

Left to Die on Everest

No one came to David Sharp's aid on Everest. What happened?

July 23, 2006

He woke to wind, bitter cold. Not that there was much sleep to be had here: High Camp, 50 or so tents scattered about a sorry slant of broken shale and scalloped snow scratched into the northeast flank of Mount Everest, 27,000 feet above sea level. It was desperate up this high, even in the best conditions. Climb above 26,000 feet and it becomes impossible for the body to acclimate. Your digestive system begins to shut down, blood oxygen dwindles, brain cells starve. As one Everest alumni puts it, "At altitude, you stay pretty busy trying not to die."

David Sharp stepped from his tent into a velvet night filled with a silver spray of stars. This time the 34-year-old planned to go it alone. No guide. No teammates. Others were nearby, but they were strangers, climbers from a few different teams milling near their tents, preparing for their own summit bids. He saw the dull glow of the tents, a few headlamps bobbing in the dark, heard the clink of carabiners, stoves firing, a low murmur of voices. He brought his watch up into the light of his own headlamp. Shortly after midnight, May 14. Time to go.

Tall and rail-thin, with brown hair and a passion for Bob Marley, Sharp was a former engineer from Guisborough, England, who had quit his career to become a math teacher, which allowed him more time for his true calling: climbing mountains. He looked the part of the mathematician, with wire-rim specs and a goatee that had grown scraggly since he'd arrived in Tibet. While his neighbors in Advanced Base Camp (ABC) had iPods, satellite phones, and laptops, Sharp was resolutely low-tech. In his 10-year-old backpack he carried old but adequate climbing gear and two books (Shakespeare and a Bible). He hadn't even bothered to bring a camera.

Those who knew Sharp asserted that he was a strong and experienced climber. In 2002 he summited Everest's 26,750-foot neighbor, Cho Oyu, and then went on to Everest itself in 2003 and 2004. Twice he'd climbed Everest's northeast ridge, and twice he'd come tantalizingly close to the top, just below the Second Step, 1,000 vertical feet below the 29,035-foot summit. In the 2003 climb he lost a few toes to frostbite.

This was his third shot, "If he didn't summit Everest this time, that was going to be it," says David Watson, an American climber from Vermont who befriended Sharp in ABC this year. "He wasn't coming back, because he couldn't afford to. So he was determined. And he said he was willing to give up more fingers and toes to do it."

It's believed that Sharp reached the summit on the afternoon of the 14th, but the achievement came at a high price. He would freeze to death under a rock ledge next to the route not far above High Camp, and, as the world soon learned from websites, radio interviews, and editorials, as many as 40 climbers passed Sharp along the ridge as he lay dying. Outrage created debates that point fingers not at a storm, but solely at the climbers involved. Even Sir Edmund Hillary (the first man to ever summit Everest in 1953) spoke out. "The whole attitude toward climbing Mount Everest has become rather horrifying," he told the press. "A human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain." People see the price they pay to get there more important than the lives around them.

In extensive interviews with team members and others who were on the mountain at the time, it became obvious that there were many stories out there about what happened that day. One person reports that Sharp was completely on his own, without any kind of support or even a radio, and so had no margin for error. He collapsed while still clipped in to a fixed line used by passing climbers and lay just three feet from the route. Many did stop to try to help him or comfort him, but only after they had already passed him on their way to the summit. They stopped on their descent. Many of those who passed Sharp did not see him the first time because it was dark, and they were wearing oxygen masks and hooded down suits. Or they did see him and mistook him for the corpse of an Indian climber, nicknamed Green Boots, who has been there since 1996.

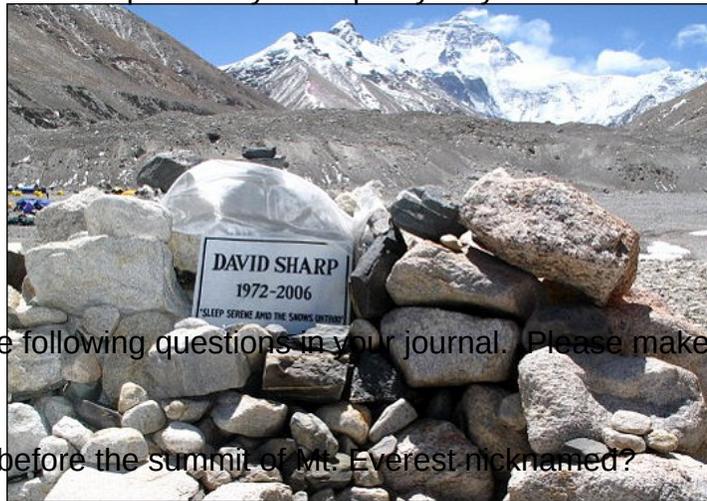
Members of a 12-person Turkish team say they came upon Sharp approximately 24 hours after he set out and described him as sitting up, conscious, and responding 'in a restrained way,' while others

who saw him around the same time claim he was unconscious, in a hypothermic coma, and irrecoverable. Eight hours later, after daybreak on the 15th, climbers found Sharp shivering, near death, but able to speak his name.

Whatever the case, one thing is abundantly clear: Some climbers on the ridge that day were aware of Sharp but chose their summits over an attempt, however monumental and possibly futile, to save his life.

When Sharp's personal belongings were gathered from his tent among them found was a plastic bag containing his passport and wallet. Inside the wallet they discovered an undisclosed amount of money, more than they might have expected for a modest mathematician. Travel money to ensure safe passage home. More than enough to have hired a Sherpa, or even a guide.

As the chorus of the righteous loudly points out, maybe this wasn't a mountaineering story but a story about how mountaineering serves as a microcosm of human nature. Aren't we all susceptible to the impulse to avoid the bleeding man on the curb, to leave the problem to someone else? Don't we resent having to bail out the less fortunate when they've brought trouble on themselves? And do any of those impulses absolve us of the responsibility to help any way?



*David Sharp
Memorial at Base
Camp*

Questions

Directions: Please answer the following questions in your journal. Please make sure to answer in full sentences.

- a) What is the last section before the summit of Mt. Everest nicknamed?
- b) What makes section so dangerous?
- c) What were some of the reasons given as to why David Sharp was not rescued?
- d) In your opinion, what are some things a mountaineer could do to prevent themselves from getting into a similar situation as David Sharp?
- e) Do you believe the mountaineers who passed David Sharp, essentially leaving him to die, were correct or incorrect in their decisions to do so? Explain your belief.