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Hope in the Himalayas: The Strongest Men I Know

by Jeff Rasley
Fall 2009

Twelve years have passed. The memories still sear my consciousness. But I am able to write about what happened in the Nepal Himalaya in October 1999.

I was on a climbing expedition on Mera Peak, a 21,000 foot mountain in the south-western corner of the Everest region. Not one of the fifteen different climbing teams in base camp successfully summited Mera the first week of October, when my team was on the mountain. The conditions were too tough with unrelenting snow and terrible visibility. It rained every day for 2 weeks below 14,000 feet and snowed every day above that altitude.

The eleven-day trek to Mera base camp was surrealistic, over high mountain passes, across rushing glacier-fed streams, slipping and sliding through a muddy bamboo forest, and past a Sherpa village wiped out by an avalanche. We were soaking wet from rain every day the first week, and then slowed by deep snow as we neared our base camp. After four days of fighting the weather between base camp and high camp, our team gave up. I spent the last day on the mountain in a tent by myself, retching and wretched with altitude sickness.

The snow continued to fall as our defeated and bedraggled team finally hiked out of base camp. At sunrise on the second day of the hike out, my tent sagged with five inches of big-flaked heavy snow which had fallen over night. It continued falling as we ate breakfast, packed gear, and then trudged 2,000 feet up the backside of Zatrwa La. This was the last high pass we had to cross to get out of the great white-capped peaks and back to civilization in Lukla Village, where a Twin Otter airplane was scheduled to pick us up and fly us back to Kathmandu. By the time we post-holed up to the crest of the pass, the fresh snow was over two feet deep.

Barely visible through the falling snow on a ridge above and behind us were splotches of red and yellow -- down parkas of three Nepalese porters from another climbing expedition that was following us out of the mountains. The three Nepalese guys were inching their way across the ridge, slowed by the blowing snow and the heavy loads they were carrying.

The conditions were perfect for an avalanche - fresh, deep and unstable snow and warmer than usual temperatures. And we were on top of a 15,000 foot pass with a 4,000 foot descent.

We huddled together at the top of the pass. Heather wanted us to spread out for the descent, but Tom argued that the five of us ought to stay close to each other. We didn't rope up. All of a

sudden, Heather yelled and took off running. Tom cursed. Seth bellowed, "Go!" And I heard the low distant roar mountain climbers dread.

We started running after Heather. Judy fell and cried out. Tom and Seth grabbed her arms, pulled her up, yelling in her face to "Run! Run!"

I saw them out of the corner of my eye as I pounded mechanically down the rocky, snow-covered slope, stumbling into and over boulders hidden by snow. With my mental capacity still impaired by altitude sickness, my only conscious thought was keep going down to survive.

The spindrift came over us, stark white and opaque; I could barely see my gloves and boots. But the avalanche had petered out. We fell to our knees gasping. We looked back up into the vast whiteness of the mountain.

The three Nepalese porters from the other expedition had disappeared -- vanished in the gigantic wave of the avalanche. We later learned that they were killed, along with four others who died in a series of avalanches across the Nepal-Tibetan Himalaya that week.

One death received international headlines, that of the famous mountaineer, Alex Lowe, on Shishapangma in Tibet. The deaths of six Nepalese porters in the avalanches that struck across the Nepal-Tibetan Himalaya were noted in news reports with passing references as footnotes to the loss of a great Western mountaineer.

Heather, Tom, Judy and I were able to get to Lukla village that night. The worst part of that last 10-hour hike out of the mountains was just enduring it. The next worst part was wading across three glacier-fed streams. The water was freezing and running fast as the massive snowfall melted and ran off the sides of the mountains. We were all bone tired, wet and emotionally drained.

At the Mera Lodge in Lukla, we sat by the wood-burning stove trying to warm ourselves. The night wore on but our sirdar/guide, Seth, and our five porters didn't arrive at the Lodge. We feared something had gone wrong for them.

Around midnight, Tom and Ram, our cook, hiked back to the nearest stream. They returned with the frightful report that it had become a raging river, neck high. When we had crossed around 6:00 p.m., it was only knee-deep.

We stayed up until exhaustion sent us into our sleeping bags on the Lodge's cots. But before we went to bed we gathered in the kitchen to pray, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and agnostics; all united in our fervent hope and prayers for the safe return of Seth and our porters. Sick, wet, and exhausted as we were, we fought off the dread that was creeping around the edges of our minds with hopeful prayers.

After Seth, Tom, Judy, Heather and I had made it to the bottom of the Zatrwa La, Seth had instructed us to hike on to Lukla, and he would go back up to find our porters. We pulled on our light expedition packs, and watched Seth disappear back up into the blowing snow.

Seth found the five porters struggling half-way down the pass. The two youngest porters, Suk and Chandra, were hypothermic and too weak to descend under their own power. Seth and Jid Baldoo, the senior porter, carried Suk and Chandra the rest of the way to the bottom of the pass. Then, Seth and Jid climbed back up, 4,000 feet to the top of the pass, and carried down the two 70 pound dokos (carrying baskets) left behind by Suk and Chandra.

The ethics of Nepalese guides and senior porters do not allow them to abandon gear. They will risk their lives to preserve their company's tents and their climbing clients' personal gear. I have seen a sirdar dive off of a ridge with a 1000 foot drop to save a day pack carelessly dropped by a client.

Seth Chetri is large for a Nepalese. The Chetri are the warrior caste in Nepal. In 1999 he was about five feet nine inches and 160 lbs in his early twenties. He spoke English well, and he told me his dream was to win a scholarship to the National Outdoor Leadership School in the U.S. He loved to practice his English telling and hearing dirty jokes.

Jid Baldoo was also tall for a Nepalese at about five feet eight inches, and probably weighed 140 lbs. Most Nepalese porters are small and slight standing five feet four to six inches and weighing between 125 and 135 lbs. Jid is Tamang, one of the many distinct ethnic groups in Nepal. The Tamang have lived as peasant farmers for centuries on the great slopes of the Himalayas. Since Nepal was opened to tourism after the historical first summit of Everest in 1953, many Tamang have found employment with expedition companies as porters. Jid had worked his way up to senior porter, and had recruited our staff of porters from his village. Although he spoke no English, I had gotten to know Jid from a previous expedition, and a special affection had grown between us. I had given him my rain jacket, as I also had a rain poncho, and he was the envy of other porters on the trail. In 1999 most Himalayan porters had no rain or severe cold weather gear, and wore flip flops or cheaply-made Chinese tennis shoes on their feet.

After Seth and Jid carried the two dokos to the bottom of the Zatrwa La, they divided the extra loads among themselves, Pal Mansung and Mon Baldoo, the four who had the strength to carry. Then, the six of them set off in the dark for Lukla.

When they reached the first stream, it was waist high. Seth tied a rope to a boulder, waded across and tied the other end to a boulder on the other side. He helped Suk and Chandra cross the river as the others passed the gear across. They repeated the process at the second stream. The third stream was up to Seth's shoulders and running too fast to cross. The six of them spent the rest of the night soaking wet beside the river at freezing temperatures.

Around nine in the morning we heard whistling coming up the lane outside the Mera Lodge. Suk and Chandra were barely walking, still suffering from hypothermia. But Seth was whistling as he walked into the lodge. He and Jid had brought the others out safely. Seth proudly announced that none of the gear was lost. He and Jid each carried 120 lbs. over twenty miles on mountain trails and across three swollen-rushing streams in the dark, while caring for Suk and Chandra.

Some six months after my return from the Mera Peak expedition, I was driving home from my office in downtown Indianapolis. Tears started streaming down my face, and I had to pull over to the side of the street. I was crying and trembling. I could no longer hold in the feeling of guilt and shame. The picture was seared in my mind of the three porters just before they disappeared in the white tsunami. And I had done nothing, could do nothing. But it would not release me.

I called Tom in southern Indiana and Judy in Montana a few days later. Each had similar symptoms. We were experiencing mild post traumatic stress disorder.

I had participated in four Himalayan expeditions in five years. I swore off mountaineering after Mera in 99. I did not return to Nepal for four years. It was no longer safe to visit Nepal, anyway. A violent Maoist revolution against the King had broken out, and there were shootings and bombs going off in Kathmandu.

But May 29, 2003 was the golden Jubilee of the first summit of Mt. Everest, and Nepal once again beckoned. The country needed tourists to return, and the Maoists and government declared a truce. The Hillary family put its considerable resources to work at bringing tourists back to Nepal. Sir Edmund would co-host with the King of Nepal a black-tie affair in Kathmandu, and Hilary's son, Peter, would co-host with the Incarnate Lama of Tengboche Monastery the highest party in the world on the grounds of the Monastery at 11,500 feet. I heeded the call. I did not attempt to climb any mountains, but trekked through the Khumbu to Everest Base Camp at 18,000 feet and covered the highest party in the world at Tengboche Monastery as an independent journalist.

Since 2003, I have returned to Nepal each year to lead Himalayan expeditions. And the following year I started a fund raising project for a remote Himalayan village. The project has grown into a Nepal-based NGO, which has completed a village school and, most recently, a hydroelectric system.

On a trek, I will often stop at a trail bend, or take a rest cramponning up a glacier, and remember without tears. I remember and honor the heroic strength and goodness of Seth Chetri, my guide and sirdar, and Jid Baldoo, an illiterate Buddhist peasant-farmer. I will not forget those three unnamed porters I saw disappear in the avalanche; and I honor them too. I will try to face the challenges life puts in my path inspired by the courage, strength and kindness of Seth Chetri and Jid Baldoo, the two strongest men I know.

Jeff Rasley organizes tours and treks in the Nepal-Tibet Himalayas through Adventure GeoTreks, Ltd. and is the Coordinator of the First Friends Basa Village Project. Anyone interested in visiting the Nepal-Tibet Himalayas or assisting with the Basa Village Project may contact Jeff Rasley at jrasley@juno.com or visit his website: <http://www.jeffreyrasley.com>

Jeff Rasley is the author of *Bringing Progress to Paradise*, a book about combining adventure travel with service work in Himalayan villages.