

**Seasonal Stories
for
the Nepalese Himalaya**

2006

by Elizabeth Hawley

Winter 2005-Spring 2006: A “Dead” Australian Comes to Life on Everest

A Rare Traverse of Annapurna I Involved an Extra Challenge

Noted French Climber Lafaille Disappears on Makalu

“I imagine you guys are surprised to see me here,” were Australian mountaineer Lincoln Hall’s words upon being discovered miraculously alive on the north side of Everest on 26 May after having been reported dead the day before. He was speaking to Dan Mazur, the leader of another expedition, Mazur’s two clients and their Sherpa on their way to the summit. “Can you please tell me how I got here? ... You guys on this boat too?”

At the “Mushroom Rock” at about 8550 meters, Mazur’s party found Hall with the top of his down suit half off, his gloves and cap entirely off, no oxygen equipment, ice axe or backpack, sitting one meter from the edge of the Kangshung Face. They pulled him away from the precipice, secured him with rope, gave him oxygen, food and water, put his arms into his sleeves, his hat and gloves on him—but he kept taking them off and Mazur’s party had to keep putting them back on—“he was like a three-old-year child,” said Mazur.

A radio call by Mazur for Sherpas from Hall’s expedition to come and get him brought them at 11:30 a.m.; he was now delirious. It took several days, at least 15 Sherpas and 50 cylinders of oxygen to get Hall to base camp; a yak took him the last distance because of his weakness and seriously frostbitten fingers and big toe. Mazur’s summit party, knowing it was then too late to go for the top, turned around and went down to advance base camp instead.

The Hall saga is reminiscent of the case in the disastrous spring of 1996 of a resurrected American, Beck Weathers, who suddenly appeared alone at his South Col camp (at 7900 meters) saying, “it’s great to be alive.” Alive he was, but after having been out in the open for 20 hours at very high altitude and presumed dead when last seen on a ledge 20-30 meters below the Col, he was nearly blind and very badly frostbitten on the fingers of both hands and his nose.

Everest traverses seem to have become the latest fashion with an unprecedented four successful ones this season. Three had received permission from both the Chinese and Nepalese authorities; one had not but managed to get away with it—but at a price, literally.

The Italian Simone Moro had no permit to make a traverse. According to him, he had intended to reach the summit from the Nepalese side’s South Col, descend the Tibetan north face’s Hornbein Couloir, move across the west ridge and down into the Nepalese side’s Western Cwm to the camp he had left there. But, he claimed, he became lost in the moonless dark and had to follow the fixed ropes, which he pulled out of the snow, down the normal northern route. An Italian friend, who lives in Lhasa and speaks Chinese and Tibetan, met him in base camp and explained to the authorities there and at the nearest police post how he had

innocently gotten lost. The police gave him a pass allowing him to cross the border into Nepal.

Others who were on the mountain at the same time as Moro point out that he had taken his passport with him, which is most unusual when climbing in Nepal. They say there were a tent and an oxygen bottle labelled MORO placed by two Italians, Marco Astori and Roberto Piantoni, at 8100-8200 meters on the normal north-side route. His friend was already waiting for him at base camp when he arrived, but he had no satellite phone, so their meeting must have been pre-arranged. He had to pay \$3000 for his permit to cross the border, a detail he had omitted to mention earlier.

Those who did have permits came from three other expeditions: crossing also from south to north were a Swiss, Mario Julen, with his Sherpa Da Nima; from north to south a Korean, Park Young-Seok, with Serap Jangbu Sherpa, and Dawa Sherpa all alone. Dawa rightly claimed a speed record for traverses with his elapsed time, verified by the leaders of the teams, which he left on the north side and joined on the south side, of 20 hours and 15 minutes. He was helped by using two bottles of oxygen from 8300 meters on his way up to 8500 meters coming down.

Although Lincoln Hall very fortunately did not die after all, eleven people did, making this spring the second deadliest season on the great mountain (the worst was the famous *Into Thin Air* 1996 spring, when a dozen died). This season on the south side, three Nepalese Sherpas, Lhakpa Tshering, Dawa Temba and Phinzo, perished when a massive chunk of the notorious Khumbu Icefall collapsed on top of them.

The remaining eight deaths occurred on the Tibetan side. Two men, a Russian, Igor Plyushkin, and Tuk Bahadur Thapa Magar, a Nepalese, succumbed to acute altitude sickness, and another, a German named Thomas Weber, to a stroke. Two were killed in falls: a Swedish skier, Tomas Olsson, when one ski cracked, and an Indian soldier, Sri Kishan. And three died—as Hall nearly did—from exhaustion, exposure and frostbite: a Briton, David Sharp, Vitor Negrete, Brazilian, and Jacques Letrange from France.

There was much outraged commentary, including entries in internet mountaineering websites, about how as many as 30 people may have passed the dying David Sharp at 8500 meters as they went for the top or descended from their summit bids, but continued on their way. Their actions were depicted as heartless and reflections of a supposed deterioration in climbing ethics with the advent of large numbers of “amateurs” in recent years. But armchair critics can fail to take into account all the possible reasons:

- Many simply did not see him. It was a very dark night and head lamps focus on restricted areas; the day was very cold, so they would still have had their hoods around their faces; almost all were wearing oxygen masks which limited their viewing areas; and Sharp was in a shallow cave where he was difficult to spot.

- Some may have seen him but thought he was the long-dead Indian whose body he was actually lying on top of.
- Others may have seen—even recognized—him and thought he was dead already.

In any case, some climbers did stop and try to give him help. The Turks tried, but they were fully occupied rescuing their own member and could give only limited assistance. Sherpas from other teams also tried, but they were themselves exhausted and their oxygen supplies were running low. Sharp did not have a Sherpa helping him—he reportedly refused to have one. He wanted to climb alone, and so he did—it is extremely difficult to piece together his movements. He climbed alone and tragically died alone.

Although reports of this kind of alleged callous behaviour by climbers determined to fulfil their personal ambitions to get to the summit regardless of others' predicaments, made good newspaper stories, there were several instances in which “amateurs” sacrificed their own summit successes to help strangers in distress. The reaction of Dan Mazur's party when they came upon Lincoln Hall was not unique.

Some Everest death counts for this spring have included one more climber, Pavel Kalny, a Czech who plunged to his death on the west face of Lhotse, where the climbing routes for Everest and Lhotse are the same at lower altitudes but diverge higher up. This man was higher up, a Lhotse climber, not an Everest climber.

The total number of teams on Everest this season (which ranged in size from one member with no Sherpa helper to 29 members and 22 Sherpas) was 97, two fewer than last year's 99, rather than as one might expect greater than the previous year's total. It actually was larger this spring on the Tibetan side, up from 56 to 66, but a bigger drop on the Nepalese side, down from 42 to 31 brought down the overall total.

In terms of numbers of summiters, there was an even greater difference between the Tibetan and Nepalese sides this season. A total of 275 people went to the top from Tibet, not counting the possibility that David Sharp summited and died during his descent—his movements above 8500 meters are not known. From Nepal, only 192 people succeeded.

One explanation for the fall in numbers of Everest teams in Nepal was the worrisome situation created by the ten-year-old armed rebellion of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and its recent increasing use of force throughout the country—plus this spring's political unrest that spilled onto the streets of Kathmandu and other towns nationwide organized by conventional parties angered by the King's “autocratic” actions; this took the forms of protest marches, public rallies and general strikes including bans on motorized travel. The international news media gave increasing attention to all of this, and some expeditions planned for Nepal were cancelled.

An American leader of a Cho Oyu expedition in Tibet decided to shun Nepal. He had heard how the leader and one member of a largely Russian team to the north side of Everest last spring had been wounded by Maoist gunfire on their way in a taxi from Kathmandu to the Tibetan border (the rest of his team had gone earlier in a bus escorted by security forces). So instead of travelling to Cho Oyu via Kathmandu, Tom McMillan and teammates flew directly from San Francisco to Beijing and Lhasa.

Furthermore, he did not even use a Nepalese trekking agent to make various arrangements for his party. After his return home, McMillan confessed, "I made a terrible mistake" in employing a Chinese in Urumchi named Guo. "Our trip was a disaster. Mr. Guo did a poor job to organize the trip, and this ruined the trip for everyone." The tents tore apart, and the cooks were totally unaware of hygiene, cooked unappetizing food with too much grease, and when criticized threatened members with knives. Largely because of all this, but also because of illness, the expedition never got above Camp 1. McMillan hopes to return to the mountain in 2007 or 2008 and will certainly use a Nepalese agency next time.

Back on Everest, two summiters' claims to success in Tibet were immediately challenged by climbing circles in their home countries, Malaysia and the Philippines, who declared that they did not produce convincing evidence. In the case of the Malaysian, Ravichandran Tharumalingam, his statements and those of others who knew him during his climb, and a photo he gave as evidence, differed in various details, while doubts raised about the Filipino, Dale Abenojar, centered on the question of whether he was competent enough to have reached the top of the world.

The subject of incompetence arises in connection with others. A compatriot of a Czech woman, Stanislava Ludikova, noted that she had spent much of her time walking around advance base camp. She twice struggled to climb up to Camp 1, taking two days to make a normal one-day climb, but never got higher. "In my opinion, she was not physically prepared" to climb Everest.

Then there is the case of two men from the Gulf state of Bahrain who set out to be the first Arabs to reach the summit of Everest on any Arab's first attempt. Although they had never before been higher than 2000 meters, Adnan Al Jaber and Faraj Al Qassimi arrived in Kathmandu on 20 March to conquer the 8850-meters-high peak. They made a nine-day acclimatization trek—not a technical climb—in Nepal's Everest area at altitudes of 4500 to 5000 meters before going to base camp in Tibet.

When they returned to Kathmandu in mid-April, they would say only that one of them got altitude sickness but they were going back very soon. Instead, they left the area completely. Apparently they reached no higher than an intermediate camp at 5800 meters. They had not been on the mountain long enough to have reached even advance base camp at 6400 meters.

On return to Bahrain, however, they claimed triumphantly to have reached 8500 meters. "We were so close...we could see the Everest peak," Al Jaber is quoted by the *Gulf Daily News* as saying. (One cannot see the summit of Everest from that altitude on the north side.) They gave a chatty interview to the paper, spoke of the

kindly help they had received from the Crown Prince to solicit funds, the training they devised to get in shape, how awesome their first sight of Everest was, how one must have “a 100 percent positive attitude” without which “you might kill yourself,” and how unpleasant their experience was in the mountain’s cold and rarefied atmosphere. But the published interview provided extremely few details of their actual climb, which is not surprising if they did very little.

As usual some Everest summit records were set—but not by Arabs. They included the oldest ever and the first double amputee. Takao Arayama, 70-year-old Japanese, became Everest’s oldest summiter—by precisely three days—on 17 May on the Tibetan side of the mountain.

The first successful double amputee, 46-year-old New Zealander Mark Inglis, had summited two days earlier from the Tibet side. Two single-amputee summiters, each of whom had lost a substantial part of one leg, had been American Tom Whittaker in 1998 and a Sherpa six years later; both climbed from the Nepalese side. The first double amputee to try was an American, Ed Hommer, in the autumn of 2001, but when he had reached 7500 meters, he found that the scar tissue of his left stump had cracked open in the very dry air and was bleeding slightly. He abandoned his climb.

About 25 years ago, Inglis had been marooned in a storm on New Zealand’s highest mountain, Mt. Cook, for two weeks, and his badly frostbitten legs had to be amputated at mid-calf. His cleverly engineered artificial legs have the flexibility to enable him to handle technical climbing, but when he was going down the fixed rope early in his attack on Everest this spring, an anchor pulled out, he did a couple of somersaults and found himself sitting in the snow with one leg lying beside him. He got out some duct tape and did “a field fix,” then descended very carefully to advance base camp; a new leg was brought up to him from base camp, and he went back up.

He said he felt “huge satisfaction” at having summited Everest. “If you are a climber, as I have been all my life,” he said, “the skills are there” already. “My problem is not going up but coming down.” This means, “you have to be very careful; there is far more wear and tear on the stumps.” And indeed he got frostbitten; in his descent to advance base camp on the day after his success, he was lowered by one his guides on his bottom and two days later reached base camp astride a yak. Back in New Zealand his stumps had to be operated on.

The most technically challenging successful climb of the season was the two-way traverse of Annapurna I’s east ridge. When the well known Polish climber, Piotr Pustelnik, organized his four-man team for this task, he was well aware of the difficulties they would confront on the very long summit ridge starting from Glacier Dome in the east and running westwards to Roc Noir and the three over-8000-meter summits of Annapurna—and then back again via the same ridge. But he did not anticipate the addition of two not-so-highly skilled Chinese Tibetans on his permit and the problems one of them would present.

This east ridge is seldom attempted and even more seldom successfully climbed: the Swiss accomplished its first traverse in the autumn of 1984, but they

did not retrace their ridge route in descent. The first two-way traverse was achieved in the spring of 2002 by the French mountaineer Jean-Christophe Lafaille and equally noted Spanish Basque, Alberto Inurrategi. These were the only crossings of the ridge's full length before this year.

Like Lafaille and Inurrategi, Pustelnik's party had no bottled oxygen or Sherpa support. First they acclimatized on Cho Oyu, and then on 6 May went to their base at 4130 meters at the south end of the Annapurna Glacier for their push to the main summit (8091 meters high). After having made three more camps and two bivouacs, three members, Pustelnik, his compatriot Piotr Morawski and Slovakian Peter Hamor, set out on 21 May from their bivouac at 7700 meters for the three summits.

Tagging along with them now was one of the Tibetans, Luo Tse, who had twelve 8000-meter summits to his credit, but all of them were achieved on much bigger teams than his 2006 group of just two members and one Sherpa. He now got stuck at the col between the east and central summits, Pustelnik reported. The route here had become very difficult, and it took hours for the Europeans to find a feasible route down a ramp for 100 meters below the ridge on the northern slope of the central summit. By this time it was 4:00 p.m., but there was no place to stop for a bivouac; it would be necessary to finish their ascent well after nightfall. At this point, Pustelnik realized Luo Tse had become partly snowblinded and badly dehydrated and had no headlamp.

So Hamor went on alone, rejoined the ridge, gained the central and main summits on the 21st and then bivouacked at ten o'clock between the summits while Pustelnik and Morawski had a struggle to get the Tibetan down to their last bivouac at five o'clock the next morning. The Europeans' trials were still not over: by the time they had managed to reach their last fixed camp they had been without food for four or five days and were completely exhausted. They gave no thought to another try for the summit. They went home.

The two Tibetans and their Sherpa stayed on alone, rested and then, they reported, succeeded on their second summit bid in windy and cloudy weather on 4 June. They saw nothing at the top, but Luo Tse was certain they had reached the main summit because he had already seen it from the east summit in his first attempt with Pustelnik.

Another extremely difficult east ridge on an 8000ers is the prominent one in the middle of Everest's Kangshung (east) face in Tibet. An American who had successfully summited the mountain by its standard northern route in the last six successive years, Gheorghe Dijmarescu, got good advance publicity on the internet for his intention to lead a team up his unconquered mysterious "Fantasy Ridge," which turned out to be this east ridge. It is a formidable feature: a steep, crevassed, rock ridge with huge unstable snow mushrooms, a climber's nightmare in a remote area.

It had been seriously attempted only twice. A Japanese team abandoned their spring 1991 climb at just 6400 meters in progress so slow that one member joked they might reach the summit by the end of the year. They decided to stop

before someone had a serious fall or got hit by pieces of the mushrooms that were frequently breaking off. Ten years later, an Indian team unluckily had not a single full day of good weather through-out their five weeks there, with white-out conditions briefly even at base camp, frequent avalanches and few safe places to put camps above 6900 meters, where they gave up.

Dijmarescu had decided not to approach the ridge from the remote Kangshung Glacier at the foot of the east side as the Japanese and Indians had. His team made their base and advance base camps where all expeditions camp for the normal northern route. They first tried climbing the northeast ridge to its junction with the east ridge to study their route looking down it, but heavy snowfall prevented that. Next they went to a low pass, the Raphu La, on the northeast ridge to look from there and saw terrible snow conditions: leaning towers of snow and ice ("it looked like the back of a dinosaur," according to the other American member, Dave Watson), with the top part of the ridge heavily crevassed. They decided it was badly out of condition and much too dangerous. That put an end to that fantasy. They successfully ascended the normal route.

A small Slovenian party accomplished the first ascent of the difficult 7000er, Janak Chuli, known as the Outlier. The mountain, north-northwest of Kangchenjunga on the Tibetan border, had been attempted only once before, by Romanians in 2004. Now Andrej Stremfelj and Rok Zalokar forged a complex route up the south face to the southwest pillar over to the west face and finally around to the northeast ridge and the top on 6 May. The south face presented many wide ice gullies while a number of pitches on the southwest pillar were shaped like the prow of a ship. They climbed the mountain from their advance base at 5715 meters with only one bivouac.

The planned use of performance-enhancing drugs was reported for the first time in the Nepalese Himalaya. The leader, Sven Gangdal, told a member of a Norwegian expedition to Lhotse, Erik Oppegaard, that either he had to leave the team or Gangdal himself would go. Gangdal explained that he had no wish to be responsible for a drug user. Oppegaard left.

A funny thing happened in connection with the first permit issued by the Nepalese ministry of tourism for Mt. Palung Ri to two unsuspecting New Zealanders, Tim Logan and Michael Chapman-Smith, who had selected it because its altitude was what they wanted (just over 7000 meters) and it was, they mistakenly thought, unclimbed. Imagine their surprise when they approached close to their mountain, found a boundary pillar and saw beyond it the numerous tents of Cho Oyu base camp.

So instead they climbed a 6000er definitely inside Nepal called Cho Rapsek and returned to Kathmandu to declare, as Chapman-Smith put it, that it was "morally unacceptable" for the Nepalese government to have granted a permit for a mountain that wasn't theirs. (When in May 2003 the ministry published a new, expanded list of peaks for which it would grant climbing permission, there at No. 226 was Palung Ri for the first time. But Palung Ri is in Tibet, not Nepal; its south ridge is a continuation of a north ridge of Cho Oyu, a border mountain. Even when

it was pointed out to officials soon after the list was released that Palung Ri is actually in another country, it was never deleted.)

A Nepalese government ruling that team leaders found deeply offensive was its classification of human bodies left on a mountain as rubbish. The situation arose in connection with the tourism ministry's refusal to refund the expeditions' \$2000 rubbish deposits because of the bodies of the Czech who died on Lhotse and an Italian who probably fell into a crevasse on Pasang Lhamu Chuli (also known as Jasamba). The Czech's climbing partner, Martin Minarik, was unable to retrieve Pavel Kalny's body and had to leave it, while Hans Kammerlander never found the body of his teammate, Alois Brugger.

Jean-Christophe Lafaille, who pioneered the two-way traverse of Annapurna as mentioned above, tragically disappeared in January while attempting the first solo winter ascent of Makalu. The highest he is known to have reached is 7600 meters, where he pitched his small red tent on the 26th and from which he set out alone for the top early the next morning, as he reported by satellite phone to his wife Katya in France. This was expected to be the first of his reports to her that day.

But he never made contact with her or his base camp staff again. A search of the mountainside on the 4th of February by helicopter by his wife, her brother and Veikka Gustafsson, a Finnish mountaineer who had climbed with Lafaille and knows from his own ascent the climbing route Lafaille was following. They saw only his little tent and no other trace.

Gustafsson thought he knew what had happened. Ten years previously, he himself had climbed the same standard route that Lafaille was following. He had two climbing partners, American Ed Viesturs and a New Zealander, Rob Hall, while he himself led most of the final part to the summit. This section had numerous treacherous crevasses; he fell into three of them but was always belayed and emerged unscathed. Lafaille had no one to belay him, and Gustafsson was sure that the Frenchman fell into one and became fatally wedged against two walls of ice.

Autumn 2006: Shots are Fired Near Cho Oyu Advanced Base Camp

China Initiates Policy to Reduce the Numbers on Everest

Rare Death Toll on “Safe” Ama Dablam

When shots rang out near Cho Oyu’s crowded advance base camp on 30 September, some of the climbers ventured out to see what was going on. A professional photographer from Romania, Sergiu Matei, took his camera along and was in time to film a queue of Tibetans snaking up the trail to the Nangpa La, the high pass into Nepal used every year by hundreds of Tibetans fleeing their homeland to join the Dalai Lama in India. His pictures show a line of unarmed Tibetans trudging uphill when a shot is heard and a figure falls to the ground; behind them can be seen the Chinese border police who had fired at their retreating backs. The figure was a 17-year-old nun, Kelsang Namtso, who had put up no resistance and died where she lay in the snow.

The first official Chinese account said the Tibetans had attacked the armed police, who were then forced to defend themselves, but later her death was officially attributed to altitude sickness. A Czech expedition leader, who witnessed the shooting, Josef Simunek, told a pro-Tibetan organization based in Washington, “We felt as though it was 20 years ago in our country in communist times, when Czech soldiers killed Czech citizens in their escape over the Iron Curtain.”

International publicity about the Nangpa La shooting incident led some journalists to see it as a factor in the Chinese authorities’ decision to place restrictions on teams going to Everest next spring. But the Chinese Mountaineering Association’s formal announcement distributed in November to trekking agencies in Kathmandu made it clear that the cause was actually related to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and China’s plan to take the Olympic torch to the summit of Everest before running it from there live on television in relays to the stadium in Beijing.

“The project of 2008 Olympic Torch Relay on Mt. Qomolangma [Everest] started officially in October of 2006, and the maneuver of [the trial run for] this project will be held in spring 2007,” the announcement explained. “According to the Spirit of Government for guaranteeing this cheering project a complete success, CMA negotiates with CTMA [China Tibet Mountaineering Association] and makes the following agreements to limit the number of climbers in Mt. Qomolangma area in 2007-spring season:

1. Increase the cost of Mt. Qomolangma.
2. Improve the quality of expeditions.
3. The climbing experience of 8000 meters is required for the climber.

Note: the duration of increased cost of Mt. Qomolangma is March 1st to June 1st, 2007.

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation!”

A covering letter from Li Guowei, secretary of CMA's Exchange Department, to one Kathmandu agent says that "we have some temporary measures to limit the climbers in 2007 & 08." But at least part of what is now billed as temporary is expected to become permanent, according to a CTMA official in an interview in December. He estimated that the number of teams in 2007 could be half the number this spring. Asked whether any teams at all besides the official 50-member expedition would be permitted in 2008, he replied, "I don't know."

The official explained that the rules would gradually be tightened in the coming years. Improving the quality would include a requirement in 2007 that climbers have mountaineering skills—which, astonishingly, some do not possess when they arrive at base camp—and be equipped with walkie-talkies and other equipment that would enhance safety. Although he did not expand on this topic, it might also mean in future that agents will no longer be able to simply obtain a climbing permit, to sign up as "team members" a collection of independent climbers who have never met before, who don't even speak a common language, and to provide no leadership responsible for them and their safety; just charge a modest fee, take them to base camp, and say goodbye. It is possible that the tragic death of Britain's David Sharp last May, which attracted much critical attention in the West, may have gotten the attention of the authorities also. Sharp was a "member" of such a collection. He had no walkie-talkie and refused to have a Sherpa helping him: he wanted to climb alone, and so he did—and he died alone. If he were still alive, he might not be able to come back under the new rules.

The requirement that all Everest climbers must have been to 8000 meters in the past would not have disqualified Sharp, but it certainly will disqualify a lot of would-be Everesters, especially those who would normally join a "collection." A significant percentage of the hundreds of people who go each year to nearby Cho Oyu, 8201 meters high, which is the least difficult of all eight thousanders via its standard route, do so as a run-up to an Everest attempt. But many of them turn back before reaching the magic altitude of 8000 meters and thus will not be considered by the CMA and CTMA to be fit to attempt the Tibetan side of Mount Everest.

The rules from 2007 onwards may be a boon to the government of Nepal, which charges a steep fee for climbs on its side of the mountain, and they seem likely to affect the business of a number of Kathmandu trekking agents who have solicited clients for the Tibetan side only. But they will certainly be effective in reducing the crowding at camp sites and at the ladder placed beside the Second Step, and in eliminating the quasi-competent men and women wanting to be able to boast back home that they have climbed to the highest point on earth.

The cost increases in Tibet were spelled out soon after the initial notice. They add \$1000 to the current \$3900 per foreign climber, \$500 more on top of \$1700 per climbing Sherpa, and \$300 more to \$1100 per kitchen staff worker. These rates will still be substantially below Nepal's permit fees, although numerous unexpected charges keep being added on in Tibet.

Ama Dablam climbers Duncan Williams from Southampton, England, and Swedes Mikael Forsberg and Daniel Carlsson, plus their three Sherpas, were asleep in their third and last high camp at 6200 meters at about 5:00 a.m. on 13 November, just before they were due to crawl out of their tents and go for their summit. They probably never knew what hit them. It was a huge mass of ice that broke away above camp 3, swept them hundreds of meters down the mountainside and buried them in a big mound of avalanche debris. One of Williams' teammates reached the camp's site later that day and found only one metal spoon and two pieces of rope that had been fixed but were pulled out by the avalanche.

Before this autumn a total of only 11 climbers had perished on Ama Dablam, the handsome 6812-meters-high mountain near Everest, since its first attempts in the late 1950s. Now half that number died on a single day. This was the first fatal avalanche ever to strike the standard southwest ridge route, which the six men had been following, and only the second fatal avalanche anywhere on the mountain. (The first had been late in the morning of 24 October, 1979, on the dangerous west face and had killed one New Zealander.) Thousands of men and women had safely ascended the southwest ridge; seven had died while climbing it, but six of those had fallen and the other one had succumbed to acute altitude sickness.

Avalanching spelled disaster elsewhere in Nepal's mountains. On Pumori, also near Everest, four Sherpas were killed when hunks of ice rained down on them the day after the Ama Dablam disaster; they were climbing the southeast face, which is fatally avalanche-prone but strangely the standard route chosen for commercial expeditions. In the previous month, a veteran Sherpa, Lhakpa Rita, was fatally hit by an avalanche on Annapurna I. Even before he arrived at his base camp, a Swiss mountaineer, Thomas Nikles, was killed by snow avalanching while he was on his way to Tashi Kang, north of Annapurna. And no one knows how far four Frenchmen got on Ganesh VII, a border mountain north of Kathmandu, because they disappeared. They had taken an inexpensive permit for a trekking peak, Paldor, but continued northward to climb Ganesh VII, which is off limits to climbers; it is about 6550 meters high and had never been attempted before. All of them were buried in an avalanche triggered by a falling serac after they left their camp at 5500 meters for the summit on 27 October.

While three-quarters of this autumn's teams concentrated on just two famous mountains and their well-trodden routes—81 on Cho Oyu and 59 on Ama Dablam—two teams were pioneers and made first ascents of peaks no one ever hears about. Five young Japanese, led by Miss Yoshimi Kato, were the first ever to attempt a 6905-meter mountain in the Manaslu area called Panbari, and they managed to “conquer” it in a three-week effort. Without Sherpas to help them fix 1500 meters of rope (1000 meters of it across numerous crevasses in an icefall from an altitude of 5300 to 5800 meters) they forged a route up the west face to the north ridge. The final ridge challenged them with six steps each 40 meters high; they had no more rope left to fix this section in deep snow, but nevertheless they were able to reach the top on 29 September.

In the northeastern corner of Nepal is a 6344-meters-high mountain called Merra (not to be confused with Mera, a so-called trekking peak near Everest). Two Danes attacked Merra and one, Claus Ostergaard, went to the top via its southeast face to the east-northeast ridge. They too had no Sherpa help; they fixed no rope. In their push to the summit, Ostergaard's teammate, Thejs Ortmann, felt the effects of high altitude and was climbing so slowly that Ostergaard went on ahead and alone reached the top on 18 October. He described the climb as "quite easy" with only one "tricky section," a 20-meter rock slab just below the east summit.

Only a handful of climbers go to Everest in the autumn season because everyone knows that no one succeeds in the short climbing period between the end of the monsoon rains in September and the onset of the fierce jet stream winds in October. The last ascent of Everest in the post-monsoon season was made by a team of Slovenians led by Davo Karnicar, who needed snow and in early October 2000 became the first person ever to descend on skis in one continuous run from the very top of Mount Everest to base camp.

But veteran Himalayan climber Wally Berg, an American living in Canmore, Alberta, Canada, owner of a business that organizes and conducts climbing expeditions, and summiter of Everest four times, felt he knew how to succeed: for a seven-member team, take plenty of supplies (88 oxygen cylinders) and Sherpa helpers (13 climbing Sherpas plus cooks and bottle-washers), go relatively early, get the camps set up and wait for favorable weather to strike for the summit. His plan worked: five members with nine Sherpas were on the summit on 18 October after having out-waited a continuous snowstorm over several days. Three of the summiters skied major parts of their descent but broke their journey to sleep in their highest camp at the South Col. The expedition's members and Sherpas had consumed the contents of 84 oxygen bottles during their six-week effort, and the Sherpas had fixed a total of 3800 meters of rope.

Over on the north side of Everest were three strong and highly experienced Spaniards, Alberto Inurrategi, Ferran Latorre, and Juan Vallejo, who had a total of at least 23 8000-meter summit successes to their credit. They took no Sherpas, no oxygen bottles and no rope to fix on their chosen climbing route up the extremely steep, never-ending north face via the Japanese and Hornbein Couloirs. They were just three men equipped with their mountaineering expertise and motivation.

First they acclimatized by climbing the normal route to the North Col at 7000 meters, then moved over to their camp at the bottom of the north face at 5900 meters. They started their summit push on 30 September, and with three bivouacs they were inside the Hornbein Couloir. Here on 3 October at 8200 meters Latorre stopped, not feeling strong, but his teammates carried on up to 8500 meters, where the Hornbein opens out. Now Vallejo decided his strength was ebbing, and Inurrategi turned back with him, not wanting to continue alone—and "maybe I was beginning to get tired too," he said. They seemed satisfied with what they had accomplished. "We made a good push," Inurrategi commented.