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DEATH STORM ON EVEREST

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Seaborn Beck Weathers thought his chances of success were good. Mount Everest is a tough climb, to be sure, but not the monster it once was. Weathers, 50, a wealthy pathologist from Dallas, is not a professional mountaineer. But he was in the best shape of his life. He had clothing designed to protect him to 80 degrees below zero. And he had paid \$60,000 to Rob Hall--a renowned New Zealand climber and guide who had seen 39 people like Weathers to the top of the world in the past four years. "Rob felt we all had a very good chance of reaching the summit," Weathers would say later. "We had prepared correctly and were climbing at the right time. We knew what we were doing. What occurred later was really a total surprise."

Three days after Hall's optimistic assessment, Weathers, face burned black and arms nearly useless, would be one of the surprise survivors of one of the worst alpine disasters in recent memory. On the night of May 10 a storm swept the summit's fearsome "Death Zone" with snow, bitter cold and hurricane-force winds. Within 24 hours, eight of the more than 30 climbers on the peak were dead, among them Hall and Scott Fischer of Seattle, who was also running a commercial tour.

By May 1996 Everest had become the accessible behemoth, or so it seemed. Never as murderously tricky to climb as K-2, the world's second-highest peak, its challenge lay in the brute facts of its extreme altitude, occasional storms and inaccessibility. As clothing and equipment manufacturers mitigated the first problem, and a sprawling base camp sprang up at 5,340 meters to provide warmth and food to dozens of would-be peak beaters, the issue for elite climbers was no longer whether they could reach Everest's pinnacle but rather how many paying customers they could take with them. It was not exactly a risk-free ticket to Disneyland, but for less than \$100,000 a wealthy and dedicated amateur could buy a decent chance at summiting: money could buy altitude.

Communications breakthroughs increased the impression that Everest was accessible to nearly anyone. Climbers call home from the summit using satellite phones. They send E-mail. Over the past two months, socialite-alpinist Sandy Hill Pittman has been describing her ascent with Fischer's group on the Internet

and throwing in remarks about books and recipes. One of her cyber correspondents inquired as to whether there were "any permanent markers at the summit. Flags, or plaques, or anything like that? A gift shop, perhaps?" Pittman didn't tell her new friend that the most enduring mementos on Everest's higher reaches are the bodies of dead climbers.

Weathers realizes that now. So do a lot of other people. Says Jeff Blumenfeld, editor and publisher of Expedition News: "You can be hooked up to a Website, you can call anyone on a sat phone, you can have the latest high-tech gear, and the mountain can still win."

Most Everest expeditions take place in early May, when the weather is best. Friday before last was temperate and clear, a day to rival the one in 1993 on which 40 people reached the top. Now 11 groups were swarming up the mountain's top 900 meters like ants on a piece of cake. Fischer's and Hall's parties set out at around midnight and eventually merged, pushing together through waist-high snow up Everest's last 75 meters. Despite delays due to the number of people crowding through narrow passes, the mood was good. The daughter of Washington State postal worker Douglass Hansen had earlier faxed in her support: "Come on, Dad, do it." By 2:30 p.m., he and more than 20 others had reached the peak.

But as Jonathan Krakauer, a journalist covering the climb for Outside magazine, stood at the top of the world, he noticed something ominous: clouds were approaching from the valley below. Within two hours they had arrived and metastasized into a monster: shrieking winds blew sheets of snow horizontally at 65 knots. A "whiteout" dropped visibility to zero, and wind chill plunged to -140[degrees] F. "It was chaos up there," says Krakauer. "The storm was like a hurricane, only it had a triple-digit wind chill. You don't have your oxygen on, you're out of breath, you can't think." In one horrifying vignette after another, the mountain began picking off its conquerors.

The first to die may have been Yasuko Nambo, 49, one of Hall's clients from Japan; her frozen body was discovered the next morning, 365 meters above the South Col, the valley between Everest and its neighbor Lhotse. Another guide, Andrew Harris, came within yards of the camp before apparently walking right off the 8,500-meter Lhotse face. Fischer, a vastly experienced climber known as "Mr. Rescue," lagged behind his clients, perhaps to help stragglers. Searchers found him two days later high above the South Col. In the same area they found Taiwanese climber Makalu Gau, half buried in the snow and mumbling. Gau could be awakened, but Fischer was comatose; and so, by the stark rules of mountain triage, the overtaxed rescuers saved whom they could.

Leader Hall, meanwhile, had stayed on the ridge to tend Hansen, who had expended all his energy on the summit. Exposed and out of oxygen, Hansen died during the night. Hall hung on: at 4:35 the next morning, his startled friends in camp heard his voice on the two-way radio. Rescuers tried twice but failed to reach him: his only hope was to make his own way to the South Col. "We tried to get him to move," mountaineer Ed Viesturs told Outside Online. "And we thought he was moving down the ridge. But after three hours, he

mentioned, almost casually, 'You know, I haven't even packed up yet.'" Instead, Hall asked to be patched through to his wife, Dr. Jan Arnold, back in New Zealand and seven months pregnant with their first child. They talked for several hours. Arnold had reached the summit with her husband in 1993; now "she was right there with him, basically," says a friend. At a press conference later, she reported that his final words had been, "Hey, look, don't worry about me." Then he turned off his radio.

On the northern approach to the peak, three members of an Indian expedition were stranded on their way down from the top. Their frantic comrades thought they had persuaded a late-departing Japanese group to forgo its summit attempt and stage a rescue. But when next heard from, the Japanese were announcing their successful climb. The appalled Indians believe the Japanese found all three men and left at least two to die. The Japanese called the allegations "contrary to the truth, one-sided and unjustified." Responded an adviser to the Indians: "They [the Japanese] will have to live with their consciences."

Those who survived the storm have the choice of seeing their fate as either a happy accident or a miracle. Fischer's climbers, now led by guide Neal Beidleman, were saved when Beidleman glimpsed the Big Dipper during a storm lull and was able to navigate them into camp. Gau's sherpa managed to wake him and get him down to the high camp, where he could receive fluids intravenously. But the most remarkable revival was that of Weathers, the Dallas doctor. At 9 a.m. on Saturday, fellow climbers left behind his apparently lifeless body; that morning the news was relayed to his horrified wife in Texas. Later that day, she got another phone call. People in the high camp had been astonished to see a zombie-like figure staggering down the hill toward them, face blackened from the sun, arms held rigidly outward, eyes closed to slits. Weathers had refused to die.

Neither Gau nor Weathers, both in critical condition, would have survived were it not for Lieut. Colonel Madan K.C., a Nepalese helicopter pilot. Choppers seldom venture above 6,000 meters: at a certain height, the thin air reduces their lift. Yet Madan flew up to a giant cross the climbers had painted on the Everest ice with red Kool-Aid. There he hovered, runners just touching the snow's treacherous surface, as Gau was loaded on board. Madan flew Gau down to the base camp, then repeated the process with Weathers. It was the second-highest helicopter rescue in history.

By last Tuesday, when the survivors of the most disastrous 24 hours in Everest's history honored their perished comrades in a Buddhist service, NBC's Everest chat room had reported more than a million hits, including tens of thousands of condolence messages. Beidleman responded, "We haven't enjoyed the fact of reaching the summit. And we are still in grief."

The mountain no longer seems so accessible. Krakauer, one of the two survivors in Hall's summiting party, believes commercial expeditions "need to be reconsidered" both because the customers put the guides' lives in additional danger and because "when the s----- hits the fan, there is nothing any guide can do for any client."

To which Sir Edmund Hillary, now retired in New Zealand, added, "I have a feeling that people have been getting just a little bit too casual with Mount Everest. This incident will bring them to regard it rather more seriously."

--Reported by John Colmery/Katmandu, Meenakshi Ganguly/New Delhi, Jenifer Mattos/New York and Simon Robinson/Auckland

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