Everest summiteer backtracks on story about fatal climb

The Associated Press

The first double amputee to summit Mount Everest is backing off a claim that earned him international condemnation: That his team radioed down to his expedition leader about a dying climber and was told to continue on to the summit.

New Zealander Mark Inglis had said that on his ascent in the early hours of May 15, he encountered 34-year-old David Sharp freezing to death under a small rock overhang near the mountain's summit.

Inglis said that when he radioed the information down to expedition leader Russell Brice, he was told to push on.

But in a statement to The Associated Press Thursday from Christchurch, New Zealand, where he is recuperating after having five fingers and parts of his leg stumps amputated from frostbite, Inglis now says the cold, strain and lack of oxygen might have caused him to mix up the details.

"I was sure that I heard radio traffic at the time," he wrote. "I also thought I had called myself and received a reply, but like all things in that early part of the day my focus was on my hands and the challenges to come, specifically the traverse to and the climb of the (S)econd (S)tep" — a 100-foot rock cliff below the summit.

"That combined with the difficulties with the oxygen mask meant that I may be mistaken," Inglis continued.

The earlier claim earned Inglis and Brice the scorn of Everest pioneer and fellow New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary, and exemplified what many decry as the summit-at-all-cost ethic that has grown up around the world's tallest peak.

Inglis, 46, a former search-and-rescue mountaineer who lost both legs in a 1982 climbing incident, recalled coming to the rock overhang around midnight during his ascent, and noticing that the guide rope he and other climbers use on their way up disappeared into the small cave. Inglis said he had to unclip his safety harness from the rope, walk hunched over for a few meters, then clip back on.

"During those few meters I saw in the back of the cave someone huddled up," wrote Inglis in the e-mail. "I pointed him out to Dorji (his Sherpa guide) and moved on out to clear the route for the others following. I called out to the others to check the guy out as he looked frozen solid."

On the way down, Inglis said he and a companion were concerned about their own frostbite. When they saw that others were trying to help Sharp, they kept moving.

"Unfortunately as the least able client that day that was about all I could do," he wrote. "To get into the 'cave' would have been difficult for me, I struggled with the open overhang as it was ... additionally my stumps were near the limit of their function and I still had a long way to go."

After being evacuated to the Nepalese capital of Katmandu, Inglis gave a brief interview to TVNZ, in which he said there was a radio call to Brice on the way up — which Brice has steadfastly denied. Now, Inglis says his "recollection is unclear."

"Dorji indicated that we had to keep moving," Inglis wrote. "After letting the others know by call out and perhaps using the radio, I am unsure about the details, we moved on."

Inglis said it was not until more than a week later that he learned the full story of Sharp's predicament.

"It is unfortunate that David's parents have not been able to do what they requested," he concluded, "to grieve for David in private."

Inglis, who worked at New Zealand's Mt. Cook National Park, was himself rescued after spending two weeks in an ice cave during a blizzard. He lost both legs below the knees but continued climbing on prosthetics.

During the Everest expedition, Inglis had a close call when he was sliding down a slack rope too fast and somersaulted several times, cracking his climbing foot along its stem. Inglis repaired the broken prosthetic and continued using it until a replacement could be brought up.

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