



Lawrence Huntington - Plume off the Summit

Everest 1994 - Alt. 29,029'

Standing in the airport in Newark, NJ, I was awaiting the arrival of my Australian climbing partner, Michael, to come for an overnight visit on his way to Kathmandu for our next adventure – the 1994 Expedition to climb the North East Ridge of Everest. He and I, both in our high fifties, had become close friends three years before while attempting the same route, and I had come to rely on his advice and experience, gained from his many previous attempts on the north side of the mountain.

His visit brought with it all the apprehensions of the challenge ahead, the three month separation from my wife, Caroline, the leave from my business responsibilities, and the inherent dangers of such an undertaking. While waiting for Michael, I comforted myself on this latter concern in knowing that he was a person of balance, experience, and good judgement.

Michael and I drove to our house in the country an hour north of New York in time for dinner with Caroline and, incidentally, with our newest family member, a small rabbit with the imposing name of Junior. While catching up on our news, I asked about his close friend, the violin player, whose practice tapes he often listened to as we shared a small tent high on the side of the mountain. He told us that he had broken off his relationship with her because he did not wish to leave any ties back home for his now seventh attempt to climb to the summit. We also learned that he had had an uncharacteristically distressing argument with his Jesuit Priest brother as he was leaving home.

The next morning, the three of us took a stroll in the woods, leaving Junior to his usual daytime activity out of the house eating the grass and other plants. Michael wondered if Junior could get into trouble on

his own, but we assured him that there were no predators around. Just then, from ten minutes away, we heard a piercing scream from the rabbit and rushed back to see the neighbor's dog in the process for killing him. Sad.

After Michael's departure, Caroline asked me if the rabbit's death was a sign.

A month later, the expedition members were assembled at Base Camp in Tibet, and the climbing plans began to take shape. As is typical of large expeditions (ours included twenty climbers from around the world and a like number of Sherpas in climbing and support roles), smaller sub-groups of four or six form a team which might last for the duration of the months on the mountain. Knowing this pattern, I assumed that Michael and I would join together, once again.

Prior to actually starting to ascend and establish what would become six separate camps, each a day's climb apart, from Base Camp at 17,000' to Camp Six at 27,200', the Sherpas held their traditional religious ceremony, called a Puja, to bless the mountain and the individuals on the expedition. While standing in the circle around the stone alter-like structure that the Sherpas had built and listening to their chanting, I suddenly had a premonition about Michael's determination to reach the summit at all costs. I decided that I should not place myself with his sub-group and must find a quiet way to change to a different team. This I accomplished by requesting more acclimatization time when he decided he was ready.

After many cycles of climbing for three or four days to ever higher elevations and then retreating all the way to Base Camp for a rest, our team patterns were well established in rotation. One group would be pushing the route higher on the mountain while others would be ferrying loads to equip the camps. By mid-May, we had established Camp Six with tents, sleeping bags, stoves, food and cylinders of oxygen to supplement the very thin air. It was time to plan our summit bids, pending a spell of clear weather. Because of the limitation of space and equipment, only one team could try for the summit at a time. Each left Base Camp one day apart to ascend through the six levels, hoping for perfect weather on the seventh day. Michael's group was one day ahead of ours, and therefore, he was at Six, making his summit bid on the day that we left Five, at 25,500', to climb to occupy the tents at Six. The weather was clear but with very strong winds and very cold, at about zero degrees Fahrenheit.

Climbing at such extreme altitudes is beyond tiring. Each step requires many breaths, even when inhaling some supplemental oxygen, and the pace is probably not better than six or eight steps per minute. The oxygen cylinders are heavy (off-setting some of the value of the extra air), and the mask and goggles limit any peripheral vision. Most of one's thoughts are about wanting the ordeal to be over – to escape the cold, disorientation, and lack of air. Important to ponder is that each step up puts one further from safety, and requires the understanding of how much energy to save for the climb down.

The terrain on the north side of Everest is ever more difficult as one ascends. It is like the inside of a bowl, the higher the steeper. Along with the steepening grade, the slabs of rock poking through the powdery snow angle downward so that most foot placements are precarious, and most of the snow has not consolidated enough to make a firm step. Moving requires great care and concentration.

In the late afternoon, we reached the tents at Camp Six and immediately set about melting snow for liquids to slake the thirst resulting from all the heavy breathing. By about eight o'clock, we settled back

to rest, planning to sit up at ten PM to prepare for our midnight departure. (Every movement or task at altitude takes dramatically longer and is more tiring than at sea level).

The radio burst into life. The expedition leader, Eric, came on the air to tell us that Michael had insisted on proceeding to the summit long after a sensible turn-around time, and that he had made the top at seven PM, just as darkness had come. He and his partner, Mark, had come down only about fifty feet and were stranded without protection. Eric asked us to abort our summit bid and attempt to climb through the night to rescue our friends. By this time the wind was ferocious, even though the night sky was full of stars. I was bitter cold, and my fingers froze in the short time I removed my mittens to clip on my crampons.

From this time on each of the four in our group was climbing alone in the dark, using the light from a headlamp. I found some comfort in seeing the dots of light around the slope, but I was aware that only I could keep myself safe. After about an hour, I realized that I had no feeling in any of my fingers – I had to deal with that or face their loss. I downclimbed back to the tent, crawled through the doorway and placed my hands in my armpits until the feeling came back. Then I resumed the ascent, returning to the labored breathing on the difficult sloping rock slabs. Soon, it became clear to me that, battling the strong winds, we were not going to be able to make any real progress toward Michael and Mark and that our own safety was back in the tents. I watched all the headlamps descending as well, the others having come to the same conclusion. By dawn, all in our group of four were back at Camp Six. I was spent.

After a short rest and discussion on the radio with Eric and my companions, I decided that my climb was over and that I could not ascend an additional 1800' to aid Michael and Mark. I started my descent alone and eventually, with only a short break at Camp Four at 24,000', where others were gathered, I reached the bottom of the steep sections of the mountain. There, at Camp Three, I listened in on radio conversations confirming that Michael had reached the summit but had exhausted himself. While his younger partner, Mark, was still able to move, Michael was not ever coming down.

I sat by myself and wept, both for his death and my failure.



Camp Six – Alt. 27,200'

