

Into Thin Air

A Personal Account of the Mount
Everest Disaster

Jon
Krakauer



VILLARD

Eiger Dreams

Into the Wild

Under the Banner of Heaven



INTO THIN AIR

A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster

Jon Krakauer



VILLARD NEW YORK

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For Linda;

*and in memory of Andy Harris, Doug Hansen, Rob Hall,
Yasuko Namba, Scott Fischer, Ngawang Topche Sherpa, Chen Yu-Nan,
Bruce Herrod, and Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa*

Men play at tragedy because they do not believe in the reality of the tragedy which is actually being staged in the civilised world.

José Ortega y Gasset

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Introduction

In March 1996, *Outside* magazine sent me to Nepal to participate in, and write about, the guided ascent of Mount Everest. I went as one of eight clients on an expedition led by a well-known guide from New Zealand named Rob Hall. On May 10 I arrived on top of the mountain, but the summit came at a terrible cost.

Among my five teammates who reached the top, four, including Hall, perished in a rogue storm that blew in without warning while we were still high on the peak. By the time I descended to Base Camp nine climbers from four expeditions were dead, and three more lives would be lost before the month was out.

The expedition left me badly shaken, and the article was difficult to write. Nevertheless, five weeks after I returned from Nepal I delivered a manuscript to *Outside*, and it was published in the September issue of the magazine. Upon its completion I attempted to put Everest out of my mind and get on with my life, but that turned out to be impossible. Through a fog of messy emotions, I continued trying to make sense of what had happened up there, and I obsessively mulled the circumstances of my companions' deaths.

The *Outside* piece was as accurate as I could make it under the circumstances, but my deadline had been unforgiving, the sequence of events had been frustratingly complex, and the memories of the survivors had been badly distorted by exhaustion, oxygen depletion, and shock. At one point during my research I asked three other people to recount an incident that four of us had witnessed high on the mountain, and none of us could agree on such crucial facts as the time, what had been said, or even who had been present. Within days after the *Outside* article went to press, I discovered that a few of the details I'd reported were in error. Most were minor inaccuracies of the sort that inevitably creep into works of deadline journalism, but one of my blunders was in no sense minor, and it had a devastating impact on the friends and family of one of the victims.

Only slightly less disconcerting than the article's factual errors was the material that necessarily had to be omitted for lack of space. Mark Bryant, the editor of *Outside*, and Larry Burke, the publisher, had given me an extraordinary amount of room to tell the story: they ran the piece at 17,000 words—four or five times as long as a typical magazine feature. Even so, I felt that it was much too abbreviated to do justice to the tragedy. The Everest climb had rocked my life to its core, and it became desperately important for me to record the events in complete detail, unconstrained by a limited number of column inches. This book is the fruit of that compulsion.

The staggering unreliability of the human mind at high altitude made the research problematic. To avoid relying excessively on my own perceptions, I interviewed most of the protagonists at great length and on multiple occasions. When possible I also corroborated details with radio logs maintained by people at Base Camp, where clear thought wasn't in such short supply. Readers familiar with the *Outside* article may notice discrepancies between certain details (primarily matters of time) reported in the magazine and those reported in this book; the revisions reflect new information that has come to light since publication of the

magazine piece.

Several authors and editors I respect counseled me not to write the book as quickly as I did; they urged me to wait two or three years and put some distance between me and the expedition in order to gain some crucial perspective. Their advice was sound, but in the end I ignored it—mostly because what happened on the mountain was gnawing my guts out. I thought that writing the book might purge Everest from my life.

It hasn't, of course. Moreover, I agree that readers are often poorly served when an author writes as an act of catharsis, as I have done here. But I hoped something would be gained by spilling my soul in the calamity's immediate aftermath, in the roil and torment of the moment. I wanted my account to have a raw, ruthless sort of honesty that seemed in danger of leaching away with the passage of time and the dissipation of anguish.

Some of the same people who warned me against writing hastily had also cautioned me against going to Everest in the first place. There were many, many fine reasons not to go, but attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act—a triumph of desire over sensibility. Any person who would seriously consider it is almost by definition beyond the sway of reasoned argument.

The plain truth is that I knew better but went to Everest anyway. And in doing so I was party to the death of good people, which is something that is apt to remain on my conscience for a very long time.

Jon Krakauer
Seattle
November 1996

Dramatis Personæ

Mount Everest Spring 1996*

Adventure Consultants Guided Expedition

Rob Hall	New Zealand, leader and head guide
Mike Groom	Australia, guide
Andy “Harold” Harris	New Zealand, guide
Helen Wilton	New Zealand, Base Camp manager
Dr. Caroline Mackenzie	New Zealand, Base Camp doctor
Ang Tshering Sherpa	Nepal, Base Camp sirdar
Ang Dorje Sherpa	Nepal, climbing sirdar
Lhakpa Chhiri Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Kami Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Tenzing Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Arita Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Ngawang Norbu Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Chuldum Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Chhongba Sherpa	Nepal, Base Camp cook
Pemba Sherpa	Nepal, Base Camp Sherpa
Tendi Sherpa	Nepal, cook boy
Doug Hansen	USA, client
Dr. Seaborn Beck Weathers	USA, client
Yasuko Namba	Japan, client
Dr. Stuart Hutchison	Canada, client
Frank Fischbeck	Hong Kong, client
Lou Kasischke	USA, client
Dr. John Taske	Australia, client
Jon Krakauer	USA, client and journalist

Susan Allen

Australia, trekker

Nancy Hutchison

Canada, trekker

Mountain Madness Guided Expedition

Scott Fischer

USA, leader and head guide

Anatoli Boukreev

Russia, guide

Neal Beidleman

USA, guide

Dr. Ingrid Hunt

USA, Base Camp manager, team doctor

Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa

Nepal, climbing sirdar

Ngima Kale Sherpa

Nepal, Base Camp sirdar

Ngawang Topche Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Tashi Tshering Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Ngawang Dorje Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Ngawang Sya Kya Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Ngawang Tendi Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Tendi Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

“Big” Pemba Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Jeta Sherpa

Nepal, Base Camp Sherpa

Pemba Sherpa

Nepal, Base Camp cook boy

Sandy Hill Pittman

USA, client and journalist

Charlotte Fox

USA, client

Tim Madsen

USA, client

Pete Schoening

USA, client

Klev Schoening

USA, client

Lene Gammelgaard

Denmark, client

Martin Adams

USA, client

Dr. Dale Kruse

USA, client

Jane Bromet

USA, journalist

MacGillivray Freeman IMAX/IWERKS Expedition

David Breashears	USA, leader and film director
Jamling Norgay Sherpa	India, deputy leader and film talent
Ed Viesturs	USA, climber and film talent
Araceli Segarra	Spain, climber and film talent
Sumiyo Tsuzuki	Japan, climber and film talent
Robert Schauer	Austria, climber and cinematographer
Paula Barton Viesturs	USA, Base Camp manager
Audrey Salkeld	U.K., journalist
Liz Cohen	USA, film production manager
Liesl Clark	USA, film producer and writer

Taiwanese National Expedition

“Makalu” Gau Ming-Ho	Taiwan, leader
Chen Yu-Nan	Taiwan, climber
Kami Dorje Sherpa	Nepal, climbing sirdar
Ngima Gombu Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Mingma Tshering Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Johannesburg Sunday Times Expedition

Ian Woodall	U.K., leader
Bruce Herrod	U.K., deputy leader and photographer
Cathy O’Dowd	South Africa, climber
Deshun Deysel	South Africa, climber
Edmund February	South Africa, climber
Andy de Klerk	South Africa, climber
Andy Hackland	South Africa, climber
Ken Woodall	South Africa, climber
Tierry Renard	France, climber
Ken Owen	South Africa, journalist and trekker

Philip Woodall	U.K., Base Camp manager
Alexandrine Gaudin	France, administrative assistant
Dr. Charlotte Noble	South Africa, team doctor
Ken Vernon	Australia, journalist
Richard Shorey	South Africa, photographer
Patrick Conroy	South Africa, radio journalist
Ang Dorje Sherpa	Nepal, climbing sirdar
Pemba Tendi Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Jangbu Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Ang Babu Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa
Dawa Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Alpine Ascents International Guided Expedition

Todd Burleson	USA, leader and guide
Pete Athans	USA, guide
Jim Williams	USA, guide
Dr. Ken Kamler	USA, client and team doctor
Charles Corfield	USA, client
Becky Johnston	USA, trekker and screenwriter

International Commercial Expedition

Mal Duff	U.K., leader
Mike Trueman	Hong Kong, deputy leader
Michael Burns	U.K., Base Camp manager
Dr. Henrik Jessen Hansen	Denmark, expedition doctor
Veikka Gustafsson	Finland, climber
Kim Sejberg	Denmark, climber
Ginge Fullen	U.K., climber
Jaakko Kurvinen	Finland, climber

Swedish Solo Expedition

Göran Kropp	Sweden, climber
Frederic Bloomquist	Sweden, filmmaker
Ang Rita Sherpa	Nepal, climbing Sherpa and film crew member

Norwegian Solo Expedition

Petter Neby	Norway, climber
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Himalayan Guides Commercial Expedition

Henry Todd	U.K., leader
Mark Pfitzer	USA, climber
Ray Door	USA, climber

New Zealand–Malaysian Guided Pumori Expedition

Guy Cotter	New Zealand, leader and guide
Dave Hiddleston	New Zealand, guide
Chris Jillet	New Zealand, guide

American Commercial Pumori/Lhotse Expedition

Dan Mazur	USA, leader
Jonathan Pratt	U.K., co-leader
Scott Darsney	USA, climber and photographer
Chantal Mauduit	France, climber
Stephen Koch	USA, climber and snowboarder
Brent Bishop	USA, climber
Diane Taliaferro	USA, climber
Dave Sharman	U.K., climber
Tim Horvath	USA, climber

Dana Lyngre USA, climber

Martha Lyngre USA, climber

Nepali Everest Cleaning Expedition

Sonam Gyalchhen Sherpa Nepal, leader

Himalayan Rescue Association Clinic (in Pheriche Village)

Dr. Jim Litch USA, staff doctor

Dr. Larry Silver USA, staff doctor

Dr. Cecile Bouvray France, staff doctor

Laura Ziemer USA, assistant

Indo-Tibetan Border Police Everest Expedition (climbing from the Tibetan side of the mountain)

Mohindor Singh India, leader

Harbhajan Singh India, deputy leader and climber

Tsewang Smanla India, climber

Tsewang Paljor India, climber

Dorje Morup India, climber

Hira Ram India, climber

Tashi Ram India, climber

Sange Sherpa India, climbing Sherpa

Nadra Sherpa India, climbing Sherpa

Koshing Sherpa India, climbing Sherpa

Japanese-Fukuoka Everest Expedition (climbing from the Tibetan side of the mountain)

Koji Yada Japan, leader

Hiroshi Hanada Japan, climber

Eisuke Shigekawa Japan, climber

Pasang Tshering Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Pasang Kami Sherpa

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

Any Gyalzen

Nepal, climbing Sherpa

* Not everyone present on Mt. Everest in the spring of 1996 is listed.

EVEREST SUMMIT MAY 10, 1996 29,028 FEET



It would seem almost as though there were a cordon drawn round the upper part of these great peaks beyond which no man may go. The truth of course lies in the fact that, at altitudes of 25,000 feet and beyond, the effects of low atmospheric pressure upon the human body are so severe that really difficult mountaineering is impossible and the consequences even of a mild storm may be deadly, that nothing but the most perfect conditions of weather and snow offers the slightest chance of success, and that on the last lap of the climb no party is in a position to choose its day....

No, it is not remarkable that Everest did not yield to the first few attempts; indeed, it would have been very surprising and not a little sad if it had, for that is not the way of great mountains. Perhaps we had become a little arrogant with our fine new technique of ice-claw and rubber slipper, our age of easy mechanical conquest. We had forgotten that the mountain still holds the master card, that it will grant success only in its own good time. Why else does mountaineering retain its deep fascination?

Eric Shipton, in 1938

Upon That Mountain

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absentmindedly down at the vastness of Tibet. I understood on some dim, detached level that the sweep of the earth beneath my feet was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to take care.

It was early in the afternoon of May 10, 1996. I hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&Ms. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separate ribs that made ordinary breathing an excruciating trial. At 29,028 feet up in the troposphere, so little oxygen was reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired.

I'd arrived on the summit a few minutes after Anatoli Boukreev, a Russian climbing guide working for an American commercial expedition, and just ahead of Andy Harris, a guide of the New Zealand-based team to which I belonged. Although I was only slightly acquainted with Boukreev, I'd come to know and like Harris well during the preceding six weeks. I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreev striking summit poses, then turned around and headed down. My watch read 1:17 P.M. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

A moment later, I paused to take another photo, this one looking down the Southeast Ridge, the route we had ascended. Training my lens on a pair of climbers approaching the summit, I noticed 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 Pumori, Ama Dablam, and the other lesser peaks surrounding Everest.

Later—after six bodies had been located, after a search for two others had been abandoned, after surgeons had amputated the gangrenous right hand of my teammate Beck Weathers—people would ask why, if the weather had begun to deteriorate, had climbers on the upper mountain not heeded the signs? Why did veteran Himalayan guides keep moving upward, ushering a gaggle of relatively inexperienced amateurs—each of whom had paid as much as \$65,000 to be taken safely up Everest—into an apparent death trap?

Nobody can speak for the leaders of the two guided groups involved, because both men are dead. But I can attest that nothing I saw early on the afternoon of May 10 suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down. To my oxygen-depleted mind, the clouds drifting up the grand valley of ice known as the Western Cwm* looked innocuous, wispy, insubstantial. Gleaming in the brilliant midday sun, they appeared no different from the harmless puffs of convection condensation that rose from the valley almost every afternoon.

As I began my descent I was extremely anxious, but my concern had little to do with the weather: a check of the gauge on my oxygen tank had revealed that it was almost empty. I needed to get down, fast.

The uppermost shank of Everest's Southeast Ridge is a slender, heavily corniced fin of rock and wind-scoured snow that snakes for a quarter mile between the summit and a subordinate pinnacle known as the South Summit. Negotiating the serrated ridge presents no great technical hurdles, but the route is dreadfully exposed. After leaving the summit, fifteen minutes of cautious shuffling over a 7,000-foot abyss brought me to the notorious Hillary Step, a pronounced notch in the ridge that demands some technical maneuvering. As I clipped into a fixed rope and prepared to rappel over the lip, I was greeted with an alarming sight.

Thirty feet below, more than a dozen people were queued up at the base of the Step. Three climbers were already in the process of hauling themselves up the rope that I was preparing to descend. Exercising my only option, I unclipped from the communal safety line and

stepped aside.

The traffic jam was comprised of climbers from three expeditions: the team I belonged to, a group of paying clients under the leadership of the celebrated New Zealand guide Rob Hall; another guided party headed by the American Scott Fischer; and a noncommercial Taiwanese team. Moving at the snail's pace that is the norm above 26,000 feet, the throng labored up the Hillary Step one by one, while I nervously bided my time.

Harris, who'd left the summit shortly after I did, soon pulled up behind me. Wanting to conserve whatever oxygen remained in my tank, I asked him to reach inside my backpack and turn off the valve on my regulator, which he did. For the next ten minutes I felt surprisingly good. My head cleared. I actually seemed less tired than I had with the goggles turned on. Then, abruptly, I sensed that I was suffocating. My vision dimmed and my head began to spin. I was on the brink of losing consciousness.

Instead of turning my oxygen off, Harris, in his hypoxically impaired state, had mistakenly cranked the valve open to full flow, draining the tank. I'd just squandered the last of my gas going nowhere. There was another tank waiting for me at the South Summit, 250 feet below, but to get there I would have to descend the most exposed terrain on the entire route without the benefit of supplemental oxygen.

And first I had to wait for the mob to disperse. I removed my now useless mask, planted my ice ax into the mountain's frozen hide, and hunkered on the ridge. As I exchanged banal congratulations with the climbers filing past, inwardly I was frantic: "Hurry it up, hurry it up!" I silently pleaded. "While you guys are fucking around here, I'm losing brain cells by the millions!"

Most of the passing crowd belonged to Fischer's group, but near the back of the parade two of my teammates eventually appeared, Rob Hall and Yasuko Namba. Demure and reserved, the forty-seven-year-old Namba was forty minutes away from becoming the oldest woman to climb Everest and the second Japanese woman to reach the highest point on each continent—the so-called Seven Summits. Although she weighed just ninety-one pounds, her sparrowlike proportions disguised a formidable resolve; to an astounding degree, Yasuko had been propelled up the mountain by the unwavering intensity of her desire.

Later still, Doug Hansen arrived atop the Step. Another member of our expedition, Doug was a postal worker from a Seattle suburb who'd become my closest friend on the mountain. "It's in the bag!" I yelled over the wind, trying to sound more upbeat than I felt. Exhausted, Doug mumbled something from behind his oxygen mask that I didn't catch, shook my head weakly, then continued plodding upward.

At the very end of the line was Scott Fischer, whom I knew casually from Seattle, where we both lived. Fischer's strength and drive were legendary—in 1994 he'd climbed Everest without using bottled oxygen—so I was surprised at how slowly he was moving and how hammered he looked when he pulled his mask aside to say hello. "Bruuuuuuce!" he wheezed with forced cheer, employing his trademark frat-boyish greeting. When I asked how he was doing, Fischer insisted that he was feeling fine: "Just dragging ass a little today for some reason. No big deal." With the Hillary Step finally clear, I clipped into the strand of orange rope, swung quickly around Fischer as he slumped over his ice ax, and rappelled over the edge.

It was after three o'clock when I made it down to the South Summit. By now tendrils of mist were streaming over the 27,923-foot top of Lhotse and lapping at Everest's summit pyramid. No longer did the weather look so benign. I grabbed a fresh oxygen cylinder, jammed it onto my regulator, and hurried down into the gathering cloud. Moments after I dropped below the South Summit, it began to snow lightly and visibility went to hell.

Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my compadres dallied to memorialize their arrival at the apex of the planet, unfurling flags and snapping photos, using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. Nobody suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter.

* The Western Cwm, pronounced *koom*, was named by George Leigh Mallory, who first saw it during the initial Everest expedition of 1921 from the Lho La, a high pass on the border between Nepal and Tibet. *Cwm* is a Welsh term for valley or cirque.

DEHRA DUN, INDIA 1852 2,234 FEET



Far from the mountains in winter, I discovered the blurred photo of Everest in Richard Halliburton's Book of Marvels. It was a miserable reproduction in which the jagged peaks rose white against a grotesquely blackened and scratched sky. Everest itself, sitting back from the front ones, didn't even appear highest, but it didn't matter. It was; the legend said so. Dreams were the key to the picture, permitting a boy to enter it, to stand at the crest of the windswept ridge, to climb toward the summit, now no longer far above....

This was one of those uninhibited dreams that come free with growing up. I was sure that mine about Everest was not mine alone; the highest point on earth, unattainable, foreign to all experience, was there for many boys and grown men to aspire toward.

Thomas F. Hornbein

Everest: The West Ridge

The actual particulars of the event are unclear, obscured by the accretion of myth. By the year was 1852, and the setting was the offices of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India in the northern hill station of Dehra Dun. According to the most plausible version of what transpired, a clerk rushed into the chambers of Sir Andrew Waugh, India's surveyor general, and exclaimed that a Bengali computer named Radhanath Sikhdar, working out of the Survey's Calcutta bureau, had "discovered the highest mountain in the world." (On Waugh's day a computer was a job description rather than a machine.) Designated Peak X by surveyors in the field who'd first measured the angle of its rise with a twenty-four-inch

theodolite three years earlier, the mountain in question jutted from the spine of the Himalayas in the forbidden kingdom of Nepal.

Until Sikhdar compiled the survey data and did the math, nobody had suspected that there was anything noteworthy about Peak XV. The six survey sites from which the summit had been triangulated were in northern India, more than a hundred miles from the mountain. To the surveyors who shot it, all but the summit nub of Peak XV was obscured by various high escarpments in the foreground, several of which gave the illusion of being much greater in stature. But according to Sikhdar's meticulous trigonometric reckoning (which took into account such factors as curvature of the earth, atmospheric refraction, and plumb-line deflection) Peak XV stood 29,002* feet above sea level, the planet's loftiest point.

In 1865, nine years after Sikhdar's computations had been confirmed, Waugh bestowed the name Mount Everest on Peak XV, in honor of Sir George Everest, his predecessor as surveyor general. As it happened, Tibetans who lived to the north of the great mountain already had a more mellifluous name for it, Jomolungma, which translates to "goddess, mother of the world," and Nepalis who resided to the south called the peak Sagarmatha, "goddess of the sky." But Waugh pointedly chose to ignore these native appellations (as well as official policies encouraging the retention of local or ancient names), and Everest was the name that stuck.

Once Everest was determined to be the highest summit on earth, it was only a matter of time before people decided that Everest needed to be climbed. After the American explorer Robert Peary claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1909 and Roald Amundsen led a Norwegian party to the South Pole in 1911, Everest—the so-called Third Pole—became the most coveted object in the realm of terrestrial exploration. Getting to the top, proclaimed Gunther O. Dyrenfurth, an influential alpinist and chronicler of early Himalayan mountaineering, was "a matter of universal human endeavor, a cause from which there is no withdrawal, whatever losses it may demand."

Those losses, as it turned out, would not be insignificant. Following Sikhdar's discovery in 1852, it would require the lives of twenty-four men, the efforts of fifteen expeditions, and the passage of 101 years before the summit of Everest would finally be attained.

| | |

Among mountaineers and other connoisseurs of geologic form, Everest is not regarded as a particularly comely peak. Its proportions are too chunky, too broad of beam, too crudely hewn. But what Everest lacks in architectural grace, it makes up for with sheer overwhelming mass.

Demarcating the Nepal-Tibet border, towering more than 12,000 feet above the valleys at its base, Everest looms as a three-sided pyramid of gleaming ice and dark, striated rock. The first eight expeditions to Everest were British, all of which attempted the mountain from the northern, Tibetan, side—not so much because it presented the most obvious weakness in the peak's formidable defenses but rather because in 1921 the Tibetan government opened its long-closed borders to foreigners, while Nepal remained resolutely off limits.

The first Everesters were obliged to trek 400 arduous miles from Darjeeling across the Tibetan plateau simply to reach the foot of the mountain. Their knowledge of the deadly effects of extreme altitude was scant, and their equipment was pathetically inadequate b

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