Myles Osborne for SummitClimb Everest Tibet, Dispatch 28th May 2006

Hi Everyone, We're writing to you from Advanced Base Camp (ABC) today, there's been a lot going on up here and with the kind assistance of EverestNews.com we'll let you know what we've been up to....

So last time we left you, Phil, Myles, Dan, Andrew and Jangbu Sherpa were at Camp 3 at 8300m on 25th May, chewing on noodles and complaining about the lack of oxygen. We left camp at 11.30pm in excellent weather that night, although it was around -30 degrees, sucking on the (thankfully) un-stolen oxygen we had at high camp. We then started a slow climb up to the North Ridge proper. It's a somewhat surreal world there; you're climbing in the small, concentrated light of a headlamp, constantly checking that your oxygen mask and regulator don't freeze, watchful of the crampons and feet of dead bodies that dot the route. The Kangshung face falls 10,000 feet to your left, and the North Face 7,000 feet to your right. Tread carefully.

In the early hours of the morning we reached the foot of the First Step, the first technical pitch, glad of the warmth it generated to climb it. At this point, Phil decided to turn around; a week or so earlier, he'd saved the life of another climber suffering from cerebral oedema on 18th May by dragging him down from the Second Step at 8600m, getting some frostbite in the process, and to be honest it was astonishing that he had even made it back to this altitude in a week. And during the wee hours of a freezing morning, he made the smart call to turn himself around before he became too badly frostbitten.

Moving past the First Step, the remaining four of the group came up towards Mushroom Rock at 8600m - just before the Second Step - as the sun finally hit the ridge at about 7:30 am on 26 May, 2006. A welcome sight.... but it brought with it something none of us could have expected to see....

Sitting to our left, about two feet from a 10,000 foot drop, was a man. Not dead, not sleeping, but sitting cross leggedd, in the process of changing his shirt. He had his down suit unzipped to the waist, his arms out of the sleeves, was wearing no hat, no gloves, no sunglasses, had no oxygen mask, regulator, ice axe, oxygen, no sleeping bag, no mattress, no food nor water bottle. "I imagine you're surprised to see me here," he said. Now, this was a moment of total disbelief to us all. Here was a gentleman, apparently lucid, who had spent the night without oxygen at 8600m, without proper equipment and barely clothed. And ALIVE.

We stopped and began to talk to a man who we found out was Lincoln Hall, an Australian from the Blue Mountains. It became clear that he in fact was extremely close to death in our non-medically qualified opinions; he had sustained severe frostbite in every finger, and did not want to keep his gloves or hat on. His fingers looked like ten waxy candle sticks. His head wagged and jerked around, his beady eyes embedded in a frosty face, trying to focus on something, anything. He seemed to be in deep distress, shivered uncontrollably, and kept trying to pull himself closer to the edge of the cornice, to the point that we physically held him back and eventually anchored him to the snow. Lincoln later told us that he believed that he was on a boat, not a mountain, and that he wanted to be overboard.... i.e. 10,000 feet down the Kangshung face.

We fed Lincoln snacks, and hot water and juice we'd brought with us, and gave him our oxygen to breathe. We pulled all his clothes on and talked to him. Dan radioed to ABC and had our staff at SummitClimb rouse the Seven Summits team, of which Lincoln was a member. It took a while to convince them that Lincoln was still alive. They believed Lincoln to be dead, having been informed of this by a sherpa the night before. Tragically, acting on this information, the leader of Seven Summits, Alex, had already called Lincoln's family to inform them of his death. Yet they quickly sprung into action and sent a sherpa team from high camp and some from lower down to try to pull Lincoln from the mountain. Phil by this point was in high camp and assisted in informing the Seven Summits sherpas there.

The entire 4 hours we spent with Lincoln, he was fairly active, and even "thrashed around" a bit. We had to take extra care to fasten him securely to the slope, as whoever had left him the night before had not tied him in to anything, and it seemed just short of a miracle that he had not fallen off the ridge during the night.

Lincoln was unable to stand or speak clearly, but over a couple of hours he began to warm him up and talk. We waited for the sherpas we had requested on the radio to arrive and by 11:30 am they showed, with Lincoln's **rucksack brought up from C3**. We swapped oxygen sets on Lincoln (ours for theirs) and they started rigging him for the long hard trip down.  Later that day he reached the North Col due to the herculean efforts of the Sherpas.

But as we turned our attention back to our original morning's objective of Everest's top, we realized that time had been slipping away; we were still perhaps 3 hours from the summit, and although we were strong and eager to go on, the early afternoon storms were not far away. They could trap us high on the mountain at 2 or 3pm, probably culminating in a greater tragedy. So after years of fundraising, and months of training and climbing, we made the tough call to turn around. And as it turned out, the storms did indeed blow in that afternoon.

Coming back down the ridge, to be honest feelings were of nothing but disappointment at not making the summit; Everest is a peculiar mountain in that the summit is so highly prized and sought after, that nothing else seems important. This was made abundantly clear to us as two Italians walked by just as we found Lincoln. They increased their pace, moved on by, and said "No speak English." Although one of our compatriots at high camp had had an hour-long chat with them in English the day before.

The following day Lincoln had been brought back to ABC by a massive rescue effort involving several teams. We went over to visit this man of mystery we had found at 8600 meters, in his expedition's medical tent. We reintroduced ourselves and sat there talking about his family and wife. During the conversation, I could not help but wonder, "How in ANY way is a summit more important than saving a life?" And the answer is that it isn't. But in this skewed world up here, sometimes you can be fooled into thinking that it might be. But I know that trying to sleep at night knowing that I summited Everest and left a guy to die isn't something I ever want to do. The summit's always there after all.

It's easy to be critical of the way Everest had become commercialised: sherpas dragging unfit clients to the summit and hopefully back down; teams showing up unprepared and using the oxygen and tents of others; people stealing the "Emergency Oxygen for Ecuadorian Oxygenless Ascent" bottle of a climber who only just made it down alive. We must hold on to a basic value for human life that we all hold down at sea-level and keep that in the mountains. It's something that SummitClimb's Dan Mazur and other leaders involved in this rescue remember, but that many others sacrifice for  the precious summit of this mountain.

Down here at ABC on Everest we're aware that there have been a lot of false or incorrect reports of goings-on up here, as well as many that might have worried friends and family. We hope that this will help settle the nerves, and we apologize for not being in touch sooner. A combination of telecommunications issues has contributed to some silence from our end, and we apologize profusely for the inconvenience.

We have yaks coming to a deserted ABC on 30th May and hope to be in Kathmandu by 1st or 2nd June. We miss you at home and can't wait to see you all.

Thanks for following our expedition,

Myles Osborne for the SummitClimb North Ridge Expedition 2006