
Source 3**Everest The Hard Way**

Pete Boardman and Pertemba Sherpa have reached the summit of Everest and need to return to Camp 6 where their team member Martin Boysen is expecting their return. But their companion Mick Burke is still on the summit...

A decision was needed. I pointed at my watch and said, 'We'll wait ten more minutes.' Pertemba agreed. That helped us – it shifted some responsibility to the watch. I fumbled in my sack and pulled out our stove to leave behind. The time was up.

At first we went the wrong way, too far towards the South Col*. There was a momentary lessening in the blizzard, and I looked up to see the rock of the South Summit. There was still no sign of Mick and it was now about half past four. The decision had been made and now we had to fight for our own lives and think downwards. The early afternoon had drifted into approaching night and our success was turning into tragedy.

Pertemba is not used to moving without fixed ropes or in bad conditions. At first he was slow. Three times I virtually pulled him down in the sliding, blowing powdery snow. But he is strong and adaptable. He began to move faster and soon we were able to move together. Were we in the gully? I felt panic surge inside. Then I saw twin rocks in the snow that I recognized from the morning. We descended diagonally from there and in the dusk saw the oxygen cylinder that marked the top of the fixed rope over the rocks. We slid down to the end of the rope and tied a spare rope we had to it and descended the other hundred and fifty feet. From there we moved down and across for one thousand feet towards the last of the fixed ropes.

But as soon as we started we were covered by a powder-snow avalanche from the summit slopes. Fortunately our oxygen cylinders were still functioning and we could breathe. We threaded our way blindly across the thin runnels of ice and snow that covered the sloping rocks. I felt a brush of snow on my head and looked up to see another big avalanche coming, channelled, straight at me. I looked across. Pertemba was crouched to hold my fall, and was whipping in the rope between us tight to my waist. I smashed my axe into the ice and hung on. The surging snow buffeted over and around me for minutes. Then it stopped. Pertemba had held; the axe had stayed in the ice.

We moved on. It was a miracle that we found the last of the fixed ropes in the dark. On the fixed rope Pertemba slowed down and I pulled him mercilessly until he shouted that one of his crampons had fallen off. The rope between us snagged and, in flicking it free, I tumbled over a fifteen-foot rock.

At half past seven we stumbled into Camp 6. Martin was there and I burst into tears.

Pete Boardman

* Col: a mountain pass