
REBECCA STEPHENS

A British Woman on Everest

On 17 May 1993 Rebecca Stephens became the first British woman to climb Mount Everest. She was accompanied by Sherpas Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering.

It was our last chance, our last attempt on the summit of Everest. The season was drawing to a close – the monsoon encroaching – and talk was of cold beers in Namche Bazar. This was it. Our last moment – and the Sherpas thought it too dangerous to climb.

‘Guys, don’t give up on me now. Please not now.’ These were my thoughts as Sherpas Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering lay huddled in a small, domed tent. Tchering Zhambu and myself were in another, positioned for a summit bid from the South Col. ‘There’s black cloud in the valley. Not good weather. We’re young,’ they cried.

‘Well,’ I mused, ‘the perfect excuse.’ A large part of me thought: ‘I can go back to bed, put my head down, forget the whole bloody thing.’ But another part of me wanted that summit. Was making a decision always so impossibly hard? To go or not to go. It had seemed that way for as long as I could remember. Choice is a terrible thing. Until Everest I had thought climbing easy – not physically easy, necessarily, but simple. There was only one aim: to climb to the top. No buses to catch, timetables to meet; no finances to juggle, bathrooms to clean, taxmen or editors to appease. No clutter.

Everest put an end to that. Everest, by virtue of its sheer size, makes complicated all things that should be simple. Camps need to be established: tents, sleeping-bags, stoves, billies, food and drinks put in place. Oxygen, too – for those who use it – needs to be positioned. And teams are large: nine Westerners in our case, and seven Sherpas. A lot of people. A lot of variables – before counting the biggest variable of all: the weather.

I was tired of decision-making. Twice in the last week I had thought we should have made a bid for the summit when, in the event, circumstances for our team dictated otherwise; and twice I had watched tens of climbers ascend, and descend triumphant.

But one more chance – just one, a slim one – presented itself. We had been to Camp 4 on the South Col, retreated, and were now at Camp 2, 22,500ft, at the foot of the Lhotse Face.

Was it only yesterday, Camp 2? It felt an age. I remembered John Barry, the expedition leader, saying: ‘It’ll be a monumental test of will.’ He was referring to the climb, to having to retrace steps from Camp 2 to Camp 4; and he was right – almost. The hard bit was not the climb itself; it was summoning the energy to pack my rucksack, put on my harness, my boots

and crampons and set off, again. So nearly I didn't bother. The forecast was for 45 pushing 50 knot winds and I convinced myself I would be walking into failure. I would climb to the Col – that ghastly, inhospitable, frightening place – only to have to retreat once more. My chance of success, I thought, was no more than one in a hundred.

'You're a realist,' said Sandy Scott, our doctor. 'I'd have said three to four per cent.' I was scared, too. Suddenly I found myself in a situation in which I was talking in the first person singular. I would be alone. I had assumed that John would be making a second attempt with me. But he had made his choice. He had stayed a third night on the South Col to look after Harry Taylor, who was snowblind after his oxygenless ascent.

'But you won't be on your own,' Sandy said gently. 'You'll be with Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering, and Tchering Zhambu.' These Sherpas were twice as strong and twice as fast on the hill as any man I had met, and always smiling. But I had never actually climbed with them – and it would be me making all the decisions.

'They know this mountain better than anyone,' said Sandy. Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering both had been to the South Summit several times. 'And they're cautious,' he said. I felt ashamed. Sandy was right. The Sherpas would look after me.

The four of us set off together from Camp 2 at 5am. Dawn was just breaking. Once on our way we travelled quickly, across the head of the Khumbu glacier in the Western Cwm and up the steep Lhotse Face. I was hugely advantaged. On our first attempt we had used oxygen from Camp 3, at about 24,000ft, a little over halfway up the face. The oxygen bottles were British, solid and strong to meet British standards, which was great, except that each bottle weighed a hefty 6.5kg, and that was without the brass attachments, regulator and mask. For the second attempt we had handed over an astronomical sum of money to the New Zealanders for their spare titanium bottles, made in Russia. They were the best: small, simple to use and, most important, light. I had plenty of them.

I plugged in at Camp 2 and shot up the fixed ropes to Camp 3 in under four hours. Previously, my best time, without oxygen, had been 5½ hours. We stopped for a quick brew in our tent at Camp 3, perched on the tiniest snowy shelf between séracs, and then went on our way, across the Lhotse Face – just a walk really – and up and over the Geneva Spur to the South Col. Tchering Zhambu and I were on the Col by 1pm. Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering had raced ahead and were already ensconced in their tent, brewing us tea.

I loved watching them. They were so dextrous. They were small – Tchering Zhambu was tiny, about 5ft 2in. But the efficiency of their movements amazed me. The tent I shared with Tchering Zhambu was full of snow, littered with food wrappings, and sort of crescent-shaped. It had been domed once – in fact the last time that I was in it – but the poles had buckled in the wind and the canvas had collapsed. It was chaos and yet Tchering Zhambu managed to sort the oxygen, dry his feet, man the radio and lean out of the tent to collect snow for a brew; all without knocking

over the 'boil-in-a-bag' warming on the stove in the corner. I did nothing. I was not allowed to.

Seven pm and we put our heads down, just for a couple of hours. Didn't sleep, just rested.

'Tchering Zhambu,' I whispered. He stirred. 'Tchering Zhambu, there's no wind.' I could hardly believe it: the forecast was as wrong as it was possible to be.

Tchering Zhambu sat bolt upright – it was 10pm, we planned to leave at 11pm – and immediately lit the stove for a brew. It takes a while, all this brewing, collecting and melting snow, but an hour or so passed and I got the distinct impression something was up. The Sherpas – Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering in the other tent, and Tchering Zhambu in mine – were talking among themselves in Nepali.

'What's up?' I asked Tchering Zhambu.

'Weather not good.'

'But there's no wind,' I retorted. I stuck my head out of the tent: the mountain was clear, the sky full of stars.

'Ang Pasang says black cloud in valley. Too dangerous.'

There was only one thing for it. I put on my boots, tripped out of my tent and into theirs.

'Ang Pasang?'

'Black cloud dangerous,' he said, 'We're young.' What to do?

'Ang Pasang, pass the radio please.'

John and Sandy were sleeping in the cook tent that night, by the radio, so I could call them at any time. I was touched. The boys at Base Camp were doing the same.

I explained: 'John, Ang Pasang says we may not find our way. And there's lightning. You have a view on that?'

'I don't know, Becs.' This was desperate.

'The weather's going to get worse, not necessarily in the next two hours, but it's going to build up. Whether it will hold off long enough I wouldn't like to say,' said John.

The discussion went round in circles: Camp 4 to Camp 2, Camp 2 to Base Camp, back to Camp 4. '

Talk it over very gently with Ang Pasang and let him make the final decision,' said John. 'It's his life too.'

We waited an hour. The wind did not pick up and the stars still crowded the sky. And then I saw three lights making their way up the hill from the Col. I do not know how the decision was finally made, but one thing was for sure: if those three people thought there might even be the slightest chance of making the summit, I could not go back to bed. At 12.30am we were ready to go.

'Get on those fixed ropes,' said John, 'Get on to the South Summit; reassess the situation there. And good luck. I think you're going to be OK. Over.'

I heard him switch to Base Camp: 'The beauty of fixed rope,' he said, 'is that you can't get lost. If the worst comes to the worst they can rattle down the ropes, back to the tent.' I wonder if he would have been happy to let us

go if he had known what we were to discover? There were no fixed ropes. They must have been buried in the snow.

There were just three of us now. Tchering Zhambu had a cough, and was forced to turn back after climbing only a couple of hundred yards from the Col. It was dark, very dark. And to add to the fun I had let my head torch batteries run flat, as had Ang Pasang. Kami Tchering led, turning his head every few paces so we could follow. It was much steeper than I had imagined; icy in patches. In other places rock lay camouflaged under the thinnest powdering of snow. I wondered at times how the hell we were going to get down again. But for the moment we were heading up and, I thought, going rather well. The Sherpas apparently felt otherwise. It was about 4am, still dark. They sat in the snow and refused to budge.

'What's the matter, guys?' They were chatting away madly on the radio, in Nepali. 'Nawang says you've got two cold, scared Sherpas,' said John. Nawang was the cook at Camp 2. Thin cloud now engulfed us and there were no longer stars visible in the sky.

'Maybe if you can persuade them to keep going until dawn, that might do the trick,' said John.

Maybe. 'Look, Ang Pasang, let's just keep climbing until we catch up with the three ahead. We can discuss it with them.'

I tried everything: Take my jacket. (I had a spare one.) 'If you get to the top? Of course you can come to London.' There was a reluctance, but they – we – moved on. We never did discuss the matter with the three climbers ahead. We caught up with them, said our hellos and climbed on past (they had no oxygen, so climbed slowly). It was hard work – harder for the Sherpas than for me. I was on three litres of oxygen per minute, they on one. That made a big difference. We would take seven paces, maybe eight (ten was always beyond our reach) and rest for a minute, another six, and rest again. And when the snow deepened, we took it in turns kicking steps.

Up and up. The dawn broke and light snow blew in our faces from the east. The whole of Tibet was one ominous snow cloud, and yet somewhere – somewhere along the SE ridge leading to the South Summit – the Sherpas' attitude changed. They wanted that summit too.

I don't know why: I had read hundreds of books and talked to countless people, and yet when I stood on the South Summit, the view along the final ridge to the true summit staggered me. Everything we had climbed thus far was snow, or ice. This was rock, mostly: angular lumps falling away sharply left and right.

'You can go first Kami Tchering,' I said.

'No, you can go.'

'No, you go.'

Kami Tchering led. It was not difficult by Alpine standards; perhaps *peu difficile*. But it was exposed. Best not look down. There were fixed ropes, in parts; but where there were not, one slip and it would all be over.

I was happy when I left the rock behind for the broader snowy ridge that led to the summit. I knew it was the summit: it had lots of flags on top. It was not very dramatic. But the joy on the Sherpas' faces made my heart

near burst. They grabbed the radio: 'Summit, summit, summit. We make summit.'

I suppose it is fear that forbids one to bask in such moments too long. The cloud cleared for a moment to reveal a view across the Tibetan plateau that stretched for miles: to China and Mongolia, no doubt. But I only glanced for a second. It was cold, and the wind had picked up a little.

Going down was exhausting: I knew it would be. And dangerous. The five people who had died this season had died here, descending from the summit to the Col. I concentrated hard, and the Sherpas were wonderful: 'Slowly, slowly.' Kami Tchering led, while Ang Pasang paced himself just behind me.

It took about five hours down, and for an hour of that time the snow cloud that had filled Tibet invaded our path and masked our vision almost completely. But I felt calm, and when it cleared, there, far below, was a small, red figure on the Col, excitedly waving his arms. It was Tchering Zhambu.

A half-hour later he was unstrapping my crampons and rubbing my hands warm because, casually, I had remarked that I was chilly. He boiled some noodle soup, but I was not hungry. Gently, he insisted I should crawl into my sleeping-bag and rest; but I could not sleep.

It didn't matter; nothing mattered that night. I was content. It was a feeling I had never before experienced.

Summary: Rebecca Stephens was a member of the DHL British 40th Anniversary Everest Expedition which aimed to climb the mountain by the route of the first ascent and to raise money for Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust. The joint leaders were John Barry and Peter Earl. Four people stood on the top: Harry Taylor, who on 10 May became the second Briton to climb Everest without bottled oxygen, and, on 17 May, Rebecca Stephens, accompanied by Sherpas Ang Pasang and Kami Tchering.

(This article first appeared in the Financial Times, 19 June 1993. It is reproduced by kind permission of the Editor and the author.)

