hours earlier. Given the guide's conservative, exceedingly methodical nature, many of his colleagues have expressed puzzlement at this uncharacteristic lapse of judgment. *Why*, they wondered, didn't he turn Hansen around much lower on the

mountain, as soon as it became obvious that the American climber was running late?

Exactly one year earlier, Hall had turned Hansen around on the South Summit at 2:30 P.M and to be denied so close to the top was a crushing disappointment to Hansen. He told me several times that he'd returned to Everest in 1996 largely as a result of Hall's advocacy. He said Rob had called him from New Zealand a dozen times urging him to give it another shot. And this time Doug was absolutely determined to bag the top. "I want to get this thing done and out of my life," he'd told me three days earlier at Camp Two. "I don't want to have to come back here. I'm getting too old for this shit."

It doesn't seem far-fetched to speculate that, because Hall had talked Hansen into coming back to Everest, it would have been especially hard for him to deny Hansen the summit a second time. "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." As the veteran American guide Peter Lev told *Climbing Magazine* after the disastrous events on Everest, "We think that people pay us to make good decisions, but what people *really* pay for is to get to the top.

In any case, Hall did not turn Hansen around at 2:00 PM - or, for that matter, at 4:00, when he met his client just below the top. Instead, according to Lopsang, Hall placed Hansen's arm around his neck and assisted the weary client up the final forty feet to the summit. They stayed only a minute or two, then turned to begin the long descent.

When Lopsang saw that Hansen was faltering, he held up his own descent long enough to make sure Doug and Rob made it safely across a dangerously corniced area just below the top. Then, eager to catch Fischer, who was by now more than thirty minutes ahead of him, the Sherpa continued down the ridge, leaving Hansen and Hall at the top of the Hillary Step.

Just after Lopsang disappeared down the Step, Hansen apparently ran out of oxygen and foundered. He'd expended every last bit of his strength to reach the summit, and now there was nothing left in reserve for the descent. "Pretty much the same thing happened to Doug in '95, " says Ed Viesturs, who, like Cotter, was guiding 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 zombie, like he'd used everything up."

At 4:30 PM and again at 4:41, Hall got on the radio to say that he and Hansen were in trouble high on the summit ridge 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 Andy Harris, still at the oxygen cache, in, the throes of his hypoxic dementia, overheard these radio calls and broke in to tell Hall - incorrectly, just as he'd told Mike Groom and me - that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty.

Groom heard the conversation between Harris and Hall on his radio as he was descending the Southeast Ridge with Yasuko Namba, just above the Balcony. He tried to call Hall to correct the misinformation and let him know that there *were* in fact full oxygen canisters waiting for him at the South Summit, but, Groom explains, "my radio was malfunctioning. I was able to receive most calls, but my outgoing calls could rarely be heard by anyone. On the couple of occasions that my calls *were* being picked up by Rob, and I tried to tell him where the full cylinders were, I was immediately interrupted by Andy, transmitting to say there was no gas at the South Summit."

Unsure whether there was oxygen waiting for him, Hall decided that the best course of action was to remain with Hansen and try to bring the nearly helpless client down without gas. But when they got to the top of the Hillary Step, Hall couldn't get Hansen down the forty foot vertical drop, and their progress ground to a halt.

Shortly before 5:00, Groom finally managed to get through to Hall and communicate that there actually *was* oxygen at the South Summit. Fifteen minutes later, Lopsang arrived at the South Summit

on his way down from the top and encountered Harris. At this point, according to Lopsang, Harris must have finally understood that at least two of the oxygen canisters stashed there were full, because he pleaded with the Sherpa to help him carry the life-sustaining gas up to Hall and Hansen on the Hillary Step. "Andy says he will pay me five hundred dollars to bring oxygen to Rob and Doug," Lopsang recalls. "But I am supposed to take care of just my group. I have to take care of Scott. So I say to Andy, 'no, I go fast down.'"

At 5:30, as Lopsang left the South Summit to resume his descent, he turned to see Harris - who must have been severely debilitated, if his condition when I'd seen him on the South Summit two hours earlier was any indication - plodding slowly up the summit ridge to assist Hall and Hansen. It was an act of heroism that would cost Harris his life.

A few hundred feet below, Scott Fischer was struggling down the Southeast Ridge, growing weaker and weaker. Upon reaching the top of the rock steps at 28,400 feet, he was confronted with a series of short but troublesome rappels that angled along the ridge. Too exhausted to cope with the complexities of the rope work, Fischer slid directly down an adjacent snow slope on his butt. This was easier than following the fixed lines, but once he was below the level of the rock steps it meant that he had to make a laborious 330 foot rising traverse through knee-deep snow to regain the route.

Tim Madsen, descending with Beidleman's group, happened to glance up from the Balcony around 5:20 and saw Fischer as he began the traverse. "He looked really tired, Madsen remembers. "He'd take ten steps, then sit and rest, take a couple more steps, rest again. He was moving real slow. But I could see Lopsang above him, coming down the ridge, and I figured, shoot, with Lopsang there to look after him, Scott would be O.K."

According to Lopsang, the Sherpa caught up with Fischer about 6:00 PM just above the Balcony: "Scott is not using oxygen, so I put mask on him. He says, 'I am very sick, too sick to go down. I am going to jump.'" He is saying many times, acting like crazy man, so I tie him on rope, quickly, otherwise he is jumping down into Tibet."

Securing Fischer with a 75 foot length of rope, Lopsang persuaded his friend not to jump, and then got him moving slowly toward the South Col. "The storm is very bad now," Lopsang recalls. "BOOM! BOOM! Two times like sound of gun, there is big thunder. Two times lightning hit very close near me and Scott. Very loud, very scared."

Three hundred feet below the Balcony, the gentle snow gully they'd been gingerly descending gave way to outcroppings of loose, steep shale, and Fischer was unable to handle the challenging terrain in his ailing condition. "Scott cannot walk now; I have big problem," says Lopsang. "I try to carry, but I am also very tired. Scott is big body; I am very small; I cannot carry him. He tell to me, 'Lopsang, you go down. You go down.' I tell to him. 'No, I stay together here with you.'"

About 8:00 PM Lopsang was huddling with Fischer on a snow covered ledge when Makalu Gau and his two Sherpas appeared out of the howling blizzard. Gau was nearly as debilitated as Fischer and was likewise unable to descend the difficult bands of shale, so his Sherpas sat the Taiwanese climber beside Lopsang and Fischer and then continued down without him. "I stay with Scott and Makalu one hour, maybe longer," says Lopsang. "I am very cold, very tired. Scott tell to me, 'You go down, send up Anatoli.' So I say, 'OK I go down; I send quick Sherpa up and Anatoli.' Then I make good place for Scott and go down."

Lopsang left Fischer and Gau on a ledge 1,200 feet above the South Col and fought his way down through the storm. Unable to see, he got far off route toward the west, ended up below the level of the Col before he realized his error, and was forced to climb back up the northern margin of the Lhotse Face to locate Camp.

By midnight, nevertheless, he made it to safety. "I go to Anatoli tent," reported Lopsang. "I tell to Anatoli, 'Please, you go up, Scott is very sick, he cannot walk. Then I go to my tent, just fall asleep, sleep like dead person.'"

Guy Cotter, a longtime friend of both Hall's and Harris's, happened to be a few miles from Everest Base Camp on the afternoon of May 10, where he was guiding an expedition on Mount Pumori,

and had been monitoring Hall's radio transmissions throughout the day. At 2:15 Pm. he talked to Hall on the summit, and everything sounded fine. At 4:30 and 4:41, however, Hall called down to say that Doug was out of oxygen and unable to move, and Cotter became very alarmed. At 4:53 he got on the radio and strongly urged Hall to descend to the South Summit. "The call was mostly to convince him to come down and get some gas," says Cotter, "because we knew he wasn't going to be able to do anything for Doug without it. Rob said he could get himself down OK, but not with Doug." But forty minutes later, Hall was still with Hansen atop the Hillary Step, going nowhere. During radio calls from Hall at 5:36, and again at 5:57, Cotter implored his mate to leave Hansen and come down alone. "I know I sound like the bastard for telling Rob to abandon his client," confessed 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, Cotter woke up in his tent below Pumori to hear a long, broken transmission, probably unintended: Hall had been 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. But he was saying something like, 'Keep moving! Keep going!' presumably to Doug, urging him on."

If this was indeed the case, it meant that in the wee hours of the morning Hall and Hansen - perhaps accompanied by Harris - were still struggling from the Hillary Step toward the South Summit through the gale. And if so, it also meant that it had taken them more than ten hours to move down a stretch of ridge that was typically covered by descending climbers in less than half an hour. Of course, this is highly speculative. all that is certain is that Hall called down at 5:57 PM. At that point, he and Hansen were still on the Step; and at 4:43 on the morning of May 11, when he next spoke to Base Camp, he

had descended to the South Summit. And at that point neither Hansen nor Harris was with him.

In a series of transmissions over the next two hours, Rob sounded disturbingly confused and irrational. During the call at 4:43 AM he told Caroline Mackenzie, our Base Camp doctor, that his legs no longer worked, and that he was "too clumsy to move." In a ragged, barely audible voice, Rob croaked, "Harold was with me last night, but he doesn't seem to be with me now. He was very weak." Then, obviously befuddled, he asked, "Was Harold with me? Can you tell me?"

At 5:00 A.M Base Camp patched through a call on the satellite telephone to Jan Arnold, Hall's wife, in Christchurch, New Zealand. She had climbed to the summit of Everest with Hall in 1993, and she 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 Major Tom or something, 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."

At 5:31, Hall took four milligrams of oral dexamethasone and indicated he was still trying to clear his oxygen mask of ice. Talking to Base Camp, he asked repeatedly about the condition of Makalu Gau, Fischer, Beck Weathers, Yasuko Namba, and his other clients. He seemed most concerned about Andy Harris and kept inquiring about his whereabouts. Cotter says that they tried to steer the discussion away from Harris, who in all likelihood was dead, "because we didn't want Rob to have another reason for staying up there. At one point, Ed Viesturs jumped on the radio from Camp Two and fibbed, 'Don't worry about Andy; he's down here with us.'"

A little later, Mackenzie asked Rob 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 David Breashears and Ed Viesturs reached the summit, they would find no sign of Hansen's body; they did,

however, find an ice ax planted about fifty vertical feet above the South Summit, along a very exposed section of ridge where the fixed ropes came to an end. It's quite possible that Hall and/or Harris 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 where he slipped. But this, too, is merely conjecture.

What might have happened to Harris remains even harder to discern. Between Lopsang's testimony, Hall's radio calls, and the fact that another ice ax found on the South Summit was positively identified as Andy's, we can be reasonably sure he was at the South Summit with Hall on the night of May 10. Beyond that, however, virtually nothing is known about how the young guide met his end.

At 6:00 AM, Cotter asked Hall if the sun had reached him yet. "Almost," Rob replied - which was good, because he'd mentioned a moment earlier that he was shaking uncontrollably in the awful cold. In conjunction with his earlier revelation that he was no longer able to walk, this had been very upsetting news to the people listening down below. Nevertheless, it was remarkable that Hall was even alive after spending a night without shelter or oxygen at 28,700 feet in hurricane force winds and windchill of one hundred degrees below zero.

During this same radio call, Hall asked after Harris yet again: "Did anyone see Harold last night except meeself? " Some three hours later Rob was still obsessing over Andy's whereabouts. At 8:43 AM he mused over the radio, "Some of Andy's gear is still here. I thought he must have gone ahead in the night-time. Listen, can you account for him or not?" Wilton attempted to dodge the question, but Rob persisted in his line of inquiry: "O.K. I mean his ice ax is here and his jacket and things." "Rob," Viesturs replied from Camp Two, "if you can put the jacket on, just use it. Keep going down and worry only about yourself. Everybody else is taking care of other people. Just get yourself down. After struggling for four hours to de-ice his mask, Hall finally got it to work, and by 9:00 AM he was breathing supplemental oxygen for the first time. By then he'd spent more than sixteen hours above 28,700 feet without gas.

Thousands of feet below, his friends stepped up their efforts to cajole him to start down. "Rob, this is Helen at Base Camp," Wilton importuned, sounding as if she was on the brink of tears, "You think about that little baby of yours. You're going to see its face in a couple of months, so keep on going."

At 6:20 PM, Cotter contacted Hall to tell him that Jan Arnold was on the satellite phone from Christchurch and was waiting to be patched through. "Give me a minute," Rob said. "My mouth's dry. I want to eat a bit of snow before I talk to her." A little later he came back on and rasped in a slow, horribly distorted voice, "Hi, my sweetheart. 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 my 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 speak. 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.