

LIFE AND DEATH ON DENALI

A pair of Australian climbers are confronted by the fickle nature of fate during an attempt on North America's highest peak

Story and images James Castrission

Peering through the eyepiece of my camera, my climbing partner was sharply in focus. Beyond, three roped climbers were descending the knife-edge ridge beneath High Camp at about 5600 metres on Alaska's magnificent Denali. We'd started early and flown up the fixed lines on the brutally cold headwall and were now enjoying the sun, delicately picking our way along the hazardous ridge to High Camp, where we intended to cache food and fuel for our summit bid in two days' time.

It was a stunning, cloudless day. As I half pressed the shutter, two red auto-focus dots homed in on Epic's weathered nose. I could see a classic shot forming: the aperture and shutter speed were spot on, composition balanced and, by tweaking the polarising filter a touch, the sky turned a beautiful deep, dark blue.

However, before I had time to squeeze the shutter, the image disintegrated. In seemingly slow motion, the descending climbers faltered. The middle climber tripped on his crampons and tumbled like a flailing insect, unable to arrest the fall with his skittering ice axe. Moments later the second climber was jerked from his braced position. Now two climbers were tumbling out of control. My eyes shifted from the frantic top climber – desperately digging his axe into the snow – to the massive, life-threatening ice cliff two rope lengths below. I knew this was their last chance. If the top climber didn't hold the fall all three were dead. Through the camera eyepiece I watched a horror film unfold. A helpless feeling consumed me. There was nothing I could do.

SIX MONTHS PRIOR I'd been climbing in the Wolgan Valley in the Blue Mountains with one of my best buddies, Epic. Hugh Ward's nickname is apt given for his uncanny ability to always create adventure out of anything. Epic's been known to jump into puddles at the start of a two-day walk 'just to make the weekend more fun', 'forget'



Two climbers approaching the windswept camp at 3700 metres. The snow blocks in the foreground are used to protect the tents from the wind. Three roped climbers slogging it up to 3700 metres.

his headtorch heading into a cave and plead with the person on the end of the rope to follow because 'the next pitch is much better'. To your average weekend warrior, Epic is... well... a sicko. But he's a master at suffering and one of the few people I trust 100 per cent. In other words, he's the perfect mountaineering companion.

Epic and I had done a bunch of big wall climbing all over the world, including a number of seasons mountaineering in New Zealand. Now we felt it was time to push beyond our comfort zone. Neither of us had ever been really cold or really high, so the challenge of heading to Alaska and testing ourselves on Denali seemed a worthy objective.

In the past, we've found regular cardio-training (like running, swimming and cycling) great for expeditions, but nothing beats a few weekends getting ugly. Let me

explain. Mountaineering is about suffering. So what better way to train than to put yourself through a self-administered suffer-fest, depriving yourself of sleep and food and pushing yourself to the absolute limit?

On our last training session before heading to Alaska, we were moving quickly up a spur out of the Grose Valley. After about half an hour, I turned around to look for Epic. Oddly he was nowhere to be seen. Only moments earlier I could hear his heavy panting right on my heels and now nothing. I yelled a couple of times, but still no answer. As my anxiety rose a little I scanned

the ground, which fell away steeply. Finally, I saw him swaying up towards me, with his glasses fogged and face beetroot-red. Pissing sweat like a sprinkler he blurted through a painful smile: 'Had to stop and throw up. All good now though – what have you stopped for?'

After 14 hours, we bumbled back to the car with cramps and sore feet, happy with our fitness, our friendship and the knowledge that we couldn't be more ready for Denali.

"I watched in horror. The rope knotted and tangled around the two lower climbers as they tumbled, cartwheeling towards death."

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, squashed on top of each other in a battered shuttle bus, we were heading to Talkeetna, Alaska – the last stop before the Great White Mountain. With climbing gear cluttering the aisle, the bus driver bellowed through his Santa Claus beard: 'Here she comes'. Not knowing whether he was making another of his crude jokes, all was instantly revealed. There she was indeed: massive, daunting and intimidating. Standing well over 70 kilometres away, the 6194-metre Denali massif dominated the horizon. Before my brain had time to register what my eyes were seeing, my stomach churned and I felt insignificant. In the background, I heard the driver proudly telling another climber that 'The Great One' had a larger bulk than Mt Everest and due to its extreme northerly latitude in the Arctic circle, past climbers have found climbing Mt Everest good training for Denali.

'We've come to climb that...?' I spat. It was nothing like anything I'd ever seen before. Both El Capitan (Yosemite, California) and the Caroline Face of Mt Cook in the New Zealand Alps seemed trivial.

We arrived in Talkeetna with a steady rain falling on the bus roof. With the weather forecast looking miserable and preventing all access to the mountain, we found ourselves trapped in civilisation, not knowing whether we would get up on Denali's beautiful flanks. We spent the week going through our gear, doing a bit of crevasse practice over the balcony of our hotel and carbo loading.

One evening, while tucking into a massive caribou burger at the local roadhouse, two rather geeky looking climbers entered the diner, obviously frustrated by the crap weather. Oozing charisma and bubbling with laughter, it wasn't long until they introduced themselves. Over the next few hours, Epic and I listened to their mesmerising climbing

stories (including Everest the previous year) and about the work they had done as doctors in Africa with kids suffering from tuberculosis. One was a spine surgeon, the other a brain surgeon. They showed us photos of their young families and we made plans to head to a remote corner of the Himalaya together in a few years time. By the end of the night, even though the weather remained terrible, our frustration was subdued somewhat and we felt

ascend. Progress for the first few days went smoothly. We farewelled the doctors and made solid progress up the mountain. After a week, we arrived at 4600 metres with 14 days' supplies left, feeling quite strong and confident about the task ahead. The summit was still a long way above and with most of the ascent being more technical than anything we had tackled so far, we felt pretty restless. After a couple of days acclimatising at 'advanced base camp' it was time to head up and cache a load at high camp...

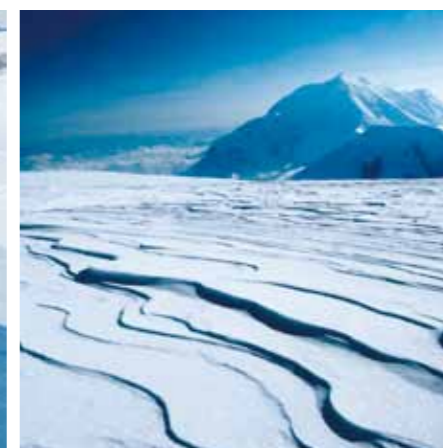
I WATCHED IN horror. The rope knotted and tangled around the two lower climbers as they tumbled, cartwheeling towards death. They'd gathered so much speed, so quickly, that each attempt to arrest their fall was futile. And then, in one final act of frantic desperation, the top climber drove his axe into the snow. It held. There was no movement.

Epic and I ditched our heavy loads and traversed to their precarious position. Fearing any movement could trigger a slab avalanche or see them tumble into the void below, we yelled at them not to move. We set up an anchor and Epic rapped down to the top climber who was drifting in and out of shock. The two below were in a much worse state. One of them had not only driven an ice axe through his hand, but his partner's crampons had also bitten savagely into his quad like a hungry shark. Thick, rich blood oozed from ragged and torn wounds. The third climber screamed in agony, having torn the ACL in his knee.

All thoughts of caching our load at high camp were forgotten. The only thing on our minds now was how to rescue these guys. First, we needed to move them down the ridge and then lower Dan (climber number three, with the torn ACL) down the headwall. With only Epic and me to hand, we knew we had our work cut out. We prayed for both the weather to hold and for other climbers to arrive and assist with the rescue.

After moving them to safer ground, Epic bandaged their lacerations and prepared hot tea while I ran ropes down to the fixed lines. We splinted Dan's knee with a snow picket and prepared to head along the ridge. Struggling with the thin air and the multitude of injuries, we slowly descended the ridge to the top of the headwall. Then just as we were about to start down the headwall, two Search and Rescue (SAR) climbers bumped into our battered and bruised party. 'You bloody bah-yooty!'

Together we spent the next five exhausting hours short-roping and lowering the party down the headwall until we stumbled into the



safety at the 4600-metre camp. We were completely buggered and, with everything happening so quickly, we'd hardly reflected on our efforts and what might have been. But sipping tea and nestled into our sleeping bags, the reality of what had just occurred hit home hard. The line between life and death in the mountains is fragile.

The next day was spent in our tent recovering. It was hard to refocus on our impending summit bid, but we knew we had to keep moving. Rising early the following day, we packed our kit and, with five days' of food, set out to establish high camp at 5600 metres. At that altitude, each inhalation only gives you about half the amount of oxygen as you'd gain at sea level, so breathing is strenuous, but we moved well and set up our camp in good time. By mid-afternoon tea was brewing and conversation had turned to the weather for the next couple of days. A climber approached.

'Hey guys, waz up?' He was Texan. 'Aw not much – just getting ready for our bid tomorrow – we're feeling pretty good', I replied.

After an awkward pause, he shook his head, focused on some snow on his boot and continued...

'Two blokes, wearing one-piece blue and yellow Goretex suits, fell 4000 feet to their death off the rib today', he said solemnly.

My heart missed a beat and I stopped breathing for an instant. 'You're fucking kidding...?' I said in disbelief. We knew it was our doctor mates.

Epic sat stunned, staring at his mug. I wanted to be anywhere on earth other than at High Camp on that bloody mountain. Confusion and anger swirled around my head. I love the mountains, but at that moment I hated them. Why them? Those two blokes represented everything that is

Left page, the horror fall as seen through the view finder. **Clockwise from top**, Epic, roped up, on the flanks of Denali. 1am, Epic approaches Denali Pass moments before we made the decision to turn back. Photo taken from the world's best dunny at 5900 metres on Denali. Epic tries to attach the injured top climber to the anchor.

good in the world. The summit instantly meant nothing and the whole scene felt pathetic. I wanted off.

Grief, complicated by mild altitude sickness, welled in our hearts the next day. The summit was shrouded in clouds and high winds and our minds were restless. To summit or bail? We knew both Andrew and John would want us to summit. Decision made.



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*MINIMUM WEIGHT INCLUDES INNER, FLY, POLES AND 2 X PEGS ONLY.

I wanted to be anywhere on earth other than at High Camp on that bloody mountain. Confusion and anger swirled around my head. I love the mountains, but at that moment I hated them.

Looking down at Mount Foraker from High Camp.



In the fading light of dusk, the clouds cleared and the precious weather window arrived. We packed our kit and nervously set off for the summit, knowing that this was our ticket to get off the mountain.

Roped together and dressed in down gear to combat the -30° conditions, we edged closer to the elusive summit of Denali. My brain was having trouble processing the rescue and what had happened to Andrew and John. I thought about the last time we'd seen them and the loose plans we'd made to head to the Himalaya together in a few years time. Did their families know yet?

Heaving for air, we topped out over Denali Pass, less than 600 metres from the summit, and were blasted by plumes of swirling

snow. The summit ridge was lost in cloud and for the first time on the mountain the altitude began to hit me hard. I became hyper-emotional with the smallest things really upsetting me. In one episode I couldn't adjust my fogged goggles through the big down mitts and found myself crying like a baby. I realised that I'd lost all feeling in my toes and my anxiety grew. Every five steps I found myself heaving for air as I lost vision. Things had become serious; the altitude was getting the better of me.

As we descended Denali, I swayed and lurched drunkenly from side to side. Soon, I was choking back vomit before it exploded without warning into the snow. Our summit bid was over. It was time to leave.

I ARRIVED BACK in Australia an emotional wreck. It took me a couple of days to work up the courage to download the images from my SLR on to my laptop. I had no idea what to expect or how I would react.

I examined each photo. The aperture, exposure and composition of each photo now had new meaning. The photos stirred my emotions, forcing me to ask questions without answers. Why were these guys alive and our doctor friends dead? How do you explain the beauty and exhilaration to those who have never climbed mountains?

And why do I want to return when life is so good back home? [W](#)

James Castrission is a 27-year-old adventurer best known for his epic sea kayak voyage across the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand. To find out more about him and his adventures visit www.crossingtheditch.com.au.



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