

car driving on a freeway. Finally they cart-wheeled to a stop several hundred metres below us. Incredibly, a few seconds later, a second figure appeared flying over the ice cliff at an even higher speed. He too began a series of skips across the surface of the snow at extreme speed. They finally stopped when they crashed into a crevasse a few hundred metres further down.

So suddenly summit day had become accident day. It was now about to become a full blown rescue operation. At 6,900m there are no helicopters, acclimatised rescue teams, or government organisations that can come to get you. We were on our own and it was rescue time. People slowly made their way to the injured climbers and we split into groups to get them down. It looked really bad. Lakpa Chiri Sherpa had a broken leg, was coughing blood, and seemed to have severe internal injuries. Tenzing Sherpa had a dislocated shoulder and damaged hip. Dennis Jonsson had a really badly injured ankle and couldn't stand up. All this at 6,900 meters!

An epic rescue had now begun. After getting the injured climbers to C2 300 meters below us, we wrapped the two most injured climbers in their sleeping bags. It then took us fourteen hours to get them to C1 400 meters below us. One of most difficult sections was the fifteen metre crevasse we had crossed the day before. Tying the injured climbers on ladders, we used a dubious Tyrolean traverse to get them across. It was scary stuff. The injured were lowered below the lip of the crevasse and then we had to haul them back up and across. There were no pulleys, no secure anchors or high tech devices, just people holding on to ropes with bare hands. We only just managed to get them across. In complete darkness we kept going. The scariest moment was when we were lowering Tenzing Sherpa down a steep ice section, again the snow anchor we were belaying from failed completely. As the belayer struggled to hold them, the injured climber began sliding into the abyss of the night. I couldn't believe it. Another snow anchor failure! It took me a good ten minutes to dig a snow trench and I reset the anchor as a proper deadman. To make sure it was bomber we pissed on the snow as we back filled the trench to

ensure a really good freeze. (This is an old Sherpa trick which works very effectively!)

It would be midnight and fourteen hours later before reaching C1. After grabbing Bert, a climber from Holland, I spent three and a half hours rappelling down in the eerie scary darkness to Advanced Base Camp a further 400m below. Needless to say we triple checked every anchor we rapped off as we had now been on the go for twenty two hours. The rest of the group crashed either inside the tents at C1 (up to four in a tent!) with the injured or bivvied outside. Thankfully it was a warm night.

After a very short sleep I awoke at ABC to people coming up from Base Camp. Soon I was climbing back upwards with a warm thermos and medicines, eager to help the others back up at C1. But it was not to be. It took me three hours to climb just 300 vertical meters and I was getting too cold and too tired to go further. I waited at 6000m for the climbers above me to come down but there was nothing more I could do. In total despair I hooked the thermos flask to the anchors, stuffed all the medicines I had in a small crack and headed downwards. Whilst rappelling I could see that the climbers above me had hardly moved from C1. Like the night before it was slow going. I felt a severe sense of abandonment towards them. A small tear drained from my eye as I rappelled down. Reaching BC at 7pm I got on the radio and spoke to the teams up on the mountain as they slowly inched their way to ABC. It was going to be a long night.

The following morning we met the rest of the team in ABC. Everyone was severely exhausted and could hardly move. The injured Lakpa Chiri Sherpa had come close to dying. The four people getting him down had to at one point to turn him upside down and drain all the blood from his body and mouth in order to help him cope with his internal injuries. As I held his hand at ABC he was having trouble breathing. We had to get him the hell out of there. We slid the ladder he was secured to down low-angled snow gullies like a sled, or carried it on our shoulders when we could towards an intermediate camp near BC.

Early the next day a high performance Nepalese Army helicopter circled loudly above us. To the screams of joy and claps from everyone the helicopter ferried the injured climbers first to the town of Periche before continuing to waiting ambulances at Kathmandu. A huge sense of overwhelming relief then came over everyone at BC. Everyone shook hands, patted each other on the back and hugged in jubilation. It was an amazing rescue. With limited resources, lack of people and at high altitude, a group of people from various countries with limited skills had joined forces to get people down safely.

Reality, however then set in. The expedition was over. Some people left the expedition immediately that afternoon and began the walk out to Lukla. Others like myself stuck around for a few days in order to recover physically and then separated from the group for a day of walking alone to create some space and get over recent events. Despite the disappointment of not summiting Purnori I was just glad that no one had died. They could have done very easily. People generally do not walk away from high speed 200 metre falls at an altitude of 7000 meters. Other than not reaching the summit of Purnori, I felt very good about getting as high as 6,900 meters which wasn't too bad having never been at altitude before. I guess sometimes reaching your first Himalayan summit is only one of the joys of mountaineering. Human life and friendship are way more precious than reaching any summit. ☉

