

# A Dangerous Day

Mal Duff

Plate 28

We were numb. Not cold numb, although that was there at times, just battered numb: numb from eight weeks of strain; from scything wind cutting at the flesh; from swirling pirouetting columns of spindrift driving and dancing around us; from weighty effort and load carrying; from eating, drinking and living high on the NE ridge of Everest.

I plodded on lost in a world of spindrift, casually watching as Tony was again hurled to his knees, everything on automatic, both sides of my brain arguing, bullying and reasoning.

'I'm hurting.' — 'But who wouldn't. After all I am carrying an enormous load. At this sort of altitude I deserve to hurt. Anyway I'm managing 50 paces between rests even though the wind's blowing out Tony's tracks and the bastard snow is falling as it has been for weeks.' — 'I'm over 8000m and stunningly tired.' — 'It's bound to hurt. What a wimp, just ignore it and keep going.' — 'God this is hard.' — 'Yes, but the oxygen should help, that's what it's for and anyway 25kg is tiring at sea level so no wonder this is bad. And when you carried up here a few days ago it was tough and carrying at 8000m is so much harder than going for a summit unladen. We're higher than the South Col but on a longer and harder route and still miles from the summit, so we have to carry. So that's that! OK?' — 'Well I really am OK but my lungs are heaving and my thighs burning.' — 'What the hell, *THIS IS EVEREST* and life is tough.' — 'I wish my goggles wouldn't keep steaming up and freezing and I wish I felt better because I'm more tired than ever and why did I try oxygen to carry an extra load when I was doing great at 8000m without?'

Tony was crouched on a rock 40m away, a small spark of life where none should exist. The spindrift swirled and battered, battered without respite, skirling over the ridge, pluming 100m before hurling itself upon us intent on extermination. Reaching the lee of the rock, a haven in the storm, and contacting Tony, another human in this madness, because all important. Fifty steps, then 60, then 70 . . . A shattering pain suddenly erupted low in my chest. As usual in the mountains problems arise with devastating swiftness. A muscle rip in my diaphragm choked the ability to inflate lungs. A moment of panic subdued by years of training. 'No matter what, I must try: try to live, to descend, or even to die but I must try. Do something. Try, think, work and rationalize because this is the big one, the master problem, that perhaps you've been seeking for years unwittingly.' But I couldn't help thinking of Pete Thexton on Broad Peak with a collapsed diaphragm; of him going blind and dying. I buzzed with panic. Zipping strokes of worry contested. A mental battle fought — the first I knew of many before the day or I expired.

We needed the oxygen regulator and mask for those coming up so we spent what seemed like hours unscrewing it from a thread caked in ice. The hose and



28 Everest NE ridge in 1985.

Photo: Mal Duff

valve were totally frozen. Realization dawned that I had been dragging this load and not getting any oxygen. I had been sucking atmosphere through the mask so it was not surprising that I had suffered, and now I was miles from anywhere with lungs like wet sponges, no power, maybe going blind and definitely slowly dying.

We dumped our loads, marked the spot and turned downhill. Now on this ridge some of it is flat, some up, and the majority down, but it is still an effort. It was nearly 1000m before I could reach the top of the fixed ropes and slide. I could only manage two or three steps at a time. It all seemed too much. Tony went to Camp 4 to pack his gear and packed mine too. I did not think that I could get off the mountain in one day and having my sleeping bag seemed a good idea. So I put on my rucksack and kept descending and monitoring progress. No sign of going blind which would have been very worrying, but a definite fuzziness, which wasn't surprising, as I was probably only absorbing the same amount of oxygen as I would at 9000m — which isn't a lot. I could manage three steps downhill or one uphill, with massive rasping pants in between. It makes for slow progress over 3km with 2000m before the glacier.

At the nasty snowstep above the second buttress I was mighty pleased that Allen Fyffe had fixed a rope there the previous day. This place was hard and dangerous, and it was really nice to clip in and slide down a little. A few hundred metres further brought the mixed ground leading to the fixed line down the second buttress. Tony had clipped on and gone on into the spindrift. I was confused. I missed a wand and ended up too low, got extremely angry and scrambled up in a panic. This was easy stuff to fall from, my balance was all wrong and what a bloody awful waste of energy, energy that I'd been harbouring for lower down.

At 7600m between the two buttresses I met Rick coming up and going well and Jon sitting down and looking tired. Both looked at me sort of sideways and asked if I needed help getting down. But I was still upright and not yet falling, so I declined and they went on to the Pinnacles. Tony was waiting at the top of the first buttress. We had a chat and he went on ahead to Camp 3 to put on a brew.

Between Camp 3 and Camp 2 we met Bob and Chris on their way up to Camp 3. At Camp 2 we reached the end of the fixed ropes. Tony went first in an effort to break steps because the snow had filled all the tracks. I clipped onto the rope and stumbled and slid, triggering avalanches which thundered down the couloirs. I tried not to sag on to the ropes — just in case . . . Energy dredged from the flesh of my body, until finally I reached the four huge abseils down to the bergschrund. Below, tied to Tony, I staggered across the glacier resting endlessly, to reach Advanced Base Camp late in the evening.

I was over one stone lighter.