

Everest 2008

Mountain of Politics



In 2008, I returned to climb Mt. Everest for the third time. With my primary objective being to raise awareness and funds for Alzheimer’s research, I also wanted to stand on top of the world – a goal that eluded me on my first two attempts in 2002 and 2003.

But the Chinese were taking the Olympic torch to the summit and took control of Mt. Everest to ensure their summit would not be marred by protests over their handling of Tibet.

For 8 weeks in the spring of 2008, I felt like a hostage and climbing took second priority over maintaining my sanity.

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Part 1: Rumors of Demise

Do I go higher? Do I turn back? Can I make it to the summit ... and back?

In the early morning hours of May 21st, 2008, I asked myself these questions. For the third time in my life, I stood in almost the same place on the highest mountain on earth asking the same questions. But this time was different. Everything was different. And everything was the same.

2007 Protests

I never intended on being at that spot on Everest in late May. I was supposed to be on the other side, the north side, the Tibet side. But the Chinese had different ideas.

I remember writing during my Everest 2007 coverage on April 26 that at the north side base camp:

“Four Americans protested the Chinese torch ambitions and were "detained" by the Chinese yesterday. The [San Francisco Chronicle](#) listed their names. Sounds like not a huge incident since they were allowed to use their cell phones. However, this will probably add fuel to the argument to over control Everest next year. By shutting down the north side, the Tibetans will be hurt the most due to lack of business.”

Well, it was a huge deal. It could have been the spark that caused the paranoid Chinese to send a fax to all north expedition leaders on March 10th, 2008 to “postpone your arrival to base camp until after May 10, 2008 due to overcrowding ...”

I sent an urgent message to my expedition leaders at Mountain Professionals asking if they had received the fax, if it was true and what were our plans. Yes, it was true was the reply.

Of course the issue was arriving that late did not allow for sufficient time to acclimatize or to establish the high camps before the monsoons started in early June. In effect the Chinese had closed Everest for the 2008 season in the name of taking the Olympic torch to the summit. Their fear was a protest at 29,035 feet that would embarrass them during a nationwide television broadcast from the summit. But the die had been cast by their own decisions.

Privately, our team had been supposedly assured since we had already paid the permit fee that we, along with several other expeditions, would be allowed to climb the north along with the Chinese. But as the protest in Lhasa of the 1959 Chinese takeover of Tibet escalated into violence the north side option was completely eliminated.

Monks and Chinese were killed; accusations were thrown by the Dali Lama and the Chinese government as to who was to blame. The Chinese reacted with some restraint but their intention was clear – Tibet was not open for negotiation. Tibet was soon closed to all foreigners. The occupation would continue and the “One China Policy” would be driven to conclusion before, during and after the Olympics. One can only imagine what will happen in Tibet once the world stops watching after the Olympics.



The torch summit team arrived at north base camp in mid March (just after the fax was sent) with 31 climbers, the majority of which were Tibetan climbers who would fix the ropes to the summit – a task previously done by now dismissed Russell Brice and his expert team of Tibetan climbers and Nepalese Sherpa.

Meanwhile, anxiety grew as our plans were in flux. Via email, I established a “support group” of climbers from various expeditions I knew were headed to Everest or Lhotse. Soon we were sharing info from our organizers and the rumors were flying. Sensational headlines from the climbing websites told of restrictions including limited permits, no satellite phones, censorship and, most disturbing, limits or closure on the Nepal side of Everest.

But the news from operators, both western and Nepalese were that everything was fine: don't cancel your flights – you will be climbing Everest in 2008. Oh, and please send us your money. Important questions went unanswered or received vague responses. But a sense of optimism prevailed and few climbers canceled.

North vs. South



Everest from Pumori Base Camp area

I had been concerned about climbing on the south for 2008. Rumors of Chinese control had been in the climbing community since the protests in 2007 but few people actually believed the Chinese would completely close Everest! The big concern was that the south would be over crowded with teams shunning the Tibetan side.



Everest North Face from Tibet

I had attempted Everest via the South Col route in 2002 and 2003 so I really did not want to return to that side. I was looking forward to the north side experience complete with the history, a different route and interacting with the Tibetans. But my choices were getting very limited and soon it was the south or, maybe, the north in 2009 or later.

In partnership with Phil Crampton of Altitude Junkies, Ryan Waters of Mountain Professionals had secured base camp services and Sherpa support with Kathmandu logistics operator, High Altitude Dreams. A preliminary climbing permit was issued by the Nepal Ministry of Tourism – after the \$10,000 permit fee per climber was paid.

I packed my duffels on March 26th and left for Kathmandu on March 27th.

This was my seventh trip to Nepal and I had become accustomed to uncertainty in the mountain Kingdom. But this time was different. Not only had the Chinese allegedly provided a large loan to Nepal for their “cooperation” – the implication being that China had bought the Nepal officials to maintain order on their side of Everest – but upcoming elections were scheduled that would depose the King of Nepal and put in a new government under the control of the Maoists – a violent paramilitary political organization that had killed over 10,000 Nepalese and held tourists up for “donations” over the past ten years.

However, I had learned to ignore the rumors and trust that the Nepalese people (and the tourism officials) were good to tourists – especially climbers with our deep pockets. In

spite of this third world country's horribly inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, the people were kind, generous, and friendly. I trusted them.

Kathmandu

Arriving in Kathmandu on March 30th, I was not disappointed. The weather was mild – not the usual hot and humid stifling atmosphere that usually greeted me. The usual organized chaos at the airport made me feel at home as I was met and taken to my hotel by the staff of High Altitude Dreams. Everything was going to be OK. Now I just had to climb Mt. Everest.

I met Ryan at the hotel. “Do we have our permit? Is everything good?” I asked immediately. “Everything is perfect” he responded and with that I went to bed after two days of travel.

But an attachment to the preliminary permit stated we were not going to be allowed above Camp 2 from May 1st to May 10th – during the Chinese torch summit – the only real restriction listed. When asked about this, once again local and western operators – even Sherpa simply winked and said everyone was agreeing to anything and that life on the mountain would be different.

Thankfully, I no longer had instant access to the Internet so I was not seeing the escalating hyperbole from the climbing sites which had now spread to the mainstream press. But friends and family did see it thus creating worry back home for our safety.

The Khumbu

I felt better once the Yeti Airlines Twin Otter left Kathmandu for Lukla. Looking out the small windows, I enjoyed the 30 minute flight as we approached the mountains I had come to love. As usual we were scheduled to take seven or eight days to trek to base camp through one of the most impressive valleys on earth – The Khumbu.

Being a consummate tourist, I filmed our landing in Lukla through the cockpit glass. See the [video](#) plus many others from Everest on the main dispatch page.



Porters on a bridge in the Khumbu

With my day pack on my back, I along with my teammates started the trek on a beautiful spring day. The flowers and buds were just starting to show as the days were longer, nights warmer and signs of winter all but melted away.

I smiled as the yaks and zos fought for space on the narrow dirt trails. Being back in Namche brought back deep seeded memories of my first trek in 1997. The low clouds blocked views of my favorite climb – Ama Dablam and also hid any views of Everest for days. Porters - young, old, male and female still provided the lion's share of the load carrying in the Khumbu. Straw baskets held kerosene, food, chickens, beer, eggs and God knows what else. Stacks of heavy plywood for new teahouses along with 100 pounds of building timbers pressed hard on their backs as they made their way up and down the hilly terrain.



Teahouse Dining Room

Each day we spent a few hours gaining 1,000 feet or so to the next village before spending the afternoon relaxing in the teahouse communal room reading or chatting with fellow climbers and trekkers. We had left behind all the rumors of the US and Kathmandu and I was getting fully focused on the task at hand.

New Rumors

But it was in Dingboche that the rumors took on a new life. A leader from Canada West Mountain Guide told us that the Nepal Army was confiscating all electronics - phones, cameras, video at an armed checkpoint at Gorak Shep – the last village before base

camp.



Soldier at the last bridge before Namche Bazaar

I strongly questioned him as to the source, the exact words, did anyone actually experience this, etc. Upon scrutiny it was yet another rumor this time spread via handheld radio from teams already at base camp. No one had had anything taken – yet. But this rumor was now on websites including one from a different team – Peak Freaks - already at BC.

I knew the army was more visible since a soldier was stationed at the last bridge before Namche. Curious I thought at the time.

I began to consider what life would be like isolated from home for the next six weeks. Not calling my wife. No ability to post dispatches. No opportunity to pitch my cause for fund raising for Alzheimer’s research. If this rumor was true, it was serious for me – after a dedicated year of work to get here. I tried to ignore (or deny) that this would happen but Everest 2008 was getting stranger by the day. All of a sudden politics dominated my thoughts, not climbing.

As I packed my small day pack and my duffels the next morning, I hid my electronics in various stuff sacks. My phone was buried in my sleeping bag in my compression sack, my solar panel in my hydration sleeve in my pack, my adaptors in pee bottles and other places I thought no one would ever actually look.

All of a sudden phone and computer connection problems became the foundation of rumors that the Chinese had jamming electronics capable of stopping phone

transmissions, they were ease dropping on calls, e-mails were being monitored, websites watched. However paranoid were our fears, there was a thread of truth to some of this.

I had learned that upon seeing my name on the north side climbing application, officials of the CTMA (China – Tibet Mountaineering Association) had linked me to a quote on the MountEverest.net climbing website where I said “While myself and other climbers are anxious about our opportunity to climb Mt. Everest, the Tibetans and Sherpas are fearful for their future. A sense of perspective is important at times like this.”

Questions were asked and a background check was run. Before leaving the U.S., I had noticed that my website had a significant increase in hits from China so I knew something was up. My innocent comment was being used for justification to exclude me from the expedition. It was explained that my comments were not political and the issue was dropped. However my site now was on the Chinese radar. I would be allowed to climb on the north but they would watch what I said on my site. I wondered if this would carry over to the south now that I had switched. Just how far did the Chinese reach?

The walk to Lobuche was uneventful as was the next day to Gorak Shep, It was business as usual in the teahouse. There was even a sign advertising to recharge your phone or laptop for 100 Rupees an hour. I relaxed a bit but still kept my toys hidden away. The big question was what awaited us at base camp.

Talk of climbing took backstage as we made our way to base camp. Calls back home (made under the cover of dark or behind a big rock) covered the usual topics but always included a review of the latest rumors spread over the Internet. Families were increasingly worried for the safety of their climber – and the climb of Everest had not even started.

Everest Base Camp



2008 Everest Base Camp

The low clouds had finally cleared as we were treated to views of Everest from Kala Patar and on the final walk to base camp. It was as high as I remembered – higher actually. I was suddenly brought back to reality as to what I was doing here. Forget the Chinese, the rumors, the distractions. I was here to climb to the summit, to raise money, to raise awareness of a devastating disease that was killing my mom. I was here to do a job. Damn the politics, this was much more important than some stunt across the border.

But as I walked into BC, I noticed frenzied activity on the southern edge. About fifty Sherpa were building a huge new helicopter landing pad. The activity seemed more urgent than it deserved.

Base Camp was already large and growing by the day as more expeditions arrived. There were literally hundreds of small sleeping tents, large dining tents and huge kitchen tents built around stone walls covered with blue tarps. Small toilet, shower and utility tents completed each camp. But there was

more.



High Altitude Dreams Base Camp

One large American company had built a rock wall around their compound. Not sure if it was to keep us out or them in but not a friendly sign. Large banners advertising sponsors adorned tents. One company had a bakery set up to sell fresh baked muffins and milk tea to trekkers. The community medical station was already established - \$85 for unlimited care. Pathways meandered through camp with many dead ends. Music blared out of camps showing the diversity of who was there.

But this was Everest base camp. The Khumbu Icefall rose gently to the east. The tip of Lhotse was visible if you looked carefully. Pumori guarded the west. The air was crisp and thin. Yaks moved quietly on the paths with only their bells announcing their arrival.

It may have been a scene right out of the b-movie *Vertical Limit* but it was real. The only things missing were the big screen televisions and sour-mash stills. Wait, they were there also. It was Everest base camp and I was finally back. A sense of comfort occupied my mind as I settled into my VE-25 tent. I knew what I was here to do. And I felt strong and confident.

We had made it to BC – with our electronics. No sign of the Army. No Chinese. No “Red” flags. Everything seemed normal – well for Everest base camp that is. Our cook made a special meal of yak sizzler (tasted like chicken) for our welcome. We got to know each other better over dinner. Tensions went away as we discussed the upcoming Puja and first climb up the Icefall. Laughs came easy as the cold of the night entered the tent.

Then ...

“Hide all your phones. The Army is searching each tent.” The neighboring expedition leader shouted into the dining tent as he ran swiftly by.

Part 2 - Volunteer Prisoners at Base Camp

Now at base camp, Willie Benegas passed by our dining tent like Paul Revere, I expected to hear “one if they search your tent, two if they search you” but this call was the more innocuous warning of “hide your phones.” Over the next six weeks, I cringed every time I saw Willie and his warnings.

We knew that some new rules were in the making based on some surprises on the trek in.

The hill is called Namche Hill. It is infamous with trekkers in the Khumbu. Maybe 2,000’ high, it is the crux of the trek between the airstrip in Lukla and Namche – the center of the Khumbu region.

Leaving the deep valley carved by the turquoise Dudh Kosi river, the dirt trail switch backs ever upwards. The only respite from the hot sun is the shade from the pines and other evergreens. The trail is quite busy at times. Everyone who is going to Everest, Ama Dablam, Island Peak or just trekking in the area must take this route. It is the only path of commerce to the higher villages so the endless supply of food, building supplies, beer and other necessities are moved on the backs of porters and zos up the steep dirt.

After an hour or so, I made it up the Hill to the edge of Namche along with one of my teammates and other miscellaneous people. A new building sat at the edge of the trail with semi-official looking people inside. The officials sat beside a small table looking at papers surrounded by westerners.

One of our Sherpas came by and I asked what was going on. “New restrictions. You must sign paper.” Was the answer.

“What if I don’t?” I thought. Am I still obligated to follow them? And with that I moved on. What I didn’t know was that one of the climbers on our permit, not with my direct team, had signed the paper on behalf of all of us on the permit. He was our designated leader for permit purposes.

A climbing permit is a political thing. It has all sorts of information about prospective climbers. It is an official document that is shown a few times. But it also represents the loose affinity of Everest climbers. Often organizers will pool together to secure a permit. One person is designated the leader but any real responsibilities or authority are unclear.

Pooling permits used to be an economic advantage when Nepal charged \$70,000 for a team of 7 climbers and \$25,000 for an individual one. Now it is a flat \$10,000 per climber regardless of team size. However people are still combined under one permit and assigned a Liaison Officer from the government (or military) to watch over them.

New Rules

The new restrictions signed on my behalf included four additions to the restrictions included on our original permit of not climbing higher than Camp 2 from May 1st to May 10th.

First, all satellite phones must be deposited with the army at base camp. Second, all commercial communications must be approved by the Ministry of Tourism before publication. Third, no banners, signs, talk or protests that would harm Nepal –China relations. Finally, no video cameras and filming anywhere on the mountain. There were some other clauses regarding garbage fees but this was filler to soften the real message.

I read it several times trying to read between the lines. Was this an appeasement for the Chinese by the Nepal Ministry? Was it serious? There were rules but no mention of process. However the opening sentence stated something along the lines of “Under the penalty of the laws of our friendly countries, you must abide by the following:” Not a good sign.

“Shit. This is getting worse” I said quietly. Then I went through all the reasons why this did not apply to me. My primary rationale was that I was not “commercial”. I had not signed the paper nor had my official leader. But overall, this thing could not be enforceable ... unless the army really did show up ... in force ...

I was not giving up my phone. I was not going to have some bureaucrat edit my dispatches. Did they want to listen in on my phone calls to my wife? Did they really care that I was writing about how furry the yaks are? How much my feet stink? The color of my pee? Come on, this was beyond ridiculous. This was silly.

But here I was sitting in Nepal, not the United States. Surrounded by people I didn't know. Could I trust the Sherpas? How about our cook. He was from southern Nepal – Hindu. Maybe he was safe. How about Sam the cook boy? I looked at our Sherpas with a new attitude. After all I was a visitor; they lived here and had families to protect. How far would they go to meet the new law or to protect their customers?

The dinner conversation was once again consumed by talk of rules, rumors and work-arounds. Some sat quietly, some were vocal but everyone was concerned. In all we had six satellite phones and one high speed Bgan unit so it was an issue for all of us. By the way, our ratio of climbers to phones was fairly common in the 31 other camps so the number of phones was massive. How in the world would they collect all of them and keep track of them? However, while the communications issue was front and center, there was a background hum that took over.

If they would go so far as to confiscate phones, how far would they go to keep us off the mountain? And what if the Chinese torch team had problems – weather delays. How long would this ban on climbing last?

At the end of the day we were there to climb Mt. Everest. Dispatches and web sites were secondary. I was becoming more and more concerned that our safety was viewed as

optional by the Nepalese. That our permit money had just gone down the same back street as the Chinese “loan”. We were of no concern. We had become insignificant pawns in a huge multinational game of pride and ego. We had no voice.

I went to my tent that night with my mind spinning. I had taken my phone and dug a hole under my tent. I placed it carefully in a small stuff sack, covered it with rocks and hoped that any search would be superficial at best. But what if someone saw me using it later? What if they told our local spy, umm Liaison Officer? What if a teammate was afraid that if it was found we would all get deported? But there was no real military presence in camp. This was all speculation. We had no real proof of searches. All I wanted to do was climb. I finally feel asleep.

Icefall Dangers

By now it was mid April, and the normal acclimatization schedule would have teams spending nights at Camps 1 and 2 for a few days but another concerning development had occurred – few ladders in the Icefall. I had noticed on arriving in base camp a pile of aluminum ladders in the middle of camp. Strange I thought at the time since most of the ladders should have been placed in the Icefall and lower Western Cwm over the impassable crevasses. But now I learned that only part of the Icefall had been “fixed” with ladders and line and nothing in the Cwm. The schedule was now at serious risk.

When asked what was going on, the Sherpas gave noncommittal answers commenting on how hard it was to fix the Icefall, how complicated it was this year and more nonsense. But speculation was that the Ministry had asked the Icefall Doctors to stall putting in the ladders as a way to control the traffic higher on the mountain. In other words...no ladders, no climbers, no summits and most importantly zero threats of summit protests. They could claim technical issues while not creating a ruckus amongst the climbers for political reasons. Clever but, once again, not believable. It seems that Everest was being run by the clowns in the circus. But the clowns held the keys.

Expedition Sidars (the leader of the Sherpas) began to complain. Western expedition leaders made a few noises but were mostly quiet letting the Sherpas do the dirty work. Influential large expedition company owners were back in their home countries monitoring the events but making little noise. After all they had complained in the beginning but once the permits were issued, they quieted down. Kathmandu logistic company owners were in Kathmandu seemingly avoiding getting caught up in all of this.

Several meetings had now been held by the highest ranking Liaison Officer to announce that more meetings would be held when the army arrives. Oh and that the Icefall Doctors were working hard on the ladders.

Another rumor began to make the rounds – the army was coming to base camp but they were delayed with altitude sickness at the lower villages. If the army was really coming, then perhaps the rumors of phone confiscation were also true.



In the Khumbu Icefall

We stayed busy waiting for the ladders to be finished. One day half way up the Icefall. Another spent on a practice course nearby with ladders and ropes for rappelling. But most of the time was spent wandering around BC, reading, eating and wondering how all of this was going to turn out. It was April 12th and we still had many weeks to go. The tension was getting stronger with all the uncertainty. In spite of knowing better, we tried to avoid spreading rumors but it was our lifeline to the future.

The Army Arrives

“The military is here in BC.” was the morning news. And it was true. Smack in the middle of base camp were several small sleeping tents, a few support tents and another blue tent.

“Please put your phones in the blue barrel by noon today” Tshering, our Nepalese base camp manager, announced during breakfast. “The barrel will be taken to the army camp. We will keep the key and you can have access to it between 6:00 AM and midnight each day.” It appeared that each team would have their own barrel holding their phones and we had unlimited access – under the supervision of the army. Interestingly, cell phones – which worked at base camp and most Sherpas had – were excluded.

At 11:45, I put my sat phone in the barrel.

I returned to my tent feeling as alone as I ever have in the mountains. Yes, I could no longer post dispatches and yes, my fund raising would take a hit. Also I would lose touch with the hundreds of 7th graders I had spoken with before I left. But most importantly, I was cut off from my wife. Yes, I could do the 20 minute walk to the army camp and use my phone under their supervision but I was 12 hours ahead of her making scheduling difficult. Also the phone would not be with me above base camp. While communication back home was a luxury, this was 2008, not 1888. We had the technology, we had the ability. This was not a matter of choice. It was martial law. And what was next?

I took it badly. I became silent. I didn't have a lot to say to anyone. My teammates tolerated my silence and found their own ways to cope with this suffocating environment.

As a group, we went to make our calls. I guess we felt better going as a team. As I approached a group of men in regular clothes, I asked who was in charge. They all looked at one another with slight grins. I asked again then started to approach each one – “Are you in charge? I want to send an email. Is that OK?” So much for my low-key strategy I had planned. I had become the ugly American.

Finally, one soldier pointed to a tall man in a red fleece jacket and said “He is in charge; I am just a small fish.” – All in perfect English. The man stepped out of the line from the others. “I want to make a call and send an email. Do you want to read it?” I asked with an air of defiance.

“Who are you calling?” he asked. “My wife, do you want to talk to her?” I said directly to his face. “No, no, no” he quickly answered. “You don't like my wife.” I said smiling now. “No, it is not necessary.” He stuttered.

“I want to send an email.” “What language is it in?” he asked. “English, why? Do you want to read it?” I said looking him directly in the eye. He just walked away returning to his line-up to stare at me. I made my call, sent my email but now noticed two disturbing developments.

A young man dressed in battle fatigues sat in a tent cradling a long weapon. It was obviously a rifle but was still in the cloth case. He fiddled with it while looking directly at me. He smiled. I looked at him and let out a laugh. “Hi, can I see your gun?” Not my finest hour.

But my emotions were on edge and any semblance of self-control had left me. I had had enough. On the edge of the camp was another man. He held a large video camera and was slowly panning across our team as we made our calls. Great, all of this was on film. I wondered who the audience would be and if there would be subtitles in Chinese.

My new friend in red called out to me. I knew he wanted me to return my phone. I had six pairs of eyes following my every move. I walked over to the barrel and returned the lifeline. I walked away not sure of whom or what was following me.

Back at camp, we all discussed how serious this had become – and how silly. Tim Ripple of Peak Freaks dropped by looking for Ryan and he talked about how strange all of this was. His point was that it was not the climbers that would create problems, it was the trekkers. They could come in, make a scene and disappear before anyone knew what happened. No permits, no control and we would take the blame. The climbers were too smart to put their own climbs in jeopardy. Oh and he announced as he left “... glad I have a civil unrest clause in my contract.”

The Heist

Feeling the strain, I stayed in camp for much of the next several days. No mountain to climb. No Icefall to go up. Nothing to do. This was getting worse by the day.

I returned the next day to visit my phone. I wore my large puffy down jacket. As more people entered the army camp, I looked around carefully for the rifleman, the cameraman and the redman. I reached into the barrel with both hands appearing to fumble with the phones. I slipped my phone under the elastic cuff on my left wrist and up my puffy down sleeve. With my other hand, I lifted another phone out of the barrel in clear sight.

With the heist underway, my heart rate increased a bit. I swapped my sim card with the one in the borrowed phone. I made my call, quietly this time. I noticed that several eyes were back on me but this time everyone seemed to be relaxed and smiling. I smiled back and gave an extra long look at my friend. He seemed to smile back.

I put the borrowed phone back and left camp with my phone up my sleeve. I had my phone back that's all that mattered. If it left me again, I was going with it. Enough was enough.

Dispatches?

That day I made a simple posting on my website: “Dispatches will resume in mid May.”

With my phone back I could send emails, make phone calls and stay in touch as I desired. But to continue to make public dispatches felt like an unnecessary risk. I knew my site was being monitored and anything I posted would reveal my technological capabilities. Would anyone really care if I said innocuous things? Probably not. But the paranoia was so high on the Chinese side that I was not willing to take the risk. While I didn't seriously consider getting shot or thrown in jail, being kicked out of the country was a real possibility.

Just as I was pondering my next steps, word came that a climber had been escorted out of base camp after his tent was searched, a sat phone found and he refused to give it up. Also, several reports came from people with video cameras that they were told to stop all filming or have their cameras taken. This included documentary makers and a daily

television show for the Vietnamese team. Even those who had paid the substantial filming fee were now censored.

Even with these actions, I continued to seriously consider posting dispatches – even lame ones. Giving in to this treatment was an affront to everything I believed. But the considerations were real. First, I was in Nepal and subject to their laws and with the change in government and the martial state that seemed to exist their behavior had become unpredictable.

Second, the Internet is a powerful tool but with a double-edge sword. I knew my site was being monitored by the Chinese and I knew they had the capability and willingness to hack into sites (they already had penetrated a U.S. government site) so having my site shut down felt like a large price to pay to talk about how good the food was. With me in Nepal with limited communications, it would have been tough to fix it remotely.

Third, the price I might have to pay would be the end of my climb and perhaps the end of my team's climb. The threats had included expelling everyone on a permit if anyone had an infraction. I felt this would have been incredibly selfish on my part to put my team at risk. Finally, it was quite unsettling to see guns handled in such a cavalier manner by the military. The Chinese had already shown their willingness to kill civilians when they killed a nun near Cho Oyu in 2006 and protecting their torch stunt was a much higher priority.

Once again, the politics and unpredictability were unsettling and disturbing. I knew that once I was home I would have the opportunity to post my impressions – uncensored. Also in order to tell the whole story, it made sense to stay to the end. Leaving early would have hurt my ability to tell the world what really happened. So patience seemed the better part of valor.

With all this going on, we decided to have a party. Word was spread and we celebrated a teammate's birthday. The tent was decorated with the best of base camp – cardboard, toilet paper and homemade signs. The rum punch was a hit as was the eclectic collection of music on the collection of iPods. It was a welcome break from the

tension.



Party at Base Camp



Why are we here?

It was now April 15 and we had not gone above BC. We were here to climb after all. We got word the Icefall was finally fixed but deep crevasses in the Western Cwm had delayed finishing the route to Camp 1. Ugg. Was this real or more excuses? Who knows? I took a long walk towards Pumori base camp. The view of Everest was spectacular. It helped bring me back – again.



Everest from Pumori Base Camp. South Col and Lhotse on right

On April 18th the route was finally finished and we left for a night at Camp 1. The climb through the Icefall was long – always is the first time – but not as hard as I remembered from my prior climbs. There were fewer ladders and only a couple of tall dangerous seracs. It made me wonder why it took so long to get it fixed – almost 4 weeks when it took less than two in previous years. Anyway, I was climbing – in the Khumbu Icefall – towards Everest. A smile came across my face. My shoulders relaxed. It was going to be OK.



Crowds in the Icefall



Crossing a lower ladder



My boots on a ladder



Climbing in the Icefall

The Western Cwm stood out like a beautiful bridesmaid at a wedding. While all eyes are on the bride the Cwm was proud in her own right. The Lhotse Face stood at the end and the Lhotse just looked down on everyone.



The Western Cwm with Lhotse on the west end

Our Sherpas had set up our tents and we crawled in upon arriving in mid afternoon. It felt good to be at a higher altitude. I finally felt like the climb had begun. Away from all the rumors and eyes at base camp. Al and I shared a tent and were getting comfortable when the wind started to blow. The 50 M.P.H. gusts lifted the floor off the icy ground. The sides breathed like a sprinter after a race. It was long night. But we were climbing. It was fun. This was what it was all about!



Tons of tents at Camp 1 at 19,500'



Camp 1 with Pumori in the background



Camp 1 tents on the edge of a shallow crevasse

Back at BC the next night, it was like we had not been away. Willie flew by with the latest rumor. The Sherpas were mum on schedules. Ryan could not get anything solid on when the ropes would be set to Camp 2. But one rumor was encouraging – the Chinese are going for the summit on April 28th. If that was true then all this nonsense would be over. We now started to plot a schedule assuming the mountain would be closed around the end of the month.

The next step was to go to Camp 2 and perhaps Camp 3 for a night. This was the minimum for a good acclimatization. But the schedule was complicated by the known restriction of May 1 -10 and now we were hoping an early torch summit would occur.

We decided to take control of our own destiny and go to Camp 2 as soon as possible. Other teams had thrown in the towel and gone down valley to thicker air and comfortable beds in the teahouses - places with no communication restrictions. But we had stayed at base camp feeling that we needed to have the flexibility to move quickly. We were prisoners at base camp – volunteer prisoners but prisoners nonetheless. Now was the time and soon we left for several nights at Camp 2.

The army had increased their visibility and now was doing daily patrols throughout base camp. But the atmosphere was more relaxed. No visible weapons. More teams had

retrieved their sat phones. Smiles and laughter was more common as were morose jokes. Base camp was returning to normal.

The Invisible Protest

But another shoe soon dropped.

An American on the Asian Trekking permit had climbed to Camp 1. There he crawled into Willie Benegas' tent and pulled a banner out of his bag: Free Tibet / Fuck China.

Willie immediately told him to throw it in a deep crevasse but his advice was ignored. Soon it was on a tent and soon it was removed by a Sherpa. Soon it ended up in the hands of the military at base camp. It is a small community at base camp even with over 1000 people living there. Word spreads quickly. It is almost impossible to keep a secret and especially one like this.

The offender was soon visited by the army as the story goes by some of his teammates who were in the tent with him during the questioning. Showing great conviction for his cause, he was soon put under what could best be called "tent arrest". His teammates were furious. In fact everyone I spoke with was outraged at this stunt.

He was no "brave young man" doing a courageous act for human rights. He was a selfish, self-promoter who had now given the Chinese and Nepalese every justification to clamp down harder on the climbers.

With one insanely stupid act, the entire Everest season was back on probation. And not one Tibetan was free. In fact no one other than a few climbers saw the sign at Camp 1. It was an ill conceived stunt with no positive results.

The atmosphere immediately went tense again with more tent searches, more meetings, more new rules and more threats of shutting down the mountain completely.

On one of our next visits to use the phones, a teammate was told he could only use it between 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM not the previous 6 to midnight. The reason: too many people wanted to use all the phones and it was too much work for the army to monitor them. After an energetic protest of this new policy, the army gave in but the tone was set.

The helicopter pad now was in constant use with Chinese officials flying in for personal inspections. After one visit, they wanted the ladders removed from the Icefall until after the torch summit. Thankfully that request was ignored. Maybe the circus has some adult supervision after all.

In another visit, a BBC reporter was expelled from base camp after doing some first hand reports of the turmoil. This in spite of his colleague being hosted on the north side of Everest to help spread the torch propaganda. The same official wanted to look at a map of the south route and was appalled at how close it was to the north side. This first hand

from someone at the meeting. Had this official ever seen a mountain before? The clowns were back.

As we prepared to leave for Camp 2, the army was now doing pack inspections in the Icefall looking for sat phones, banners anything deemed inappropriate. The police state had expanded to Camp 2. Up until now a team of trusted Sherpa were to be allowed to fix ropes to Camp 3 or maybe higher before the May 10th restriction date. But now the line was drawn at Camp 2. No discussion. No debate.

The military had established a camp at the base of the Lhotse Face to prevent climbers from going higher. They had been given permission to shoot anyone that attempts to protest. A sign was posted. It was over until the torch made it – no matter when.



Nepalese Army sign at Camp 2 below the Lhotse Face

Part 3 – Sniper at Camp 2

It was now late April and we had only been to Camp 1 once. We needed to get to Camp 3 and spend one night for acclimatization purposes but the Chinese torch schedule was playing havoc with our plans. All we knew for sure was that if they had not summited by May 1 then the restriction to climb above base camp from May 1st – 10th was going to be in effect.

So we plotted our schedule hoping the rumor of a Chinese attempt on April 28th would be successful. Twice we saw low flying military jets circling Mt. Everest. They had to be Chinese since all the tourist fly-by flights out of Kathmandu had been banned.

Actually it was quite unusual to see any jets in the Everest area since it was not a major flight path other than Kathmandu to Lhasa and those were also cancelled. The Chinese were planning to do a nationwide television broadcast of their summit and it was assumed the jets would provide another camera angle. It was beyond any reasonable imagination that they would be used for any other purpose.

To Camp 2

With this as a backdrop we left base camp on April 25th with a hope of going on to Camp 3. But again the fixed lines on the Lhotse Face had not been set nor had the tents so it was unlikely to achieve C3.

The Icefall was crowded as usual with many teams trying to get in position for a quick opportunistic run to Camp 3 before May 1. The route was complete to Camp 2 and it was becoming well worn with all the traffic. I was a little surprised at the long delays given that there were fewer ladders than in previous years but the ones near the top were long and wobbly. On those each climber took almost 30 seconds to a full minute to cross them thus backing up climbers going up and down.

But again we were out of base camp and were now climbing. It was fun and we had a good time in spite of the crowds. There was almost a jovial party-like atmosphere in the Icefall with no one getting too upset over the delays. But then again there were always climbers not happy with anything that delayed them and their complaints were heard or they voiced them like martyrs on their blog.



Crowds near the top of the Icefall



Crossing one of the long wobbly ladders

We stopped for a brief rest at Camp 1 and then continued up the Western Cwm to Camp 2. On the first trip to C2 it was overcast with a slight breeze but this time we suffered the full force of the hot sun and there was no wind whatsoever. Layer after layer came off until we were in the bare necessities to protect ourselves from getting burned. One of the cooks from Camp 2 met us a few minutes outside of the camp with a kettle of juice. It was a nice touch after a long day.

We settled in for the night at 21,000 feet. Camp 2 was set in the same place as it has been for years but looked very different to me. There were many more exposed rocks and the ravine that served as the only suitable off-glacier area was steeper and deeper. The entire area seemed to have more crevasses and was definitely melted out as compared to 2003.



Camp 2 at 21,000'



Camp 2

After a good night we took a short walk the next day to the base of the Lhotse Face. At least that was our plan. Once again, I was struck by how many tents there were at Camp 2. Row after row of small tents filled the ravine plus a lot of large domes and tarp covered dining and cooking tents. To think all of this had been brought to 21,000' on the back of Sherpas! It was a commentary on their strength and on the number of people here.

The Army Shows their Stuff

After a few minutes we arrived at the end of Camp 2. It was where the Nepal army had placed their camp. The route to the base of the Lhotse face was blocked by the sign. As we walked through the camp you could feel eyes following you. But people were smiling and there were no overt signals that anything was going on ... other than the sign at the end of the well used path in the snow.



Nepal Army sign at the end of Camp 2

If there were any doubts about rules, the sign made it clear – stop here.



Nepal Army Camp at Camp 2

The sign had become somewhat of a “tourist” destination with a lot of climbers taking their daily walk to visit the sign and trade stories. The poor grammar made it almost comical but it was clear who was in charge.

That night, back in our own dining tent, we were doing the usual routine of chatting before dinner about schedules and a world of crazy topics. Suddenly someone outside the tent said “He has a gun!” And with that I jumped up and looked out the tent window. Two men in down jackets passed by our tent and were headed toward Henry Todd’s tent area which was just above us. One carried a rifle that was clearly visible. They seemed focused on a destination and oblivious to me and my camera.



The “Sniper” at Camp 2

The “Sniper” soon was out of sight but this is what I was told by a first hand observer. They were after a person with a video camera. It had been made clear that filming was not allowed especially high up on the mountain but a lot of people had ignored this. With the recent protest at Camp 1, the army was now enforcing their rules. What made all this frustrating was the inconsistency in their rules and enforcement of those rules.

We had not taken any satellite phones to Camp 2 based on the pack searches going on in the Icefall (we were never stopped or searched) but someone had brought a video camera and was using it in full view. As the story goes, the army guys found the camera man and pointed the rifle at him as they took his camera and searched his pack.

At this point it was just one more act and we had grown numb to the entire circus. No one really made a big deal out of it. However calls back home were soon dominated by web reports of “Sniper at Everest Base Camp” and that the army had permission to “shoot any protesters”. So friends and family once again grew worried about their climbers.

We continued to hope the Chinese would summit early but the 28th came and went with no word on if an attempt was even made. With no ropes fixed above Camp 2 and the army stopping anyone, including Sherpas, from even trying to set the route we returned to Base Camp. This meant we would have to wait until May 10th if the Chinese had problems summiting early.

The Squeeze Play

Once again, I started to worry more about safety than success. Another 10 days of delay for over 500 climbers spelled extreme crowds, unwarranted risk taking and potential bottlenecks on summit night. However the weather was the biggest wildcard.

April had shown perfect weather – low winds, mild temps and no snow. Clear blue sky days had kept our spirits up. But every April is like this and every May brings change. 2008 was no exception. On May 1st, on perfect cue, the clouds moved over Base Camp and the afternoon snow showers began. Another concern was a forecast that the annual monsoons would begin a few weeks early – perhaps late May.

The squeeze was on – can't start climbing until May 10th and a short weather window plus literally hundreds of people trying to stand on a living room size plot of land at the same time. This was the worst case scenario possible.

But history was on our side. The average summit day over the past seven years was around May 21st. And the jet stream, which is the culprit for high summit winds, usually moves north of the summit in mid May thus creating the summit window and better weather. In spite of all the turmoil, we were actually in decent position. All that was left was to spend a night at Camp 3, wait for the jet stream to move and go for the top. And there were three weeks to do all of this.

The early days of May were kind of a blur. Once again there was not a lot to do. Some teams went down valley again to enjoy the warmer temperatures, thicker air and teahouses. Some teams just hunkered down at base camp. We stayed at BC, had another party, and started a daily routine of long walks.

Pumori Base Camp was a favorite destination for many climbers. First it was a nice elevation gain up and down for about a thousand feet. But more importantly, it offered a clear view of the north slopes of Everest. Using powerful binoculars or a good telephoto lens the Second Step was easily seen. But also the highest camps. Reports started coming in that tents had been spotted below the northeast ridge, the standard spot for the highest camp on the north side.



Northeast ridge of Everest from Pumori Base Camp

Once again the rumor mill was in full swing. On Monday, May 5th the BBC reported that bad weather over the weekend had destroyed all the Chinese high camps and ropes thus creating a major setback in their schedule. This was very disturbing news and also confusing since the weather over the weekend was relatively mild with only a few snow showers. Even views from the Pumori spotting post showed low winds and no plume off the summit.

At this point, I became worried that the Chinese would drag this on forever and really put us in the squeeze. I asked Ryan to check with the senior army officer to see if the May 10th climbing restriction would be extended if the Chinese had not made the summit. I actually had zero confidence in whatever his answer would be. They had proven to be totally unreliable and under the control of superiors in Kathmandu and Beijing. But it was a point we wanted to make and plant the seed that this game had to have an endpoint.

Ryan asked the officer a day later and the officer said “There will be no extension to the restrictions after May 10th.” Good news for what it was worth.

Summit?

And then it happened. I was lying in my tent just before breakfast on May 8th and I heard the news “The Chinese have summited.” Announced one of the Sherpas. They always had the best sources!

I stepped out of my tent and looked towards the summit, part of my daily routine for the past month. A huge white plume flowed gracefully from south to north. It was huge. And I had never seen such a plume from Base Camp. You cannot actually see the summit of Everest from the South Base Camp. It is blocked by the west shoulder of the mountain. So it was an indication of just how large the plume was since it was visible from BC.

There was no way anyone could summit in that wind, I told myself. But the reports were clear. The Chinese had taken the torch to the top at 9:12 AM Beijing time on May 8th. Soon reports were coming in that images were shown on Chinese television of a summit team in dense clouds holding a torch. Whether they had summited or not, I didn't care as long as they would get off the mountain. To be clear, the climbers were just climbers and the Chinese people are bystanders, it was the Government and their influence on Nepal that was the problem.

In a wink things started to change.

By noon, the blue barrel which held our phones was returned to our camp. By now it held only one phone since all the others had miraculously been retrieved by their owners. The army camp was taken down and the soldiers disappeared. A meeting was held by the Sr. Liaison Officer where he simply said "Thank you for your cooperation." And left. The siege was over. Dispatches resumed.

Sherpas started the plan to get back up to Camp 2 and fix the Lhotse face. Schedules started to take on real dates. Weather forecasts were reviewed in earnest. Team leaders held meetings amongst themselves to determine who would fix the rope to the summit. Who would go first, how to manage the immense crowds of 2008. The focused returned to climbing. The politics were over. Smiles returned.

Camp 3

We left for our night at Camp 3 on May 9th hoping to quickly follow the Sherpas as they established the high camps. Most teams were still down valley or not ready to move so quickly thus we had the Icefall almost to ourselves. The climb to C2 was now familiar: the deep crevasses in the Western Cwm, the rocky slopes around the camp, the intimidating look of the Lhotse face. We were climbing Everest!

The climb to Camp 3 was a little surprising. In spite of our quick moves, it was crowded. The Face was steep with hard packed ice. Given the little traffic thus far, there were no steps in the ice thus adding to the difficulty. Normally by this point in the season all the traffic from climbers and Sherpas had created nice depressions in the ice where you could gain purchase with your crampons. But the lines were in and as we arrived at the base we joined the conga line up the steep Face.



Conga Line up the Lhotse Face. It is about 30 degree angle on this section.

Climbing the Lhotse Face is often a major milestone on an Everest climb. It is a long day, typically about 5 hours, with little to no rest, food or water. It can be incredibly hot or brutally cold. Since it is the only route to the South Col it is always crowded. Sherpas are taking gear to stock both Camp 3 and the South Col. This includes tents, stoves, fuel, pads and lots of oxygen bottles.

But the reward is not only a night at Camp 3 at 23,500' but incredible views of the Western Cwm and the route to the Col. For the first time you start to get a feel for what summit night might feel like. The air is thinner and sleeping is very difficult. During the first night at C3, most people do not sleep on supplemental oxygen but most do for the second time on the way to the Col.

We arrived around noon and got settled into the tents. As I looked out of my tent at the Western Cwm, I allowed myself to let it sink in where I was; what I was doing. Perhaps self defense, I rarely let myself pause and consider where I was. Maybe fear that I would wake up. Maybe the shock of living a dream. But here I was at 23,500 feet on the Lhotse Face – my 5th time here. What a view. What a gift.

I watched other climbers approaching the camp, some already using oxygen, all moving slowly. I felt comfort in watching them move steadily towards their own dream. From my tent, I could not see much of the higher route. Nothing more than a steep ice cliff that I

knew I would have to climb on the next trip up. I thought about the task ahead. Could I do it? Would the same thing happen again? Would the plan I had crafted play out accordingly? Could I ...



Camp 3

Western CWM from Camp 3 on the Lhotse





View of Pumori (foreground) and Cho Oyu from Camp 3

The next morning we left Camp 3 and descended back to Camp 2 and on to Base Camp. The weather forecast had turned ugly with rumors of a foot of snow each day for the next three days thus creating our rush to get lower. In the end, the next three days were perfectly beautiful with no signs of snow. So much for the rumor mill!

The mood had turned positive throughout the camps with talk dominated by schedules for the summit and who would lead to the top. As has been the custom for the past few years, Willie Benegas was chomping at the bit to fix line to the summit. In fact he had already climbed to Camp 2 and wanted to join the Sherpas to fix the Lhotse Face but was not allowed to join by the army. A real shame given his enthusiasm, skills and energy. But all that would change for the better over the next few weeks for Willie.

The time had come for all of us. In spite of all the distractions we were finally doing what we came here for and loved every moment of it. My mind shifted from all the problems to all the opportunities: the end of my year-long journey, the chance to stand on the summit of Everest, call my wife, post an audio dispatch for all the kids. To ask for donations one last time. To claim victory. My palms became sweaty at the visualization, my heart skipped a beat.

I had been here before but never this close in spirit. I was feeling good. Strong and fit. My weight was holding – a rarity on other climbs. I was sleeping well and felt positive. Now it was time to finish what I came here for. It was time to go to the top of the world!

Part Four: Summit Night

“Do you think you will summit?” a teammate asked me during dinner one night at Base Camp. “Absolutely.” I immediately answered.

As we moved into mid May, the weather had turned very good again. I was pleased that the afternoon snows were minor and the winds seemed to be calm throughout the route. We had our acclimatization night at Camp 3 under our belt. Everyone was healthy. Our Sherpas had carried tents and oxygen to the South Col/Camp 4. So now when to go up?

This is when the weather forecast becomes literally life or death. The one from Michael Fagen back in the US showed some high winds calming down around May 20th and then good for the next five days – perfect! We set our summit night for May 20th. Interestingly the Sherpas agreed with that date but primarily based on a full moon that evening. But all I knew was that May 21st was historically a good day with a lot of summits over the past seven years.

The next several days were spent resting from our recent C3 climb, eating and drinking as much as we could and thinking through the gear we would carry. Dispatches were written and phone calls were made knowing that once we left BC these luxuries would be at a minimum.

Memories

I took some long walks and tried to visualize my summit night. Of course most of my thoughts were memories of my aborted attempts in 2002 and 2003. However I tried to look at those experiences as learning climbs not failures or ‘non-summits’ as I like to call them! In both of those tries I found myself gagging, vomiting or extremely tired. There was no doubt the right thing to do was to turn back on those attempts. But this is why I was back plus my fund raising.

As my mind raced through all these thoughts I became lost at times and thoroughly unaware of my surroundings. I continued to feel strong and confident so much so that I detailed why this climb felt different than my previous ones in my last dispatch from BC. I was ready.

We left Base Camp before 6:00 AM on Saturday May 17th. We paused by the smoke billowing up from the burning fir boughs at the Puja alter as we left. This ritual was always special to me on Himalayan climbs. I stood in the smoke, waved it across me three times with my open palms and let it sink in about where I was, what I was doing – and why – and where I was going. And with that I was off.

The climb through the Icefall was uneventful. Once again we reduced our climbing time. The crowds were similar to before. A couple of times I just stood on a flat section and looked around. The scene and feelings are difficult to describe or to capture in a picture. Blocks of ice – small, large and huge jumbled like ice cubes in a box. The snow is hard packed where the route snakes through the glacier but soft off-route. The deep cracks seem to define areas: the football field, the popcorn, the top. Ice flows down the hill for 2,000' like soft running water down a hillside. The west shoulder of Everest monitors the north side and Nuptse guards the south. Their tall profiles keep the sun away until late morning making it cool.

You fall in line with the other climbers. Sometimes you go around someone taking a break other times you let a faster climber go by. Everyone is polite – a quick “thanks”; a little small talk but mostly you climb in your own world. We are going to the top of the world!

Reaching Camp 1 brings back memories of the first night there – a lifetime ago but really only a few weeks have passed. It is easier this time. We cut time off again. The walk to Camp 2 passed by quickly. The Cwm was hot and windy, cold and calm – normal.

The afternoon was spent lying around in our tents knowing that tomorrow was a rest day and then the hard work would begin. I finished my book I had brought up earlier and traded it with a teammate. Kind of a high-altitude book club. Sunday was spent doing much of the same.

Camp 3 - Again

The climb to Camp 3 started rough. The winds had picked up just as we reached the base of the Lhotse Face. Small ground blizzards erased the steps from any soft snow or blew over the hard packed areas. I pulled my collar tightly around my neck. I felt warm. It reminded me of one of my last training climbs in Colorado with Patrick and Robert where we struggled through 60 m.p.h winds on a 13,000' peak. Muscle memory that comes from training.



The Lhotse Face in Ground Winds



Climbing the Lhotse Face in High Winds

Arriving at C3, I was pleased we had cut more time off and everyone seemed to be in good spirits – especially when it came to using our improvised bathroom – straddling a 50’ crevasse. To be precise we did not actually straddled it, we ... anyway ... it was good to be at C3 and on our way.

The normal ‘modern’ formula was to sleep on bottled oxygen the last night at C3 but we did not since everyone felt good. This was fine with me since I found sleeping on O’s kept me more awake with the awkwardness of the mask, drool in the snout and at half a liter a minute (lpm) it was such a low flow it did not make a lot of difference. I think it is more mental than physical. But that was the formula and many people did it that way.

But as I lay in my down sleeping bag my mind went to the next 48 hours. My eyes wide open staring at the seams on the thin nylon tent. I sat up and unzipped the door. Looking over the Western Cwm I could easily see Camp 2 and the top of the Khumbu Icefall against the setting sun. The 7,000m Pumori Peak was poking its nose out of a deep layer of dark clouds. Cho Oyu ramped up in the distance. What a sight. What a view ... What a gift.

Morning came early – around 4:00 AM. I think everyone was wide awake already. A quick hot drink, some breakfast bars and another ritual – getting dressed for the summit. Even though we still had to go to Camp 4 on the South Col the dress and gear was almost

identical to summit night: down suit, water bottles and a bottle of oxygen. Plus crampons on our boots and the ice axe on the pack.

The Yellow Band

The first challenge was to get away from C3 and on up the Lhotse Face towards the Yellow Band. This required a steep climb of maybe 30 feet on almost vertical ice. I attached my jumar to the fixed line and began the climb. By the time I was at the top, I was gasping for air in spite of my slow rate of ascent.

I knew better but by reflex I pulled my oxygen mask off my face forcefully, bent over and gasped for air. In a few seconds I put the mask back on knowing it would provide the oxygen I was looking for. Ugg, was it starting?

I joined the long line of climbers: Westerners from all around the world, Sherpas still carrying the essentials to 8,000 meters. The pace was slow. It was deliberate. It was fun.

As I looked up I could see the day's objectives: First the Yellow Band – several hundred feet of limestone that runs through the Himalaya in this area. It is also on Cho Oyu. Amazing to think at one point all of this was under water in a deep ocean. Next was the Geneva Spur – a small rock outcropping that stands between the Yellow Band and the South Col - the last obstacle before rest at Camp 4 ...and the summit.

I focused on getting into my pace – one step at a time. Our small team was scattered throughout the conga line. I had started the day with my oxygen at 2 lpm but soon found myself panting for air. The sun introduced itself with a huge breath of hot air as it moved above Lhotse. It was hot, bright and now the air felt even thinner.

I put my sunglasses on around my mask but soon switched to goggles since the glasses let too much light in around the sides and top and snow blindness was a real possibility in these conditions. I finally got more comfortable and continued my journey higher.

The line was backed up at the base of the Yellow Band. The first section has some big moves and each person was taking their time to move carefully. I was moving slowly but felt OK at this point. With my down suit unzipped to my harness, my goggles doing their job I approached the band with caution. I remember coming down this section almost to the day five years ago in bad shape. But this time was different.



Approaching the Bottom of the Yellow Band on the Lhotse Face



Climbers Between Camp 3 and the Yellow Band



Climbers leaving Camp 3 on the Lhotse Face – 23,500'

I moved carefully, slowly up the Band and joined a large group of climbers taking a well deserved break at the top of this section. Back in Colorado, I would not have given this a second thought but at 24,000' everything changes. The simplest things become difficult tasks. Concentration is muted. Everything is slower.

I sat there drinking my Gatorade. My teammates were higher. I was surrounded by strangers but did not feel alone. I was climbing Everest ... again.

I continued to the base of the Geneva Spur. I had left Camp 3 over six hours ago. I looked at my watch and considered my pace. I was going slowly – no doubt. But I was not too worried since Camp 3 was almost an hour lower than in previous years and I had always planned on taking my time in this section knowing what was ahead of me.

8000 Meters

As I began the climb of the Geneva Spur – now the route being all rock and no snow – I took off my crampons. I was met by one of our Sherpas, Lama Tame. He had conducted our Puja many weeks ago and did not speak English very well but had a killer smile. He

followed me closely as we made the final steps to 8000m. It was common to have a Sherpa “sweep” a team to make sure everyone arrived safely.

As I made the crest of the Spur the summit pyramid of Everest came into full view. I moved slowly on the smooth shale, careful not to slip down the hillside. I looked up at the route. I could see every inch to the South Summit. I could see everything.



The Summit Pyramid and South Summit as seen from the South Col

I stared at the view for several minutes. My eyes focused on the big rock that served as my milestone. It was the rock where I turned around in 2002 and 2003. In almost a television flashback I could visualize how I felt, what I saw, the sounds. Every feeling came into focus. I stared intently at my rock.



Near the Balcony – 27,500'

I came into Camp 4 at 26,300 feet at almost 2:30. It had taken over 8 hours to reach the South Col. This was too long for me, even starting lower on the Lhotse Face. I was tired but not as spent as I had felt in previous years.



Camp 4 on the South Col with Oxygen Bottles at Another Team's Camp

Now a different battle started – a test of my mind, of my will – my mental toughness. And a test of my body. I started to ask myself my favorite questions: Was I hurt or just hurting? Was this hard or impossible ... for me?

I crawled into our tent and began to drink as much as I could. Several liters later I felt my strength returning. I kept my oxygen mask on running at 1 lpm. I stretched out on my pad in my full down suit. My sleeping bag served as a pillow since it was still quite hot – over 80F in the tent.

Lam Babu melted snow for Al and I. We ate noodles and drank some more. I wanted to call in an audio dispatch. As I ate and drank I felt more confident. I told Babu “I will be going slowly, Babu. Is that OK?” He looked me in the eye and smiled “So we get to the summit at 9, that’s OK. It’s OK. We go slow. Maybe leave a little early, 8:30.” I smiled and made my call.

I called Cathy, my wife. It was a private conversation that was positive and optimistic. She is the best support team imaginable. But she was at home and I was at 8000 meters on Mt. Everest. We both knew the odds. We both understood the risk.

I feel asleep but woke every few minutes as someone came by the tent. Willie Benegas stopped by to ask Lam Babu for help in getting rope to the summit. One of his Sherpas

was no longer able to make the climb and Willie was shorthanded. They went into action and found a solution. Willie would lead the climb to the summit, fixing rope along the way. He would leave before every other team. As he walked away, I heard him say “I’m too old for this.” I’m sure with a grin on his face! But I knew how he felt.



Camp 4 on the South Col – 8,000 meters/26,300 feet.

Time to Go.

My watch showed 7:30 PM, May 20th 2008. It was dark. With the night time temps approaching the single digits, I zipped up my down suit and pulled my double insulated climbing boots over two pair of wool socks. Babu was already outside the tent. Al woke up and asked “Is it time?”

As I stepped out of the tent, the scene was surreal as usual. Silhouetted figures seemed to move in one-four time. A hush was in the air. It was still, quiet; peaceful. The moon cast long shadows as it rose in the east over Makalu. I put my crampons on making sure they were tight.

Babu put the 4 liter metal oxygen bottle in my pack. Along with an extra down jacket and a Nalgene of Gatorade and a thermos of hot Gatorade, it was empty. But it still felt heavy as I pulled it on my back.

I put the mask on over the wool balaclava, pulling the straps tightly so as to reduce the leaks. I put my goggles on but then moved them to the back of my head. No need to add another layer with the still air.



Alan in 2003 ready for the Summit Push

No wind, clear skies, mild temps. Perfect.

I looked up at the route. A long line of dim lights marked the route like a nighttime country road. Black on both sides. Black above. But a warmly lit snow field led the way. It was time.

Standing there, Ryan walked by and asked how my pack felt and then he was gone. Al was going through the same routine outside our tent. Babu said “Ready?” I nodded and he pointed toward the summit.

Climbing

I left Camp 4 at a swift pace. Too much adrenaline? But after a few minutes I found myself panting. Babu put his hand on my shoulder “Slowly” he said through the escaping air and I reduced my pace to something more manageable.

I felt good. Warm. Comfortable. Confident. It was going to be a long 12 to 18 hours but this was something I was going to do. Yes, I was going to do it this time. My mind got into the zone it does when climbing. One step at a time - that was my mantra. But my mind wandered.

Babu and I moved slowly but made deliberate progress higher towards the Balcony perched at 27,500 feet almost 1,200 feet above Camp 4. I knew from before that this section is considered the crux of the summit night since you are climbing in the dark. Usually it is cold; you are still tired from the climb from Camp 3. And even with oxygen, the air is getting thinner and thinner. My plan had always been to get to Balcony without question and then push hard to get to the top.

The Plan

Standing at 21,000 feet on Aconcagua, I had developed my Everest plan with Ryan. We were the first of our team to arrive at the high camp back in January. He told me how excited he was about our upcoming Everest climb. I opened up to him about my previous climbs – my disappointments, my expectations, my dreams. We discussed how this climb was different for me. He told me of his Grandfather’s Alzheimer’s. We had a common goal, a common cause. My confidence went higher.

The plan was for me to have extra oxygen so I could climb at the maximum flow of 4 lpm if I felt it was necessary the entire summit night. Also to have a strong personal Sherpa with good English so there would be no misunderstandings. Finally Ryan said “I’ll be there to push you hard if you hit the wall. I won’t push you beyond what is safe but I will push you.”

I liked this plan plus knowing that Ryan would be there. I did not expect Ryan to ‘haul’ me to the summit as is so often reported for climbers on guided climbs but rather I appreciated his sense of mountaineering, ability to relate to people and experience at high altitude. Plus I knew we would have a good time.

I am not a strong climber. Never have been. I am fond of saying that I have turned back from more summits than I have reached. Maybe I am too conservative. Perhaps my body was never cut out for this extreme stuff. But I always go into a climb expecting to summit. To do my best. That is my goal.

And I have a higher priority – to return home in good condition. For me climbing is about the entire experience not just standing on top. I value my life, my family and my future too much to risk all that for any climb.

But this year was different in many respects. I was over 50 now. Recently retired. Perhaps this would be my last chance regardless of the result, to climb a big Himalaya Hill. I had a bigger purpose as well.

Before I left I called my Mom to say goodbye. "I thought you were already back." She said as I explained my schedule for the next two months. "Well, stay warm and be careful." were her parting words of advice.

In mid 2006, Cathy and I discussed me returning to Everest. We debated not telling anyone. You know, to take the pressure off. Do it for me. Do it for us. I asked my friends at a birthday party that year. I asked my friends Joe and Linda who were visiting from Boston. I asked my climbing buddies Jim, Patrick and Robert.

Something didn't feel right about going it "alone". I had always drawn strength from knowing that people were pulling for me. But also I set expectations with them. Not that me making a summit or not made a huge difference for anyone other than for myself and my family, I knew people watched. Lessons were being drawn from my experience. And then I added another level to the deal: raise awareness and \$100,000 for Alzheimer's research.

I knew my website got more hits on an Everest summit day than any other time. I expected almost 200,000 on May 20th alone. If my visitors gave \$1 each, I would reach my goal. But what if I didn't summit, would they lose interest? Would all the good will evaporate? Not in my experience. I had come to develop a relationship with so many people over the years. They knew my priorities. They knew me. Do my best, come home safe.

The gap between me and the group ahead slowly widened. One step at a time. My breathing increased. Stay focused, I lectured myself. You can do this.

I paused and looked behind me. Like an army of determined ants a huge line of climbers were steadily making their way up from the South Col. I turned around and continued my own pace. One step, ten breaths; one step, ten breaths. It was painfully slow.

After three hours I stopped and leaned over to Babu. "Am I going too slowly?" I asked simply. "Summit maybe 10 or 11." was his assessment." "That is too late!" I gasped. We looked into each other's eyes. I looked at my boot against the snow. It was bright with the moon now overhead. I looked back up and took another step and another.

The ants had now caught up. I stepped aside and let 40 people pass me by as I considered my options. No one looked at me as they passed.

Without a lot of thought, I stepped back in line getting into my pace. But with the conga line well established I found myself actually slowed down. But it was good to have a pace car! Now the progress had slowed to one step, pause for a minute or two then another step. For the first time I allowed myself to look around.

The South Col was out of sight, hidden by a ridge. Makalu, the fifth highest mountain, stood out to the east. It was clearly visible in the bright moonlight. I looked up and could see the top edge of the Balcony. It was close. Lhotse was to the south. The air was still. All I could hear was my heavy breathing in the mask. Regardless of what the next few minutes or hours revealed this was what my climbing was all about. I took the moment in. It became part of me forever.

I looked up from my mind-numbing pace to see a large boulder to my left. The luxury of the pace allowed me to take along look. It was *my* rock! Ha! I had made it. Ha! “Not this time!” I said out loud as I passed it by. Yes!

My breathing increased. I felt out of breath. “Babu, what is the flow?” I asked him? It was 2.5 lpm. I had asked for 3 leaving BC. “Turn it up.” He said OK and adjusted the valve poking out of my pack. The next time I took my pack off at a break, I’ll check it myself, I told myself. I’ll turn it to 4 per my plan I established with Ryan.

About this time, I spotted Ryan for the first time. My teammates had long since passed me without a word. I doubt they recognized me. At this point everyone looked alike. Ryan glanced my way and continued his climb. I still don’t know if he saw me or not but it felt like my plan was falling apart.

Even with the oxygen at a faster flow, I began to get weaker. My breathing was labored. My legs still felt strong but I couldn’t get my breath. My breaks were longer and longer. More climbers passed me by. My pace car was long gone. Soon it was just Babu and I – alone at 8300 meters in the bright moonlight.

Once again I considered my options. I knew my pace was slow – too slow. My breathing was bad. The oxygen didn’t seem to make a lot of difference regardless of the flow. Only a few climbers were still below me. That meant there were at least 100 climbers ahead of me. This was not how it was supposed to be! What had gone wrong?

Decisions - Again

I continued to climb. But now my mind was in problem solving mode. The climb from 3 to 4 was tough. It was long. But I had gotten a couple of hours of rest and good hydration at C4. My body felt OK but my cardio was killing me – literally. At this point my pack was fine. I had forgotten about the weight. I was warm. I took a drink of Gatorade from my hot thermos. Was this hard or impossible? Was I hurt or hurting?

I took more steps. I pushed my pace. I caught up with the conga line. While standing there, I heard someone loudly shout out “Rock!” Amazingly someone had dislodged a rock the size of a Labrador Retriever from the Balcony. It was tumbling towards the conga line gaining speed with each tumble. Thankfully it careened to our right and missed the line. The consequences would have been disastrous if there had been a direct hit.

I continued my pace behind the line. But soon the gap remerged. I was just going too slow. It was at least another ten hours for me to reach the summit and who knows how long to return, perhaps six or more. I looked at the edge of the Balcony knowing it might be easier after that. But deep inside I knew my body was just not up for 16 hours.

Was this it? I stood in place for 15 minutes. Babu stood patiently beside me. “How about returning to BC and resting then coming back up tomorrow?” I asked him. “No. There is not enough oxygen to do that.” he answered; which was incorrect since there were at least 5 bottles at BC. I didn’t feel like a debate only 1500 feet from the summit. I tried to call Ryan on the radio but there was no response.

I continued to stand in place hoping my breathing would calm down and that I could continue, reach the top of the Balcony, change out bottles, run at 4 lpm and push. Don’t stop. Keep pushing. And with that I took another step higher. And another.

Babu took his oxygen mask off so I could hear him. “I’m tired.” I said simply. He nodded and said “I know.” We discussed more options, the timing, and the route ahead. I noticed another climber sitting on the rocks nearby like he was in a city park watching ducks in a pond. He was not moving. The line had moved fifty feet above us – an eternity in Everest time.

“You go on to the summit.” I told Babu knowing that I could make it back to C4 alone. “No, I stay with you. Summit is not important to me.” he said. And with that I said aloud to no one “It is the right thing to do.”

And took a step downhill.

My eyes focused on the steep snow under my crampons. I clipped my carabineer onto the fixed line. Each step took me closer to the South Col – and further from the top of the world. I stopped dead in my tracks maybe 50 feet downhill.

“Come on. You can’t stop now.” I told myself. I looked around again. The South Col was still hidden. But somehow the views of the surrounding peaks were clearer – more than silhouettes. Once again, I tried to soak it all in but I was really still negotiating with myself. Go down and think about this moment forever. Go back up and roll the dice. Babu stood beside me. I looked at him, he looked back.

I turned a full half circle and planted my feet upwards. A line of lights lit the route above me. It looked like they were frozen in time. I took a deep breath. And another. I looked at my boots. I looked back up - it was time. Time to go home.

The climb back to the South Col felt fast. But after an hour my legs had become weary, my breathing still labored. Babu had taken to unclipping me and clipping me back in around the anchors. I didn’t ask, he didn’t ask. It was clear that I was his charge and he was going to do whatever it took to keep me safe.

Beside our tent on the South Col I took my crampons and boots off. I crawled into the tent and sat cross legged on my sleeping pad. Babu joined me quickly. We both took long drinks from our water bottles and sat quietly. I looked at him, let out a laugh and shook my head. He just smiled.

“Three times up with no summit. I must belong to some kind of exclusive club!” I told my friend. “It’s OK.” He said with his trademark smile.

As he crawled into his sleeping bag, I pulled my satellite phone out of my pack. I was anxious to call Cathy. Let her know I was safe. It had been almost 9 hours since I called her. I pressed the single key that was programmed to dial her cell phone.

“I’m back at the South Col. I’m OK.” Was how it started. And with that Everest 2008 was done. The Journey over.

She did a quick post to the website simply saying I did my best but had turned around. We agreed it was simple to say I was ‘tired’ but it was more complicated than that.

The rest of the night was a mixture of emotions. Babu was on the radio several times as each of the climbers on our permit made the summit one by one. “Summittttttt” came the radio call from their Sherpa with incredible enthusiasm and pride.

The sun rose about 4 AM cutting short any opportunity to sleep in despite my weary state. The Col was quiet with most people still high on the mountain. About 7 AM Ryan came into camp. We had wondered where he was since we never had any contact with him and there was no word from anyone on the permit about him other than a cryptic report that he was seen around the Balcony and had some problems with his oxygen.

As Babu and I were getting ready to leave for Camp 2 Ryan told us his regulator had stopped working and he had climbed to the Balcony without supplemental oxygen. He spent several hours unsuccessfully trying to fix it or find a replacement from another climber. He decided to return to the Col after getting very cold.

“Run out of gas?” was his only comment to me. But then he asked out of politeness “Do you have any concerns if Babu and I go back up tonight?” Before I could answer, Babu said “I am going down with Alan.”

The down climb to Camp 2 was long, tiring and hot. I realized how spent I was. With each step it confirmed that my turn-around was ‘the right thing to do.’ Babu continued to monitor the progress of all the rest of the team through the Sherpas. Soon all were safely down from the summit at Camp 4 and would return to Camp 2 the next day.

My thoughts were focused on getting back to Base Camp and then to Lukla, Kathmandu and home. I was very happy for all of them – their first attempt. They had done incredibly well, especially Al an incredibly strong man at age 59 and with only Kilimanjaro, Denali

and Aconcagua under his belt. But at this point, I felt I had become detached and needed to get back home to my own family.

As Babu and I made our way to Camp 2 then through the Khumbu Icefall one last time and finally to Base Camp word came that Ryan had gone back up alone the next night, summited giving him both north and south side summits.

I left Base Camp for Lukla the 23rd and soon was home in Colorado.

Epilog

It was a record year for summits from Nepal. Around 250 people summited from the south side in 2008 and about 30 on the north. Now about 3,300 people have summited Mt. Everest from both sides.

I did not summit Everest – for the third time.

For the third June in my life when I wake up in the middle of the night, lying in my own bed next to my wife with one cat between us and another at the foot of the bed, I think of that night.

It does not matter if my eyes are open or closed I see the same thing – a night time sky filled with a bright full moon surrounded by stars. A satellite or falling star is the only movement. The snow is hard under my feet; the air is calm and cold. The only sound is my own breathing.

When I look up I see climbers ahead moving with glacial speed. When I look back, I see a few lights but mostly a dark void. The horizons are interrupted by the rugged summits of the highest peaks on earth.

This is what I remember. These are the images burned into my essence.

In the comfort of my own bed, the safety of my own home, the comfort of my wife; what I feel is ...

I sometimes laugh that I have had three serious talks with myself standing at 27,300 feet on the side of a mountain. Should I go up? Should I go down? What if I push for another hour, maybe it will all be better. More oxygen will do the trick. How about some Gu, some water. Go slower. Go faster. If only ...

I think about this journey: 12 months, five huge climbs, hundreds of emails, hundreds of calls, almost 20 million hits to my website. Enough money to start funding some serious research via the Cure Alzheimer's Fund. More awareness of what this devastating disease does to caregivers, families and the person. What it is doing to my Mom, Ida.

No, I didn't summit Everest ... for the third time. Yes, I got to about the same spot. Yes, it was tough to turn around. Yes, it is hard.

And it was wonderful.

What a ride. What a gift. What a life.

Climb On!

Alan