

Suddenly all Hell broke loose¹

Brian Nally

Once we got to the Second Ice-field, we knew it was a long one, but the distance was enormous from where we were to where we had to get to the first rocks. It was late now and the condition of the ice-field was water, ice and slush. It was in very bad condition. We decided to plough straight across rather than go for the rim. We decided to cut steps, firstly because the condition of the ice-field wasn't good, and secondly, in case we had to retreat. So we ploughed across and the stones started coming down; we'd been through stonefall many times before, but we hadn't seen anything like this. The ice-field suddenly got raked from stones in every quarter, and then suddenly all Hell broke loose, and we turned in to face the ice and face the upward slope, and tried to dodge the big ones and hope the little ones wouldn't catch us. We got hit several times but we just pressed on and on. The ice-field is incredible. It's just endless and endless. Well, eventually after Barry yelled several times to duck, and stones and warnings, we hauled in to the end of the ice-field.

We were glad that the Second Ice-field was over and Barry came up, and he said 'There's a pitch of V up there', and I said, 'Right'. We altered the ropes round and belayed off, threaded through the ring piton, went up a bit higher, put another piton in and then a third piton. I watched him belaying out the rope and he'd overcome the major difficulty and he was leading on. And then he went out of sight. And everything went quiet for a bit. The rope stopped and payed out again. Suddenly from high above I heard him yell out, 'Stones'. And instinctively I dodged and kept close to the rock, at the same time I heard my name sharp and clear and I looked up and Barry was falling backwards through the air and went hurtling past me, and the top two pitons pulled out. He crashed on to the ice about 100 ft below me.

For a moment I just stood there staring at the ring piton, not believing that it could have held, and I looked down at Barry. He was down on the ice upside down. He wasn't moving. I stayed there for a minute and then I put a piton in and tied the rope to it, and unroped, climbed up to the ring piton and hit it back in, put another piton in to secure it again. Then I climbed down to Barry, and he was very badly injured and he was unconscious. From the position of his body I came to the conclusion that his back was broken. And then I formed a harness in the rope, took all the weight off his chest, hung him in the sling. Normally it would have been quite a comfortable position. And the stones were

¹ This account of the accident on the Eigerwand of 24-5 July 1962, in which Barry Brewster lost his life, was recorded for B.B.C. T.V. on 3 May 1968 and televised later in the year. We make no comment beyond noting that anyone unfortunately faced with such circumstances must decide for himself at the time how far to risk life further in support of an accident victim so seriously injured. The first British ascent of the Eigerwand was achieved a month later by Chris Bonington and Ian Clough, in ideal conditions, with practically no stonefall (*A.J.* 67. 338, and 68. 29).

still coming and I started to hack out a platform and this took a long time, and it had to be long and wide enough to carry his full length. I was grateful that he was unconscious, hadn't got any pain. And when this platform was completed I pulled him back into it and secured him and put him in the sleeping bag and took my crash helmet off and put it on him and . . . and then tried to form a barrier between him and the upward slope, rucksacks and myself.

It was late in the afternoon by then and everything looked . . . everything was lost. It wasn't a question of just one of us being injured. It was. . . . This was the Eiger and it was both of us you see. Once or twice I went up to the rock where I'd left some gear and cooking stove and brought them back and I settled down for the night. I sort of placed myself between him and the upward slope and just waited for the morning. Stones were relentless. We were directly in a path of one of the chutes that is in direct line from the summit where all the stones funnel down and shoot out to the face. We couldn't have moved to the right or to the left. We just had to stay where we were. And during the night I had to make the decision whether at first light I should leave Barry and try and go for my friends to help or to stay. It was obvious Barry was very badly injured, and the point was I couldn't bear for him to regain consciousness and me not to be there. It was a most terrible decision to have to make, and I spent the whole night trying to make it, but even at first light I hadn't made that decision. Because I wouldn't admit that he wasn't going to pull through; He'd been unconscious, he'd moved once or twice, but he hadn't really woken.

And then at first light I tried . . . tried to really make this decision, and he seemed to stir a little, moved an arm and he seemed to regain consciousness a bit, so I went back again up the slope and got a stove, thinking that I'd make a drink or some soup or something if he could take it. I'd started to make this and he seemed to come to a bit. And he opened his eyes and seemed to know where he was and who I was and he said, 'I'm sorry Brian', and he died.

And everything went dark and it really was the end of everything. First reaction was to go for the summit at any cost, because that's what we'd come to do, and I couldn't bear the thought of going down. But time passed, and I rationalised a bit more, and came round to the proper decision to make. So I secured him once more with ice pitons, and cut the rope above him and coiled the rope, meaning to try for the descent. And I went up again to the rock, coiled the rope and came down once more to Barry and just stayed there for a little while and I couldn't bear to take any of the pieces of equipment that were so vital to me now. I couldn't bear to take the crash helmet, or the ice screws and pitons. So I left everything just where it was. I knew this was the last time I was leaving him and I started to go back up the slope and the stones had kept up all night,

but they seemed to increase now, and the whole field was raked from every quarter again. And suddenly I felt this was bigger than usual, and I started moving a bit faster and I was about 20 ft away from the rock when great tons of rubble and ice came down. I was directly in the path of the rock avalanche, and I raced for the rock and just got there, but turned round to see that this avalanche took Barry's body away and took it over the edge of the ice into the blackness. And this was the cruellest thing that could have happened.

I took up the rope and started the long haul back, going back down the ice-field again, and I couldn't bear to leave the place. But I didn't look back, I just started off again. On the way down I met the other British party coming up, and the rest of the story you know. We turned through the storm and then back to the foot. . . . And even now I know that in spite of it all what I have become or what I shall become in my lifetime those moments up on that Second Ice-field, they were the most terrible . . . they were the proudest moments of my life. To have been in the company of Barry Brewster in an attempt on the Eiger Wall. He was a fine climber, and he was a good friend. The Eiger gave us the supreme test. We didn't make the summit, but we didn't fail.