

## Tragedy on Everest

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This case was written by David Breashears, Morten Hansen and Ludo Van der Heyden, with the assistance of Elin Williams. It is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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## Prologue

On 10 May 1996, a blizzard hit the summit of Mount Everest. On the southeast route alone, five climbers perished in the storm. Others among them – marooned by darkness, flattened by high winds, numbed by frostbite, confused by lack of oxygen – were lucky to survive. Some would be left disabled for life.

Yet, five or six weeks earlier, expeditions had gathered in the warm spring sunshine of Base Camp staring at the beauty of the world's highest mountain, hoping and praying for benevolence from the mountain, the weather and the winds ...

## Early April: Arrival

Welcome to Base Camp, a ramshackle collection of 300-plus tents and makeshift rock shelters strewn across the dirty ice of the Khumbu Glacier in Nepal.

While you are picking your way among the rubble of rocks, ice, people and yaks, you soon realize that this chaos is ordered. The shelters are in fact grouped according to 14 expeditions of varying sizes. The larger settlements have dedicated tents for cooking, eating, communications equipment, latrines and even solar-heated showers, as well as sleeping quarters. And if you raise your eyes above the jagged lines of colourful nylon peaks, you see the world's most awe-inspiring skyline in all its celebrated splendour.

As you linger in Base Camp, certain people begin to stand out from the crowd of around 300 temporary residents. The first you notice is a wiry, affable New Zealander with a bushy dark beard and a dry sense of humour. Behind the twinkle in his eyes, however, lies an unmistakable intensity and focus. His confident and commanding air suggests that – if such a post existed – he would indeed be the 'Mayor of Base Camp', as some already call him. Indeed, **Rob Hall** (age 35) is in charge of the largest expedition that season: 26 people, including eight clients who have each paid up to US\$65,000 to be guided to the world's highest point. And back again.

They could not be in safer hands. Hall's marketing material promotes his company, **Adventure Consultants**, as the 'world leader in Everest climbing'. His record speaks for itself, so this is not just marketing puff. One of his colleagues will later recall that he was "the guy who was seen as the best in the industry, the one that everybody else looked up to for the organized way in which he ran his expeditions."<sup>1</sup> Over six years, he has successfully taken 39 amateur climbers to the summit of 'the Hill', as he calls it. Maybe – some are quick to point out – he has been blessed by good weather throughout this career, but, as Pasteur said, 'luck favours the prepared mind.'

Last year, 1995, was not so successful. He and all his clients were forced by conditions to turn around just 100m from the summit. If anything, this one failure to reach the top has only served to enhance Hall's reputation for safety.

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1 Guy Cotter, Hall's former climbing partner and an Adventure Consultants guide on another Himalayan expedition in 1996: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/stories/lifeafter.html>

This year, there is another formidable presence in Base Camp, the American **Scott Fischer** (age 41). For his **Mountain Madness** guiding company, based in Seattle, it will be a first ascent of Everest and only the second peak over 8,000m (26,250ft). Fischer himself has already reached the top of the ‘Big E’, as he calls it, without bottled oxygen. His mountain credentials are impeccable. His party of 23 is almost as big as Hall’s, charges similar prices and also numbers eight clients. But assembling the expedition has been tedious, and some of his intended guides have joined other expeditions, including Hall’s. He still needs to establish his firm’s Himalayan reputation.

Fischer’s herculean silhouette is in stark contrast to Hall’s. Tall, muscular, square-jawed and blond-ponytailed, with a gold ring in one ear, he is not only physically impressive but also has a magnetic personality. ‘People just gravitate to him,’<sup>2</sup> say his friends. They admit that his easy-going demeanour makes him less imposing than his Adventure Consultants counterpart but insist that he is every bit as charismatic.

It takes a little longer to notice a third significant figure, **David Breashears** (age 40), also from the United States. He too has a track record: he has reached the top of the world twice already and broadcast the first live television pictures from the summit back in 1983. In 1985, Breashears took a friend, the wealthy 55-year-old businessman Dick Bass, to the summit – until then, the preserve of only elite mountaineers.

This year, however, he has assembled a team of ten paid experts, climbers and cinematographers, with a total budget of US\$5.5 million, to bring back the world’s first **IMAX**<sup>®</sup> large-format footage from the summit. If they succeed it will be an unprecedented technical and logistical feat. For Breashears, who has been making documentaries about Everest for 15 years, shrinking film to the size of a television screen each time, the IMAX project is a chance to create images on a scale (22m wide by 16m high, or 72ft by 53ft) that does justice to the world’s highest mountain.

In addition to noticing these three expedition leaders, you also notice that you are short of breath and easily tired. This is a consequence of the altitude. At 5,300m (17,600ft), there is only half as much oxygen in the air as at sea level. As a result, your body is less efficient. Everything takes more time and much more effort.

Here are some other facts. If you had landed on the summit of Everest instead of at Base Camp, you would probably be dead by now. The air at 8,848m (29,028ft) – the altitude of a cruising airliner – has only 20% of the oxygen that is available at sea level, and the humidity is uncomfortably low. The human body cannot survive more than few minutes at that altitude unless it has undergone a process of acclimatization – going progressively higher (and then down again) over the course of several weeks. Even then, above 8,000m survival is a matter of hours. Most climbers, including professionals, rely on bottled oxygen to remain strong enough, warm enough and clear-headed enough to make it back down quickly. That’s why the area above Everest’s South Col at 7,900m (26,000ft), where most expeditions make their high camp in preparation for the final summit push, has been dubbed the ‘Death Zone’.

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2 Neal Beidleman, a Mountain Madness guide:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/etc/remembering.html>

Here are some final facts for anyone on the mountain this spring of 1996. The path to the top is strewn with bodies, some preserved by the low temperatures for decades. By now, thousands of people have attempted to reach the world's highest summit – and many have been successful. Everest has been climbed more than 800 times by various routes, with and without bottled oxygen. Nearly 150 people have paid for their dreams and ambitions with their lives. In the 1980s alone, 1,871 climbers set off from Base Camp. Just 180 made it to the summit; 56 died. The odds of failure are high. You'd better get on with preparations – it takes your mind off these statistics. If you think too hard about them, you will never make it to the top.

### **Mid-April: Acclimatization**

'Climb high, sleep low' is the relentless mantra of the acclimatization process. Up and down, up and down – 600m (2,000ft) or so higher each time, as your body adapts. Four to six weeks of danger and boredom in equal measure, passing between the chiasmic crevasses and teetering towers of the Khumbu Icefall, just above Base Camp, on every upward and downward trip.

Hall's Adventure Consultants stick together throughout the acclimatization phase. He runs the proverbially tight ship, carefully controlling the seasoned Base Camp team and meticulously supervising his two fellow guides, Australian **Mike Groom** (37) and fellow New Zealander **Andy Harris** (31). Groom has already climbed the world's four highest peaks without bottled oxygen. However, on one expedition he lost the front third of both his feet to frostbite; it took him two years to walk again. His feet are now more vulnerable to frostbite. Harris, on the other hand, has never climbed anything above 7,000m (22,100ft); his great climbing skills, youthful enthusiasm and dedication to his hero, Rob Hall, amply compensate for his lack of experience.

As well as a professional base camp manager and a team doctor, the other paid members of the team are Sherpas, the Nepalese mountain people who are essential members of any major Himalayan expedition, and are all the more important when guiding clients. Born and raised at 14,000 feet, Sherpas have adapted physiologically to cope with backbreaking work at altitude. They are the undisputed pioneers of Everest climbing and have a reputation for unwavering loyalty – at least to members of their own team. For cultural and economic reasons, even the most experienced Sherpas are reluctant to challenge Westerners.

Thanks to Hall's experience, reputation and resources, Adventure Consultants has been able to recruit seven of the most respected Sherpas in the business. Their tasks include fixing ropes, carrying equipment and hauling supplies up the mountain, including the burdensome, expensive, yet life-preserving oxygen cylinders. Most of them have climbed with Hall before and are as devoted to him as young Harris is.

The eight clients, in contrast, have no load-hauling or gear-fixing duties. They do not even have to make their own tea. Among the assorted, international group are a lawyer, a publisher and three doctors, including **Beck Weathers** (49), a talkative Texan pathologist. The only woman is **Yasuko Namba** (47), a diminutive and very quiet personnel director from Tokyo, who is following in a proud tradition: the first woman to climb Everest back in 1975 was Japanese. Weathers and Namba are well on their way to completing the 'Seven Summits' (the

highest peaks on each of the world's seven continents). But Everest is in a different league from the other six. *How* different becomes apparent only when you set foot on it.

Not all clients exude affluence – or its attendant confidence. **Doug Hansen** (46), from Seattle, was turned back by Hall in 1995 just 100m (330ft) below the summit. He was suffering from altitude sickness and only narrowly avoided catastrophe. Postal worker by day and construction worker by night, Hansen has spent the intervening year trying to raise enough money to return. He didn't succeed, but Hall has let him come at a reduced price. He likes Hansen.

Another bargain was struck over one of the last clients to join the team, **Jon Krakauer** (42), an American journalist, former carpenter and keen climber, though without high-altitude experience. He has been assigned by *Outside*, an influential and high-circulation American adventure magazine, to write about the burgeoning industry of Everest guiding. His passage is paid in the form of advertising space. He was due to climb with his old friend Scott Fischer, but at the final hour Hall offered the editor a better deal. Fischer is still none too pleased about Krakauer's defection.

Mountain Madness and Fischer have achieved their own publicity coup in recruiting **Sandy Hill Pittman** (41) as a client. Although Pittman – back for her third attempt on Everest – is a well-known columnist, she is also a wealthy New Yorker whose society exploits are said to fill more pages than she writes herself. She is not the only extrovert on the team. Flame-haired, flamboyant Danish lawyer **Lene Gammelgaard** (35) is set on becoming the first Scandinavian woman to climb Everest – and insists she will get there without bottled oxygen.

Other clients include Fischer's very good friend **Dale Kruse** (45). He is a dentist from Colorado who, as the first client to sign up at full price, has effectively provided the "seed funding" for the Mountain Madness expedition. Though technically accomplished, he has a poor record of coping with altitude. Like Doug Hansen on the other team, he is physically fit but cannot overcome his own genetic heritage. Also on the team is American mountaineering legend **Pete Schoening** (68), bidding to become the oldest man to ascend Everest. He has brought with him his nephew, a former downhill skiing champion. Two other skiers (a romantically linked pair of ski patrollers from Alaska with strong mountaineering experience) and a Wall Street trader, also a seasoned mountaineer, complete the client list.

While Hall's clients are marshalled up and down en masse through the perilous beauty of the Khumbu Icefall, and progressively higher, Fischer's are encouraged to acclimatize individually and at their own pace under his watchful (if sometimes distant) eye. Of course, they are also given ample support. Mountain Madness, like the other big expeditions, has a sizeable group of climbing Sherpas as well as a Base Camp team. In fact, Fischer has managed to find an adventurous young medic who is willing to act as both base camp manager *and* team doctor – without pay.

Fischer has also succeeded in enlisting one of the most highly respected mountaineers in the world as his second-in-command. High-altitude legend **Anatoli Boukreev** (38) is planning to climb without bottled oxygen, as he always does, despite his guiding responsibilities. The Russian-born Kazakhstani has worked as a guide previously and climbed Everest multiple times, but the combination of imperfect English, professional pride and natural aloofness does not always make for an easy relationship with the clients – or, as the weeks wear on, with his

expedition leader. He is fortunate that Mountain Madness' other guide, **Neal Beidleman** (36), an experienced American climber but Everest first-timer, is often on hand to smooth things over.

The IMAX team includes some very seasoned climbers. But the most famous name belongs to possibly the least experienced. **Jamling Tenzing Norgay** (31) is the son of Tenzing Norgay, the Sherpa who made the first-ever ascent of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953. Now Jamling has decided to follow in his father's footsteps up the Southeast Ridge. With him are **Araceli Segarra** (26), a photogenic, exuberant Catalan with an impressive climbing résumé, and maverick **Sumiyo Tsuzuki** (28), the second Japanese woman at Base Camp that spring. Culturally, she is very different from the rest of the team – and she takes a decidedly iconoclastic approach to Japanese culture too, especially her country's male-dominated climbing scene. All three, if successful, will be making their long-yearned-for first ascent of Everest. In fact, both women have experienced the anguish of turning around high on Everest in the last few years.

Not so for **Ed Viesturs** (38), Breashears' deputy. He has already been to the top twice without bottled oxygen and is considered one of America's finest mountaineers. At the same time, he is known for his reliability and resourcefulness. 'Steady Ed', as he is nicknamed, has even brought his new wife along as base camp manager for a distinctive honeymoon experience. He has climbed several other 8,000m peaks and worked as an Everest guide for Rob Hall just last year. His catchphrase is 'Getting up is optional. Getting down is mandatory.'

The roll call of experts is completed with a strong team of Sherpas, a Base Camp production crew and an Austrian cameraman, **Rob Schauer** (42), who is also one of Europe's leading mountaineering filmmakers. With so many experts on board, it is not easy for a self-confessed micromanager like Breashears.

The international character of the team makes for an exotic and eclectic cuisine. Segarra's parents own a bistro near Barcelona, so the mess tent is well stocked with fine Serrano ham prepared by her mother. Tsuzuki has brought unagi (smoked eel) and plum wine from Tokyo, and Schauer shares smoked meat and pungent Austrian cheeses. Mealtimes are as important for bonding as climbing together – and the team spirit is soon strong.<sup>3</sup> Breashears will later recall: "There wasn't a prima donna in the bunch. None of us harboured any illusions about who the real diva was. Everest would take centre stage."<sup>4</sup>

However, there is one impostor in the camp in the guise of a 19kg (42lb) behemoth: the low-temperature, high-altitude, 'lightweight' IMAX camera that has been specially engineered for the occasion. Before coming to the mountains, Breashears spent weeks testing the camera in a cold chamber at temperatures of  $-45^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-50^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) to the point that he had total confidence it would work. With the battery, lens and loaded film magazine removed, the unit can be reduced to just about 11.5kg (25lb) – the maximum weight a very strong Sherpa can be expected to carry above 7,600m (25,000ft). On the other hand, this means reassembling the monster at the summit – without any pieces rolling down into Tibet.

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3 Breashears, 1999, p. 232

4 Ibid., p. 234

### **Late April: Acclimatization (continued)**

As April marches on, the inexorable routine of acclimatization continues and the temperature rises. The steady up and down of carrying loads, preparing camps and shaping human physiology seems as if it will never end. Most of the hard work is left to the Sherpas, but crossing the Khumbu Icefall and climbing the valley above it become unpleasantly hot work for everyone. Temperatures here can reach as high as 37°C (100°F), making the terrain of land-locked icebergs melting slowly downwards all the more dangerous.

Back at Base Camp for the obligatory rest between upward forays, there are good times, especially in the three expeditions' mess tents of an evening. Team dinners are the most enjoyable and bonding part of the routine. But during the day, boredom inevitably sets in. The main activities are eating, sleeping, reading, writing home, washing clothes in plastic buckets and most of all *waiting*.

During this time, the teams barely communicate with one another. Rob Hall is immersed in his meticulous planning and strict regime, under which Adventure Consultants clients are told when to sleep, when to climb, when to eat and when to drink. His less accomplished clients work hard on improving their technical skills under his watchful eye. Hall continues to involve himself in every detail of life at Base Camp and of the increasingly higher climbs the group is now performing.

In the Mountain Madness camp, there is less need to improve ice-climbing skills. Team members continue to acclimatize at a more individual pace, but the up-and-down routine is the same. Scott Fischer faces a number of early logistical issues – from customs problems with his Russian consignment of oxygen canisters to price disputes with the Nepali porters who bring Base Camp supplies. A high-altitude tent designed to withstand extreme winds fails to arrive.

There are fewer unforeseen setbacks in the IMAX camp – except for the regular, lawnmower-like roaring of the monstrous camera (which became a full member of the team when the others nicknamed it 'the pig') and the occasional unwanted 'extra' when a member of another team wanders into a shot.

As well as acclimatizing and filming at lower altitudes, the team is also planning to stash a carefully calculated number of extra oxygen bottles at Camp IV, high on the mountain. That will give them the option of more than one summit bid if necessary. Breashears has purchased extra oxygen bottles accordingly and has also paid extra for a climbing permit that allows enough time for a possible second attempt.

### **April–May: Setbacks**

Only when faced by unlikely circumstances do the parallel existences of the teams meet. On 7 April, an Adventure Consultants Sherpa falls into a crevasse. Rob Hall is forced to enlist the help of Sherpas from other teams to rescue him. They are not pleased. They have enough tiring and dangerous work of their own to do.

In mid-April, Sumiyo Tsuzuki from the IMAX team cracks a rib during a coughing fit – a common injury at high altitude. She stoically soldiers on. In the Mountain Madness team, there are similar problems. Dale Kruse is starting to show symptoms of his old propensity for altitude sickness. And, after severe insomnia brought on by altitude, Pete Schoening comes to accept that he will not become the oldest man to climb Everest after all. He counts himself out of the final push.

The problems are not just physical. On 20 April Fischer has a minor showdown with Boukreev in Lene Gammelgaard's presence. He tells him:

*Anatoli, you were hired to guide on this trip – to mingle with the team – not just to work hard high on the mountain. If you merely function as a strong climber, I might as well have hired an altitude Sherpa.<sup>5</sup>*

On 22 April, a more serious incident shakes the Mountain Madness team. As Scott Fischer is descending, he comes across one of his Sherpas sitting high on the mountain. The man is exhibiting the symptoms of high-altitude pulmonary oedema (HAPE): difficulty breathing, coughing, tightness in the chest and extreme weakness. Fischer tells him to go down immediately – the only cure. But instead, perhaps to save face or simply out of misplaced loyalty, the veteran Sherpa chooses to go up and spend the night recovering at 6,500m (21,300ft) in Camp II. He arrives delirious and coughing up pink fluid.

With no Mountain Madness guides present, four clients undertake emergency treatment, radioing their inexperienced team doctor on the team's antiquated communications equipment for instructions. She calls on another expedition's physician for advice, but the recommended treatment has no effect and, the next day, a rescue party of guides and Sherpas is sent up. Meanwhile the clients try to drag the sick man down to meet them on a makeshift toboggan – one of them exhausting himself to such an extent that Scott Fischer has to effect a second rescue mission himself. While the critically ill Sherpa is evacuated by helicopter to Kathmandu, the rescuers are left in a state of fatigue at Base Camp.

As the camps take root higher up the mountain, mid-May is fast approaching – and with it, so everyone hopes, the window of summit-enabling weather that usually opens up at this time of year. Rob Hall's high-tech satellite communications crackle with forecasts. A sense of anticipation – mingled with dread – hangs heavy in the thin air of Base Camp.

The realization is also dawning that a comparatively large number of climbers are targeting the same small annual time window for the climb to the top. Some coordination is needed. Rob Hall, predictably, steps up to organize matters. There is a meeting of expedition leaders in the Adventure Consultants mess tent, and an agreement is negotiated. The IMAX team will go ahead of the other groups and reach the summit on 8 or 9 May. That leaves them with the option of a second attempt. Hall, Fischer and company, whose tight schedules allow for only one summit bid, will follow next on 10 May. Remaining teams, including a small Taiwanese group, will follow later.

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5 Gammelgaard, p. 107

Thus, if things go according to plan – and the mountain herself is in agreement – all three of our teams will meet, Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness going up as IMAX comes down on 10 May.

## **8 May: Departure**

For all the rigorous planning, the teams' paths cross earlier than expected – and much lower.

The traditional Everest timetable is to climb to Camp I above the Icefall, possibly spending the night there, before moving on through the steep valley known as the Western Cwm to Camp II – and the next day to Camp III, perched on a tiny ledge on the face of Lhotse (Everest's lower neighbour). This is the highest point at which the clients have slept during their acclimatization, but most of them have also been as far as the final camp at 7,900m (26,000ft) on the South Col (between the summits of Everest and Lhotse and just below the Death Zone). As day trips go, Camp III to Camp IV is not far: only 500m (1,640ft), but most of them are vertical – and they include the rocky challenges of the Geneva Spur and the Yellow Band.

On the morning of 8 May, the IMAX team are indeed at Camp III, as planned. They went to bed yesterday evening in peak physical condition with a sense of unstoppable momentum. Then high winds battered their tents all night, thwarting all attempts at sleep. Sumiyo Tsuzuki has cracked another rib in another coughing fit. Now, looking up with bleary eyes, they see clear skies. But the more experienced climbers scan the slopes above and detect strong winds up high. Looking down with the same weary gaze, they see 55-plus tiny figures beginning the climb from Camp II.

Breashears consults Ed Viesturs and Rob Schauer. Instincts born of experience tell them to wait at Camp III another day for the winds to die down and for everyone to get some sleep. However, if they wait, they will get caught up in a procession of climbers of varying abilities. And that spells risk – with no benefit. In any case, Breashears and his team are there to make a film about majestic isolation rather than the mass ascent of 16 clients with their guides and Sherpas.

The choice is stark: go up quickly as planned or go down and wait several days at Base Camp for the rush hour of human traffic to abate. There is, however, no guarantee that the pre-monsoon window of good weather will stay open long enough for a second attempt to be feasible, no matter how much they have planned for it. After examining options and conditions, the three senior team members collectively agree that going down now – however paradoxical and disappointing for the team – is the best way to safeguard the film project at this time. The upward momentum that has been building during the climb quickly deflates. But at least the worst will have been avoided: to be caught in traffic, with bad weather and plenty of congestion, while being unable to either film or move.

Throughout their morning descent, the tiny figures climbing towards them grow and one by one turn into familiar faces. A few are clearly struggling but refusing to give in. Others are strong and moving well. Jon Krakauer, ever the journalist, noted down Doug Hansen's words

during the previous day of rest at Camp II, but they express what everyone is feeling: ‘I’ve put too much of myself in this mountain to quit now.’<sup>6</sup>

Breashears meets Hall at about the midpoint of the strung-out group. It has turned into a beautiful day. ‘I felt embarrassed explaining to Rob why we were heading down now that it was a warm and sunny day,’ the filmmaker will later recall. ‘Rob looked diligent, competent and in complete control.’<sup>7</sup>

Last of all, surprisingly late in the morning, comes a tired-looking Scott Fischer, whose friendship with Breashears goes back many years. He has forgone the rest day on 7 May to take Dale Kruse back to Base Camp after a recurrence of the dentist’s altitude sickness. By now, only six of Fischer’s clients remain. Yet still he wears his characteristic charismatic grin.

### **9 May: Diversion**

The IMAX team has slept at Camp II. They wake late on 9 May and linger in the sun. By now the line of tiny figures is far above them, inching towards the distinctive smudge of the Yellow Band that leads towards Camp IV. And above Camp IV looms the summit, whose attraction they can feel even here.

The last of the tiny figures finally arrives at Camp IV in the afternoon. The members of the watching IMAX team know that only the lucky ones will be able to snatch a few hours’ sleep, even with the help of bottled oxygen, before setting off once again for the final assault just before midnight.

That afternoon, a distress call comes through on Breashears’ radio. A member of the small Taiwanese expedition left his tent at Camp III in the early hours of the morning to relieve himself – and slipped into a crevasse. He didn’t seem badly injured at the time, so his colleagues headed on upwards. Despite an earlier promise to wait until Hall’s and Fischer’s expeditions are on their way down, the Taiwanese leader, accompanied by Sherpas, is now aiming to reach the summit on 10 May too. Meanwhile, the condition of the injured man is deteriorating, hence the emergency message from the Sherpas who stayed with him.

Breashears and the two senior members of his team, Viesturs and Schauer, immediately offer to form a rescue party. They move swiftly up to Camp III. But to their horror, they find only a dead body. They decide to drag the corpse down and arrive back at Camp II late in the evening. As they settle down for a second night there, a dead man whose name they do not know is lying just outside their camp. They are tired and in disbelief as to how this could have happened.

Meanwhile, up at Camp IV, a storm roars all evening, making it all the more difficult to rest. ‘It was living hell in those tents,’ one of the expedition members will later say. But at 8.00 pm calm descends. Despite protests from several clients, Hall communicates his decision: ‘11 o’clock. Be ready. We’re going.’ In just a few hours, while the IMAX team sleeps on at Camp II, Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness will be entering the Death Zone.

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6 Krakauer, p. 148

7 Breashears, 1999, pp. 254–255

## Morning and Afternoon, 10 May: Ascent

Just past midnight, Hall's and Fischer's teams have already been climbing for an hour. It is a perfect, clear night. 'The Milky Way was on fire,' one of the guides will later recall. With their headlamps, the climbers look like a procession of white spots on the black mountain, moving one by one at a safe distance from each other, yet keeping the line intact.

Everyone is feeling the effects of altitude: while hearts pound rapidly, movement and thought are sluggish. Andy Harris, Hall's junior guide, is also feeling stiff and bruised after being hit on the chest by a falling boulder between Camp II and Camp III.

As usual, the plan is to climb through the night and – except for a few Sherpas and Fischer's head guide, Anatoli Boukreev – with bottled oxygen. The route lies along the rocky Southeast Ridge to the Balcony, a small snow ledge with breathtaking views at dawn. From here they must press on to the mini-peak of the South Summit, where the ridge becomes knife-edged before rising into a forbidding 12m (40ft) wall of rock: the notorious Hillary Step. Two Sherpas from each team have already gone ahead to fix ropes, including the lifelines that will enable the clients to ascend (and later descend) the Step one at a time. After that, it is a comparatively easy climb to the top through deep snow.

Speed (or at least what passes for speed at high altitude) is essential, as the body and brain deteriorate with every passing second in the Death Zone. Even with the extra oxygen bottles, stashed by the Sherpas on the South Summit, each person has only enough to last until about 5.00 pm. They must be back at the relative safety of Camp IV – or very close to it – by then.

Rob Hall has drummed the rules into his clients: first, his word is law on the mountain; second, they must stick close together so that the guides can keep track of them; third, they must respect the turnaround time of 1.00 pm (in poor weather) or 2.00 pm (in good weather). Even easy-going Scott Fischer has insisted on the importance of a turnaround time. Yet today, puzzlingly, no one has mentioned it. The excitement of the final push has focused all minds on the climb, not on the descent.

At 5.30 am, the first climbers arrive at the Balcony on schedule, only to find that there are no fixed ropes. For some reason, the advance Sherpas did not leave ahead of the others after all. Later, some will blame bad or competitive relationships between the two groups of Sherpas. Others will cite erroneous reports that an earlier expedition had already fixed ropes. But to this day no one truly knows why the fixed ropes were not there.

The ropes must now be installed, causing the clients to back up on the Balcony. They huddle for nearly an hour, getting colder and edgier. Then the sun rises and with it their spirits. For some, the beautiful view alone justifies all the efforts so far. However, not everyone is there to see it. The publisher on Rob Hall's team has already turned back. And now at just 7.30 am Beck Weathers can't see it either. He has suddenly become more or less blind. As a doctor he realizes that his condition is due to a combination of altitude and a recent eye surgery. No medical expertise is needed to realize that he cannot go on. Hall volunteers two Sherpas to accompany him down, but Weathers refuses:

- *I just climbed all night to get to this place. I'm not going to go.*
- *I want you to promise me that you're going to stay here till I come back.*

– *Cross my heart, hope to die. I'm sticking.*<sup>8</sup>

Later in the morning, the team shrinks yet further when the lawyer and the two other doctors turn back. One of them will later recall the moment very clearly:

*It was a struggle at that point within myself, a struggle of the voices, the one voice inside of me saying: 'Just do it, go for it, come on, 120 minutes, what's the big deal? Besides, others are still going, so it must be OK.' ... But another voice was saying: 'Wait a minute, think for yourself. It's getting too late.'*<sup>9</sup>

Despite Hall's insistence on obedience, they take the decision into their own hands, and turn back. Of the Adventure Consultants clients, only Krakauer, Hansen and Namba are still climbing. All six of the Mountain Madness clients who made it to Camp IV are still going strong.

There is a second bottleneck at the South Summit. The two teams gather under the remains of tattered old ropes from previous expeditions, increasingly hypoxic, sleep-deprived, hungry and dehydrated. Boukreev eventually leads the climb up the Hillary Step, fixing the rope that others will use as he goes. By now, vital time has been lost. The first suggested turnaround time of 1.00 pm comes and goes. Only Boukreev from Mountain Madness and Harris and Krakauer from Adventure Consultants have reached the summit. Boukreev has to head straight down, as he is not using bottled oxygen.

At 2.00 pm just three more have made it: two Mountain Madness clients and their junior guide, Neal Beidleman. The largest group does not arrive until 2.30 pm: Rob Hall; his senior guide, Mike Groom; their quiet Japanese client, Yasuko Namba; the considerably louder Gammelgaard and Pittman, both from Mountain Madness; and Fischer's two remaining clients. They celebrate for a full 40 minutes. No one mentions the turnaround time, which has long since passed. It is no longer possible to reach Camp IV before dark.

At 3.10 pm Beidleman finally insists that they must go down. They leave Hall alone to wait for Hansen. Shortly after setting off, the descending group meets a weary Scott Fischer, still on his way up. He always intended to act as the rear guard but seems to have fallen farther behind than planned. They greet each other briefly, Fischer as intent on going up as the others are eager to get down. There is no sense in lingering to talk. A bit later they encounter Doug Hansen, clinging to his ambition. At this point, he is clearly struggling just as he did last year, but he keeps pointing his finger to the top, as an indication of his resolve to conquer the mountain – which he finally does at 4.15 pm.

In total, including the Taiwanese team leader and his Sherpas, 23 people reach the top of the world on the afternoon of 10 May 1996 – their celebrations watched through the binoculars of the IMAX team below. Counting Weathers, who is still waiting faithfully on the Balcony, that makes 24 people who have to get down to Camp IV on the South Col much faster than planned.

But there is more ominous news that the IMAX team can see all too well *without* their binoculars: storm clouds are now gathering, up from the valley, black and threatening.

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8 As remembered by Beck Weathers in Breashears, 2008.

9 Lou Kasischke, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/stories/unfolding.html>

## Evening and Night, 10 May: Chaos

The full force of the storm finally hits higher altitudes at around 5.00 pm. In the space of five minutes, it changes from a perfect day to atrocious conditions. Of those who reached the summit, only Mountain Madness guide Anatoli Boukreev is safe back at Camp IV, drinking hot tea with the Sherpas who stayed behind and the Adventure Consultants clients who turned back. Everyone else is stranded at various points on the mountain by the thick, icy, whirling blizzard. One of the survivors will later liken it to ‘the disorientation that comes with swimming in a bottle of milk – you can’t even see where your feet are on the ground’.<sup>10</sup>

Just below the summit is Rob Hall with Doug Hansen, who is now too weak to descend the Hillary Step and desperately in need of oxygen. Just below, on the South Summit, Andy Harris, increasingly disoriented, tries to climb back up to assist. Please come in by radio to leave Hansen behind, but the Adventure Consultants leader refuses to abandon his client. He is reported as saying: ‘I can get myself down the Hillary Step, but I don’t know how I can get this man down. I need a bottle of gas, somebody, please, I’m begging you.’<sup>11</sup>

One of the other guides will later say:

*I remember a conversation at Base Camp just before we went up. It was just between Rob and myself. And Rob said to me, you know, if you did lose a client on Mount Everest, you might as well be dead.*<sup>12</sup>

Further down, near the Balcony, Fischer too is stranded, along with the surviving climber from the Taiwanese expedition. Twice, lightning strikes close to them. Fischer complains increasingly of feeling ill. ‘I am sick, I am sick,’ he repeats.<sup>13</sup>

Some distance below them, the largest group of climbers is trying to struggle down. It consists of two guides (Groom and Beidleman), two Sherpas, and seven assorted clients, including Pittman, Gammelgaard, Namba and Weathers – who has finally abandoned his long, faithful wait for Rob Hall. Pittman, Namba and Weathers can barely stand. Weathers is still blind. Soon, as the blizzard thickens and the wind lashes, no one is able to stand, no one can see – unless they break the ice off their eyelids. With the wind chill, the temperature drops below –18°C (–100°F).

Eventually, at 7.30 pm, the group stops and huddles together, hoping for a lull in the storm – less and less anxious to escape death. One of the surviving clients will later recall:

*I turned inward and just decided to go into that hypothermic sleep that’s so comfortable, that people mention when they’re dying of hypothermia. And it just seemed like the easiest thing to do, rather than endure any more pain.*<sup>14</sup>

The most tragic is that they do not know that they are only a few hundred horizontal meters from Camp IV – a distance they could cover in 20 minutes if they could only see where they

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10 John Taske, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/stories/unfolding.html>

11 Breashears, 1999, p. 262

12 Mike Groom, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/stories/leadership.html>

13 As remembered by Makalu Gau in Breashears, 2008.

14 Charlotte Fox, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/everest/stories/unfolding.html>

were going. What the guides do know is that if they walk in the wrong direction they will fall straight off the sheer drop of the Kangshung Face into Tibet.

As the large group huddles, two other clients, who have been travelling alone, make it back to the tents of Camp IV – one of them Jon Krakauer. His article for *Outside* magazine, if he survives to write it, will be very different from the one he envisaged. For even in the tents, safety is not guaranteed. Those lucky enough to be there can hear only the terrifying roar of the wind, which batters them relentlessly.

It is around midnight when a brief lull arrives. Most of the climbers in the huddle out on the South Col are by now barely conscious. A few of them, including Neal Beidleman, who has become the unofficial leader of the group, and Lene Gammelgaard, think they can see the tents. They head off in desperation, promising to bring help. But when they get there, only Boukreev seems physically capable of rescuing anyone. And conditions are worsening again.

## **11 May: Aftermath**

After several attempts throughout the early hours, at 4.30 am on 11 May, Boukreev finally reaches the ragged, frostbitten remaining members of the huddle. While Sandy Hill Pittman is among those capable of moving, Yasuko Namba and Beck Weathers seem close to death. Boukreev has no choice but to leave the two Adventure Consultants clients behind.

When day finally breaks, the storm is still raging, yet further rescue attempts are made. Namba and Weathers are easily found: two bodies partly buried in the snow, their faces covered in a thick crust of ice. Weathers has lost one glove, Namba two. Remarkably, they are still breathing, but both are so close to death that the decision is made not to try to move them.

Meanwhile, a team of Sherpas heads upwards. Battered by still-strong winds, they fail to find Hall, Hansen or Harris. They do manage to reach Fischer and the leader of the Taiwanese team. They give Fischer oxygen, but he is unresponsive. The Taiwanese climber revives a little with the help of oxygen and hot tea. He is so severely frostbitten that the rescuers think he cannot survive; they haul him down anyway.

Most members of Mountain Madness have already limped out of Camp IV – leaving Anatoli Boukreev behind to coordinate the fruitless attempt to save Fischer. At Camp III, visibly shaken, they cross paths once again with the IMAX team, which is hurrying up to help the rescue effort. Breashears and his colleagues had already radioed up directions about where to find their store of 50 oxygen bottles – more valuable for the survivors than any buried treasure. Rob Hall has always voiced concerns about having to come to the aid of one of the other expeditions, thus jeopardizing his own team's summit bid. Now Rob Hall has turned the tables himself.

Revived by the IMAX oxygen bottles, the Adventure Consultants survivors are getting strong enough to contemplate their own descent tomorrow. But at 4.35 pm they are alarmed to see a gruesome, two-legged creature staggering into Camp IV. With a blackened frostbitten stump for an arm and a rotting nose, it looks like one of the living dead. Dr Beck Weathers – in defiance of medical science – has just walked back into camp. He is swiftly bundled into an empty tent and stuffed into two sleeping bags with several hot water bottles, an oxygen mask

covering what remains of his face. No one expects him to survive the night. Even if he does, the rescuers have no idea how to get someone in that state down the mountain.

By early evening on 11 May, the horrible realization is beginning to sink in: Mountain Madness has lost its leader in the storm. So has Adventure Consultants, along with its junior guide, Andy Harris, and three clients: Doug Hansen, Yasuko Namba and, in all likelihood, Beck Weathers. That makes six fatalities in total, plus the Taiwanese man who died earlier. Hall's state-of-the-art radio enables him to talk to his wife who – back home in New Zealand – is expecting their first child. His voice is feeble but his last words to her are heard clearly: 'I love you. Sleep well, my sweetheart. Please don't worry too much.'<sup>15</sup>

Against all the odds, Beck Weathers wakes up on the morning of 12 May and is even able, with assistance, to walk much of the way down. The IMAX team takes him the rest of the way to Camp II. Just as remarkably, a helicopter rescue by a Nepalese air force pilot – rare and dangerous at such altitude and prompted by the tireless efforts of Weathers' wife in Seattle – lifts the leader of the Taiwanese expedition (found next to Fischer) and Beck Weathers out of Camp II. It takes him two lifts, as the thin air makes flying a helicopter a very risky affair. After amputations and reconstructive face surgery, both will survive.

### **Mid-May: Return**

Precisely one week after the fateful day of 10 May, the IMAX team sets off from Base Camp once again. It is a joint and carefully weighed decision to retrace the painful steps of acclimatization and two rescue missions in order to finish the film. Viesturs' new wife, the base camp manager, is outraged by the decision and shouts, 'Enough is enough!' She retires down the valley in protest, while the others scrape together as many oxygen bottles as they can. Then they wait three days at Camp II for good weather. Maybe it is already too late in the season?

At last, the longed-for forecast of good summit conditions comes through. Up they go through memories more difficult than the terrain. Sumiyo Tsuzuki is still coughing and has now strained her diaphragm muscles (to add to her two cracked ribs). The higher she goes, the slower she becomes. Breashears watches her carefully. Together with Viesturs and Schauer, he decides to give her one last chance: she will leave camp one hour before the rest of the team and will be allowed to go on only if she reaches Camp IV ahead of the others (who have to carry 'the pig' and the rest of the equipment). The leaders hope that this will make her realize that she ought to stop her quest for the summit. She fails the test, yet remains adamant that she can continue.

Breashears knows that he must now do what is most painful for him and for her, and that he had wished to avoid. He crawls into the tent Tsuzuki is sharing with Tenzing Norgay, who takes the hint and leaves. Left alone with Sumiyo, he breaks the news that she cannot join the summit bid. She pleads, claiming that she has been climbing slowly only to conserve her energy. She pleads again, claiming that she will lose face back home. The producer has also reminded Breashears that Tsuzuki is essential to the film's success in Japan, a market with great potential for IMAX. But Breashears does not give in to the commercial or emotional

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15 Breashears, 1999, p. 269

pressures. ‘A team is only as strong as its weakest member,’ he is fond of saying. And too many have been allowed to go up when they should have been turned down. He is resolved and will not allow her any farther.

On 23 May Breashears finally gets his summit shots. The joyful faces of Araceli Segarra and Jamling Tenzing Norgay express the feelings of the entire team. They are preserved on IMAX film for the entire world to see.

## **Epilogue**

In the spring of 1996, a total of 98 people reached the summit of Everest and 15 died – more fatalities than in any other year before or since.

Just as the history of war is written by the victors, the history of mountaineering is written by the survivors. No one will ever know the whole truth about what happened on 10 May 1996. But several of those who made it back down have written their versions of the events, allowing for an almost complete picture to emerge. It’s a story of human mistakes, successes, failures and tragedy as much as it is a story about mountaineering. There are valuable lessons for anyone involved in teamwork and leadership – in any context.

To learn those lessons may also be the best way to keep alive the memory of the people who died on Everest in May 1996.

**Appendix A**  
*Partial List of Individuals Involved in the Story*

***Adventure Consultants Team***

Rob Hall (Expedition Leader), New Zealander  
Michael Groom (Guide), Australian  
Andy Harris (Guide), New Zealander

*Clients*

Frank Fischbeck, a Hong Kong publisher  
Doug Hansen, an American postal worker  
Stuart Hutchison, a Canadian doctor  
Lou Kasischke, an American lawyer  
Jon Krakauer, an American journalist  
Yasuko Namba, a Japanese personnel director  
Dr John Taske, an Australian doctor and former army officer  
Beck Weathers, an American doctor

***Mountain Madness Team***

Scott Fischer (Expedition Leader), American  
Anatoli Boukreev (Guide), Russian  
Neal Beidleman (Guide), American

*Clients*

Martin Adams, an American former banker  
Charlotte Fox, an American ski patroller  
Lene Gammelgaard, a Danish lawyer  
Sandy Hill Pittman, an American journalist  
Dr Dale Kruse, an American dentist  
Tim Madsen, an American ski patroller  
Klev Schoening, an American former mountaineer  
Pete Schoening, an American former downhill skiing champion

***IMAX Expedition***

David Breashears (Expedition Leader, film director), American  
Ed Viesturs (Deputy Leader), American  
Robert Schauer (Cinematographer), Austrian

Jamling Norgay Sherpa, Indian climber  
Araceli Segarra, Spanish climber  
Sumiyo Tsuzuki, Japanese climber

**Appendix B**  
*Timeline of Events on 10 and 11 May 1996*

- 11.00 pm (9th) Expeditions depart from Camp IV
- 5.30 am (10th) Krakauer and one of the Sherpas are the first to reach the Balcony (8,500m)
- 7.30 am Weathers stops at the Balcony to wait for Hall's return
- 10.00 am Beidleman is the first to reach the South Summit (8,748m)
- 11.30 am Taske, Hutchison and Kasischke turn back below the South Summit
- 1.00 pm Harris, Boukreev and Krakauer are first on the summit
- 1.25 pm Beidleman, Schoening and Adams reach the summit
- 2.30 pm Hall, Groom, Madsen, Fox, Gammelgaard, Pittman and Namba arrive
- 3.10 pm Beidleman leads the first group down the mountain
- 3.45 pm Fischer reaches the summit
- 4.15 pm Hansen arrives at the top
- 5.00 pm Boukreev enters Camp IV
- 7.30 pm Beidleman, Groom and others huddle together near Camp IV
- 8.00 pm Adams and Krakauer reach Camp IV
- 11.30 pm Beidleman, Groom, Schoening and Gammelgaard reach Camp IV
- 4.30 am (11th) Boukreev rescues Madsen, Fox and Pittman
- 4.43 am Hall reports to Base Camp that he is above the South Summit and that Hansen has died
- 7.30 am Hutchison finds Namba and Weathers close to death and leaves them
- 9.00 am Hall breathes supplemental oxygen at South Summit after 16 hours without it
- 10.00 am Sherpas try to rescue Fischer but he is unresponsive
- 4.30 pm Weathers walks back to Camp IV on his own and receives oxygen and hot tea
- 6.20 pm Hall speaks with his wife one last time on the radio and says goodbye

**Appendix C**  
*Sources/Further Reading and Viewing*

Footnotes refer to the sources below. Web pages last accessed on 17 January 2011.

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