JOE SIMPSON

# Dead Man Waving

The climber lying on the Col never realised how close he had come to being saved. It was a mercy of sorts. At one point in the long night hands had pulled at him, voices harried him, frozen fingers had groped vainly for his fluttering pulse, felt for the slightest zephyr of damp breath at his lips. Then he was alone again, unaware that his colleagues from their tents on the Col had found him and then left him for dead.

No one came out to hold the dying man, to still his piteous waving arm with a gentle hand. No one took his pulse or checked his vital signs. No one acknowledged his last despairing movement, knelt by him and had the humanity to hug him. They let him die alone for reasons best known to themselves.

These events happened in May 1992 when four Indian climbers had left Camp 3 on the Lhotse Face and made an abortive attempt to reach Camp 4 on the South Col in a day of strong winds and intense cold. By nightfall two climbers had retreated to the safety of Camp 3 whilst their two colleagues were seemingly lost. Camped on the South Col that day were members of an Indian Border Police Expedition as well as five members of a Dutch expedition, led by Ronald Naar, and their Sherpas. In his book, *Alleen De Top Telt* (Only the Summit Counts), Ronald Naar states that in the night he heard 'a fearful scream above the sound of the roaring wind'. One of their Sherpas went out to search for the source. He found nothing, and nor did the Indian Border Police team who had also heard the cries. Everyone then retired to sleep.

At first light, about six o'clock, a female member of the Indian Border Police expedition visited the Dutch tents to inform them that they had found a 'casualty' and needed help. When asked what sort of help was required, the climber hesitated before other members of the Indian Border Police team appeared and reported that the victim had died. He was one of the missing climbers who had set out from Camp 3 the previous day. Clearly the anguished screams in the night had not been imagined.

Naar writes that the woman, named as Santosh, was in some confusion about what had happened.

She tells him: 'My colleagues gave him oxygen to revive him but now he is beyond help they say. He is already dead it seems.'

'But what has happened?' Naar asks her.

'I have no idea. But the others have decided to go down.'

The Indian team and their Sherpas then left the South Col and descended towards the Western Cwm. The Dutch had no reason to believe that the

man was anything other than dead and didn't bother to check the corpse lying close to their tents. For them, it would be unimaginable to think that anyone might abandon a living team member.

The retreating Indians then came across the body of the second missing climber hanging on the fixed ropes leading down to Camp 2 from the South Col. Hypothermia and exhaustion had killed him some time during the night. Perhaps it was his screams everyone had heard – anguished cries for help from a man lost and exhausted in the darkness. In their swift descent from the Col the Indians left the climber hanging on the rope. One of the Dutch team was to say later how they were consequently forced to climb over the man's body on later ascents to the Col until someone eventually cut him free in the hope that he would fall into the Western Cwm. Unfortunately the body became jammed in rocks a short distance below the ropes. It appears that no further effort was made by his team mates or other expeditions to bury or retrieve the body. Neither was any attempt made to cover or bury the body lying on the col.

Meanwhile, back on the Col, the Dutch had a brief discussion about what they wanted to do. The weather was too cold and windy for a summit attempt that day. They knew that to stay on the Col would be a heavy drain on their strength and resilience. A quick retreat to Camp 2 in the Western Cwm to recuperate and wait for an improvement in the conditions was obviously the better idea but for the moment they prevaricated. Settling back into their sleeping bags, they rested for the next four hours until one of their Sherpas crawled outside to relieve himself. He was soon back, pale-faced and visibly shaken.

'There is a dead body waving over there,' he says to a startled Ronald Naar. The Dutch leader peers out of the tent and sees the body lying amidst the snow-drifted rocks. Every now and then one of the man's arms comes up very slowly in an eerie sort of salute before it is lowered slowly back to his side. Perhaps the familiar sound of voices drifting over from the tents had triggered the almost superhuman effort to wave one hand. A feeble, slow wave. A plea. Help me. Hold me, please. Whatever signal pulsed through his enfeebled body, slowly his arm began to move.

There were five Dutch climbers and two Sherpas in residence on the Col, sufficient to drag the man into a tent. One might have expected their instinctive reaction to be to rush to the poor man's aid; to try and drag him into the tents, maybe revive him with oxygen and fluids. After all, he was only between twenty and thirty metres from the their tents. Instead there followed a bizarre radio conversation between Ronald Naar and the expedition doctor at base camp. Having established that dead men cannot make involuntary movements, Naar asked about the man's physical condition. The experts at base camp advised him that since the man had lain exposed to the fury of the elements for so long, it would be quite impossible to revive him or do anything to save him. This may very well be true, but it could only really be verified by a physical examination of the victim.

No one made any attempt to do this. On discovering that the Indian was alive and waving, the two Sherpas were distressed by what had happened, convinced in a fatalistic way that a man returning from the dead was a very serious omen.

'He is a dead man and he calls us,' Nima tells Naar. 'Our religion says a calling dead man means we should follow. We too must die.'

The Sherpas wanted to descend as soon as possible. One of the Dutch climbers, Hans Anterbosch, was also adamant that he wanted to leave. Naar left his tent to go to the adjacent tent and discuss the situation, glancing across as he went at the silent figure lying on his back, waving feebly. No one went across to examine the victim. In the shelter and relative comfort of their tent the Dutch climbers came to the conclusion that the core temperature of the man lying outside must be so low that to do anything – move him, feed him fluids or try to administer oxygen – would almost certainly kill him. The man had lain there since possibly as early as 1.30am after climbing all day in stormy conditions – nearly nine hours exposed to the killing wind. It was now four hours since his Indian colleagues had pronounced him dead. After Hans and another Dutch climber had left with the Sherpas, the remaining three filmed each other discussing what should be done.

Later, I watched their video in hushed despair, thinking all the time of the poor man dying alone barely a rope-length from the nylon walls in the background. I find it astounding that they made no attempt to examine the dying Indian.

'That man walked into his own death,' Ronald Naar writes in *Alleen de Top Telt* (Only the Summit Counts). 'I don't want any of us to get hurt. It makes no sense to try and rescue him.'

'But he is still human. He still lives, and we have to do something, don't we?' Hans van Meulen, a Dutch team mate, cries out in despair. Naar is adamant that nothing should be done; and his view prevails. It is too dangerous, he says, and although he understands their distress, he insists that nothing be done.

They did not go outside again until the following morning when the three Dutch climbers made their attempt on the summit, stepping past the man's frozen body on their way. They were forced to retreat some hundred metres below the South Summit.

In the spring of 1996 a vicious storm swept across the summit region of Everest, with tragic results. Eight climbers died during that night and early the following day, but many more survived the horrendous conditions. The laudable behaviour of both victims and rescuers stands in stark contrast to the expediency of the decision taken by Ronald Naar. In that storm, an American climber, Seaborn Beck Weathers, was abandoned on the South Col by rescuers who were overwhelmed by the conditions and the number of victims needing help. They simply couldn't find him in the dark and assumed that he must be dead.

Having slumped in a comatose state, the American revived over twelve hours later in daylight and staggered to the safety of the tents on the Col. He suffered severe frost injuries, with the loss of his right hand and part of his nose, but he survived. He had spent more than thirty hours at or above the Col, without oxygen for most of that time, and had survived through a long night of ferocious winds and plummeting temperatures. He was alive despite suffering considerably more trauma than the Indian climber in 1992.

The weather that night was appalling, with blizzard whiteout and freezing temperatures that were far more extreme than the relatively benign conditions in 1992. Rescue attempts were conducted in the stormy darkness of the night at distances from the tents far in excess of the thirty yards that separated the Indian climber from safety and warmth. The same day a Taiwanese climber, Makalu Gau, was revived and rescued from a forced open bivouac over a thousand feet above Camp 4 on the Col. Like Beck Weathers he also suffered dreadful frostbite injuries but nevertheless survived.

It shows clearly what utter nonsense it is to act upon a medical prognosis made in base camp as to the life expectancy of anyone on the South Col without making a physical examination. When the victim is a stone's throw away and you have warmth, shelter, oxygen, food and seven people capable of helping, then failure to go and take a close look at him seems highly questionable. In truth, all that the Dutch base camp doctors could do over the radio was to speculate on the dying Indian's condition and, however well meant this may have been, it was never going to be more than guesswork. It was however enough to justify Ronald Naar's insistence that his duty was not to risk the safety of his team in any attempt to save the man. The decision, it might be noted, also meant that they could pursue an unsuccessful summit attempt the following day.

When I learned of this awful death on the South Col I thought that it was a one off. A single example of climbers behaving badly that would never happen again. I was wrong.

On the evening of 10 May 1996, on the Tibetan side of Everest, three Indian climbers were trapped by that same vicious storm. The following morning two Japanese climbers and their three Sherpas made their summit bid via the North Face and NE Ridge of Everest from a high camp at 8300m. The Japanese party left early in the morning, determined to reach the summit in time to get back to their high camp before dark. They estimated that the ascent would take no longer than ten hours. By 8am they had reached their first big obstacle, the First Step, where they found, to their dismay, one of the Indian climbers slumped in the snow. It should have been no surprise since they must have known of the Indian's summit attempt and their failure to return the night before. The man was conscious, although clearly in a bad way, severely frostbitten and mumbling incoherently. The two Japanese climbers insisted on continuing with their summit bid. The Sherpas, who are all too often and easily bullied into acting against their

wishes, went with them. No liquid, oxygen or food was offered. Five fit, well-equipped oxygen-breathing climbers just moved on past the stricken man.

One and a half hours later the Japanese came to the Second Step, and it took them more than an hour to scale the 80ft-high rock buttress as the metal caving ladder, draped down it by a Chinese expedition years before, had partly come away. This sort of climbing is an extreme and exhausting undertaking at 8650m. When at last they hauled themselves over the top of the rock wall they came upon the remaining two Indians, also slumped in the snow, some thirty feet from the edge of the step. One man was unconscious and close to death, while the other was conscious and crouched in the snow as if attempting to get up and climb. The Japanese did not speak to the Indians or examine them in any way. They carried on for another fifty metres before stopping for a brief rest and to change their oxygen bottles. They even took in a little food and liquid nourishment within sight of the dying Indians. By 2.30pm, after a further 3½ hours climbing, Hiroshima Hanada and Eisuke Shigekawa had fulfilled their dream – one they were prepared to stop at nothing to achieve. Helping others had no part in the dream into which they had bought.

They happily radioed news of their triumph to their team in base camp unaware of the storm of horrified protests that their behaviour induced. It was at first reported that the five climbers descended safely to their high camp, passing the now dead bodies of the two climbers at the Second Step and the comatose but living man at the First Step. Later the Japanese changed their story, claiming that at least one of the climbers above the Second Step was still alive, and that one of their staff, Pasang Kami Sherpa, who on that day had achieved his fourth ascent of the mountain, had helped the ailing Indian down the Second Step. Presumably the Sherpa then had to leave the Indian because he was unable to help him any further on his own. In all of this, one wonders why nothing had been done by the Indian team to mount some sort of rescue of their own.

Richard Cowper, a member of the British 1996 North Ridge Everest Expedition, organised by the commercial trekking and climbing company Himalayan Kingdoms, interviewed both the Japanese climbers immediately they reached base camp. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Cowper reported Eisuke Shigekawa as saying in response to being asked why they had done nothing: '...above eight thousand metres is not a place where people can afford morality'. This is a shocking reflection on some of today's big mountain-climbing ethics. His partner, Hiroshi Hanada, apparently distressed, added in faltering English: 'They were Indian climbing members – we didn't know them.'

The leader of a Norwegian expedition was quoted as saying: 'Friendship, closeness to nature, building up a relationship with the mountain has gone. Now it is attack, in old fashioned siege style, and climbers have to reach the top at any price. People are even willing to walk over dead bodies to get to the top ... I shall never come back.'

Brian Blessed, the former star of the BBC Television serial 'Z-cars', was making his third unsuccessful attempt to climb the mountain with Himalayan Kingdoms. He was reported in *The Times* to have been outraged by the behaviour of the Japanese and had been quoted as saying in his usual theatrical manner: 'Everest stank of death ... with climbers running around like headless chickens, desperate to reach the summit first. I was horrified that such a high mountain experienced the lowest common denominator in human behaviour.' It was an emotional response from a man unashamed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Yet there is some truth in what he said. He claimed that when the Japanese team held a victory party, he went into their tent, ripped down their national flag, threw it to the ground and pissed on it. If this is true, then good for him.

The other expeditions at the base camp were outraged by the Japanese, who seemed unconcerned at all the fuss and immediately dispatched two more climbers and three Sherpas to the summit two days later. They climbed past the frozen body at the First Step and confirmed that it lay only one hundred metres above the high camp. The majority of climbers in the base camp were appalled by the behaviour although a few – more pragmatic and hard-nosed than others – felt that it would have been impossible anyway to get the victims down without grave risk. For purely practical considerations, there was nothing to be done. I wonder how they would feel if they found themselves needing help in such circumstances?

It was probably hopeless to attempt rescuing the climbers at the Second Step, but even so, it appears that a single Sherpa managed to get one man down what in reality is the hardest section of the route. If the man at the First Step was in fact alive when the Japanese returned from the summit some eight to nine hours later, then it is unforgivable that they did absolutely nothing. That climber had survived a savage storm and a long night in an exposed position, yet he had still been strong enough when first found at eight in the morning to survive the entire day without liquid or oxygen.

Surely if the Japanese climbers had had the decency to abandon their ambitions and, with their three Sherpas, had worked together, they could have saved at least one life. Four people could have worked at reviving the man sufficiently to get him moving with their assistance just as three Sherpas did with Makalu Gau from a similar height on the south side on that same day. The fifth climber could have descended to the high camp to get some essential supplies: spare oxygen, a stove, some hot drinks. They could have radioed base camp to explain the situation and request that help be sent up from the lower camps. They could have tried. It would have been desperately hard work, and would not have been without risk, but it would have had a chance of success. They seemed to have forgotten a certain moral duty.

Frankly, I find it unimaginable that they possessed such a narrow-minded, almost insane obsession with the summit, that they could find it in themselves to ignore a dying man. Even if the victim will inevitably die, does that mean you should offer him absolutely nothing, not a drop of fluid,

a comforting presence? How can anyone climb past a dying man and still think reaching the summit is worth anything?

To date a quite ghastly number of corpses have accumulated on or above the South Col. In 1993 at least five corpses were visible on the Col – three Nepalese, one Indian, and one Yugoslav. There were also two more Sherpas to be seen lying on the slopes above at 8400m. It was suggested that there may have been more, as four Indian climbers had died and been left there in October 1985. By 1994 it was estimated that there were as many as nine bodies on or near the Col. There is nothing noble about the way they have been abandoned. They are not mute, poignant testimony to an enduring spirit of adventure; they are simply the losers, abandoned by the winners.

Bodies have been left on mountains all over the world. Because these bodies lie in inaccessible or impossibly dangerous positions, they cannot be buried. But the South Col of Everest is not inaccessible. Corpses beside which people camp are not exactly hard to reach. It has been shown that, with care, it is not too dangerous to retrieve them from this spot nor too exhausting to attempt some form of burial.

The truth is that it is expedient not to do anything. Who wants to waste time, energy, and the vast amounts of money they have spent trying to climb the mountain on retrieving corpses? As we all know, expediency is the essence of convenience, and that's what helps you get up Everest.

On 22 April 1993, Pasang Lhamu became the first Nepalese and 17th woman to summit on Everest. She descended very slowly, taking five hours to reach the South Summit where she was benighted and forced to bivouac with her companions Pemba Norbu and Sonam Tshering Sherpa. The following morning Pemba left her with her companion and descended alone to the South Col to get oxygen supplies for Pasang. The weather worsened, and despite repeated attempts, no one could reach the stricken climbers. Pasang Lhamu died, and in so doing became a national heroine. Eighteen days later her body was found near the South Summit and lowered down to the South Col by a team of Russian climbers. It was then brought down to base camp by a SW Face Korean team. Whether a reward had been offered for the recovery of this national heroine, or Everest climbers had suddenly got an attack of the moralities, is not clear. She was eventually taken back to Kathmandu for national mourning.

Never before had a body been recovered from such a height on the mountain. The Russians and Koreans had proved the lie of expediency. Not only did they retrieve her body safely but they got it all the way back down to Kathmandu for cremation and last respects. What does that say about those who continue to climb in the full knowledge that they will be camping beside corpses? Not a great deal. When they do so they cannot claim to be surprised.

If you have spent mortgage-sized amounts of money to climb a mountain, then perhaps respect for the dead does become a secondary concern. Some

clients have paid commercial companies as much as $65,000 to be guided to its summit. Would it be so bad to say, 'Well, damn it, he isn't going anywhere for a while so I may as well climb to the top and then do something about him when I get down again.' And then, when you get back to the Col, you can always say, 'Hell, I'm so knackered; it would kill me if I tried to do anything for that poor guy now, but at least I thought about it.' Yes, at least you did.

It is not enough to say that these incidents are rare and exceptional occurrences. It does not matter if the mess may have since been cleaned up. The fact that we ever let it get into such a deplorable state remains a shameful legacy. Too many Everest climbers have in the past been prepared to accept the mess on the South Col as an acceptable price to pay. Commercial companies, and those guides who have first-hand knowledge of the state of the mountain, have been prepared to sell and lead trips through a field of tattered tents, oxygen cylinders and abandoned corpses.

Karl Huyberecht's shocking picture taken on the South Col in spring 1989 is a damning indictment of high-altitude mountaineering and its motives. In the foreground, almost unnoticed, as if casually tossed aside, lies the body of a man wearing a red down suit, face down amidst the rubble. For as far as one can see the bleak barren rocks of the Col are dotted with bright yellow oxygen bottles. Shredded tents, half-buried under drifts of ice-hard snow, with skeletal poles pointing bleakly at the sky, added splashes of colour to a dirty scene. It looks like a scene from a battlefield.

A record eleven climbers died on Everest in the spring season of 1996. Eighty-four climbers reached the summit, which makes a fatality rate of one in seven. Nevertheless, the average historical fatality rate still makes the Spring season of 1996 a safer-than-average year. At this rate how many climbers will have died on the mountain after another twenty years of hundreds of climbers attempting Everest each season? One hundred? Two hundred? Will the area of the South Col and above begin to resemble some grisly charnel house?

Some climbers have risked their lives, others have died, selflessly attempting to rescue fellow mountaineers, regardless of fault or criticism. Others have sat by and zipped the door shut on a man's final lonely end. Some have tried to climb the mountain in the purest style by new routes while the majority seem to care not at all for such fine ethical notions and reduce the mountain's height and seriousness by breathing bottled oxygen and hauling up on fixed ropes. Some say they are cheating, others think it is perfectly acceptable.

I understand why people might want to climb Everest. An ascent of the highest peak will always have a great deal of social cachet. For the professional climber, an Everest ascent is a significant addition to his or her mountaineering *curriculum vitae*, and so be bound to increase the chances of sponsorship or employment as a guide. Although diminished in reputation, Everest is still regarded by an ill-informed general public as the

ultimate mountaineering achievement. In most countries an ascent of Everest is still held to be an heroic endeavour. Such national acclaim can be a source of considerable wealth and prestige for the opportune climbers lucky enough to make a first ascent for their country. Few, if any, of these Everest climbers ever make any comment about the state of the mountain or the style of ascents.

There have been calls for a complete ban on climbing Everest, citing the quite plausible argument that there is nothing left to be proved by an ascent other than to massage the egos of rich clients whose motives leave a lot to be desired. Sagamartha, 'Mother of the Universe', as the Sherpas call Mount Everest, or Chomolungma, 'Goddess Mother of the Wind', as she is known to the Tibetans, is now no more than '...an old whore made sordid and debauched by her clientele', according to Jim Crumley, author of *Among Mountains*. I can sympathise with Crumley's view that it is time for Everest to be made inviolate, closed to all suitors for all time, to become a sanctuary to be honoured, admired and respected rather than abused for profit and ego. 'It will take the marshalling of world opinion,' Crumley writes, 'but to restore Everest's sanctity should be as high a priority of nature conservation as saving the tiger.' If he is correct, then it is a frightening analogy, given that the tiger, despite all international efforts at conservation, is today on the verge of extinction.

While Jim Crumley reasoned that it was time to apply the wise philosophy of conservation to a mountain crying out for respect and sanctity, he rightly overruled any temptation to argue that expeditions provide vital economic resources for an impoverished nation. Such economic arguments are deceptively facile. Trekkers would still come in their droves to view an 'Everest made sacred again'.

Does paying mortgage-sized amounts of cash to be led up a mountain, regardless of the style or the inherent moral principles behind climbing, become something laudable? When you can zip shut a tent door in sight of a dying man or believe that 8000 metres is really 'no place for morality', then perhaps it is time for all climbing on the mountain to cease, or at the very least be confined to the handful of mountaineers capable of climbing it without oxygen.

I can only guess at how close I came to dying in Peru in 1985 when my climbing partner Simon Yates was forced to cut our rope and I plunged into the crevasse on Siula Grande. Although there was a lot of pain and anguish and hardship during the four days in which I struggled to survive, it is the dreadful loneliness that still deeply unsettles me. Much of what I did at that time was instinctive; but what kept me going for so long when all seemed lost was the desperate desire for company. I went beyond caring whether I lived or died so long as I did not have to die alone. I wanted a hand to hold, a voice to hear. I craved for some human contact that might alleviate the terrifying emptiness of those days spent slowly dying.

Looking back rationally now as a mountaineer, I can see no reason why Simon Yates should have attempted to rescue me. Indeed, at the time I really thought it to be an impossible task, and if that were so then any such attempt would be suicidal. I was 6000m up on a remote mountain with a badly shattered knee. We had run out of food and gas that morning and there were no mountain rescue teams or helicopters to call upon. As a two-man team, climbing Alpine-style with no other climbers in the vicinity, we always knew that even a minor accident could be a death sentence. Suddenly we were forced to confront a situation of our own making, one that we had hoped would never happen. We found ourselves in a game that no one was likely to win – so much so that it became *how* we strove to play the game that counted in the end.

When the testing moment came, I looked into the eyes of a friend and wondered what he was thinking, what he was going to do, whether he would leave me to die or help me. It seemed to take a very long time while my life hung in the balance of another man's thoughts.

Simon had a way out. I did not. It would have been reasonable for him to climb down alone, leaving me to my fate. No one would have had any right to criticise him for such a course of action. He would probably have been able to descend the mountain safely on his own, although it would have been an extreme undertaking. He chose instead to try to rescue me single-handed in an audacious and exceptional piece of mountaineering requiring skill, experience beyond his years and, above all, courage.

*... Lights came on in the blackness, and a head torch spurted a sodium yellow light beam into the night, and I fell off my boulder and wept as heavy footfalls crunched in the gravel and voices shouted in the dark. Strong arms grabbed me and pulled me towards the lighted tents. Simon grinned and swore at me in shock – to see a dead man moving. He looked old and haggard and care-worn. After he settled me gently against the soft down sleeping bags he zipped the tent door closed against the dark shadows of a frightening night.*

(The author's latest book *Dark Shadows Falling* was published by Jonathan Cape in 1997. The book is reviewed by Trevor Braham on pages 314-316.)