Annapurna IV – narrow escape from disaster

(expedition of 2-10 to 31-10-1997)

Herbert radioed at 8 a.m. as agreed. The day looked promising, not a cloud in the sky and my colleagues had a new go at the ascent to camp 2. I was supposed to follow them the next day.

In midmorning, I could take off my anorak and enjoy the warmth of the sun. The whole time I kept my eyes trained on the steep face where I could just make out the tiny dots of my friends struggling to get to camp 2 with their heavy backpacks.

My recovery had proved quicker than I had hoped for and I almost felt sorry for having descended, but then things took a very unexpected turn.

Towards midday, wispy white cirrus clouds started to form in the sky. In alpine areas this is a sure sign of weather change. Does this apply to the Himalayas as well?

In late afternoon, strong winds and snowfall set in. At six p.m., at our prearranged contact, Herbert advised me to wait until the following morning with my decision of whether to climb up once more or not. The weather situation at camp 2, at an altitude of 6,100 m was far more critical than down at base camp which was at 4,650 m.

In the night to Oct. 23 there was heavy snowfall. At seven next morning, I crawled out of my tent and was knee-deep in the snow. Radio contact with camp 2 at 8 o'clock confirmed the situation. The ascent to camp 3 and my catching up with them were cancelled for the moment. The final decision was to be taken in the evening.

The day didn't bring any weather improvement, but snowfall became a bit less so that there wasn't such a large load of fresh snow.

In the evening, Herbert was confident the following day would be more favourable because the weather pattern so far indicated a change for the better. However, things were turning nasty. In the night, snowfall attained quantities I had never seen before in my whole career as a mountain climber. There were up to 2 m of fresh snow. My tent at base camp was almost completely hidden under the snow with just the top showing and it took me quite an effort to reach the crew tent where a very concerned sirdar by the name of Gangrei was waiting for me. Radio contact at 8 o'clock brought the expected decision to abort the expedition or rather to descend due to the rotten weather.

Herbert planned to descend to camp 1 and communicate again from there. Contact was set for 12 a.m.

Snowfall continued until midday, strong winds came up, and visibility decreased. We couldn't see further than 50 m and the snow load was getting higher and higher.

At 12 o'clock, Herbert got in touch with us. He seemed extremely exhausted. "We have just arrived at camp 1" he said, "and descent was gruesome". He told us how snow accumulated into slides all the time and how only thanks to their climbing ropes the worst could be prevented.

"Please, come and meet us halfway. We need all the support we can get. The descent was extremely exhausting".

I argued that visibility would seriously hinder our advancing but he insisted that we at least try.

I went to get the sirdar and two men from the kitchen crew and 30 min. later we set out towards camp 1. Equipped with hot tea and biscuits we embarked on our mission. I walked ahead plodding the trail but already at the first steep slope just above base camp we ran into big problems. The snow reached up to our breast and we did not really get on. Driving snow limited visibility to 10-15 m. My snow goggles kept icing over and I had to take them off every now and then to clean them.

Our advance was extremely slow and strenuous. Thinking of the glacier ahead of us gave me the creeps because there were many crevasses, some of them quite nasty, and in these weather conditions they might prove to be fatal traps.

After one hour, we knew that our action was not only in vain but highly suicidal. With a heavy heart, I decided to turn back and we found out immediately that we'd taken the right decision: our trail was completely gone. Snow and storm had obliterated everything and we had serious problems finding our way back to base camp.

After the last radio contact, we had remained on transmission, so, Herbert came on at about 2 p.m., asking where we were. I explained that we had turned back and why. His reaction was frightening: obviously, they had reached the limit of their strength and resources. They insisted on our coming.

The feeling of helplessness, of having to do something but not being able to was absolutely overpowering. Gangrei became more and more jittery. He didn't see any possibility of helping, either. In my despair I tried to communicate with them by radio but to my horror I heard Henry, our doc say "holy shit, there is one avalanche after the other thundering down on us. I lost sight of Herbert and the others".

I knew I had to keep up contact at any price. After a while, I succeeded to get in touch with all of them.

The minutes went by slowly, the next communication was interrupted. I knew exactly where my friends were and the extent of the danger they were exposed to. I knew the terrain well, I knew the angle of the slopes and the probability of avalanches. Visibility was catastrophic which exacerbated things and hindered a realistic assessment of the situation.

A sense of disaster began to take hold of my mind and Gangrei, our sirdar, started to cry, kneeling down to pray in a corner of the crew tent.

For more than an hour I tried to raise Herbert on the radio – no answer.

Was that the end? What was to become of us? What could we do? We couldn't just "go and get help".

The hopelessness of the situation and the silent radio almost killed me.

In this desperate situation, the cook came to me. He wanted to have another try with the sirdar and look for the colleagues. At first I tried to dissuade them but they insisted. I implored them not to risk anything, to turn back at the latest, when they realised they were losing the track. I sort of hammered these sentences into their heads, for if they did not come back, I would be utterly lost.

I placed myself in the entrance of our crew tent and strained my eyes in hope to make out something in the direction our friends in distress should come from. However, I could only see as far as about 20-30 m. Fear crept up my spine, just plain, naked fear – for my friends, for the Nepalese crew.

In such a situation your mind starts playing tricks on you. You begin to see the most terrifying pictures and time won't pass.

I suppose it must have been about an hour since the Nepalese set out, when suddenly visibility became a bit better and I could make out some shapes. First it was one person, then two, then the other four. "They are coming, they are coming", I shouted as loud as I could. Such an incredible relief. I bolted from the tent and dug my way through masses of snow towards the rescued friends. About 100 m from the base camp, out of breath, shouting and flailing my arms I met them. Haggard faces were looking at me, some had aged overnight by up to 20 years.

We fell into each others arms and cried with relief and joy. And there was nothing unmanly about this reaction.

Litres of hot tea and a lovely meal from our kitchen did the trick. We all felt newborn and were well aware of the fact that we'd escaped by the skin of our teeth. By and by, we also realised how much effort and willpower Herbert, our leader of the expedition,

had been able to muster in spite of all the insecurity and the viciousness of the weather.

There is an epilogue not quite without irony: the following morning the Annapurna was there, in all its beauty, radiating in the sun, surrounded by a deep blue sky and not a cloud nor a breeze of wind – as if nothing had happened. The only witness to the near-tragedy of the day before were the loads of snow, as if to mock the idyllic scenery.

It was quite a sobering experience – man is nothing in the face of the towering forces of nature.

The elusive summit lost its appeal to us. We were happy to have saved our lives.

What I personally learned from this expedition is that a summit must never be conquered. We must wait in all humbleness to be allowed to set foot there.

And after all - what counts is not the summit itself but the way to the top!

September 1997

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