Mount Everest: An Analysis Through the Lens of Death

Kiersten Orning

Department of History and Philosophy

HSTR 467: History of Mountaineering

Dr. Michael Reidy

April 28, 2022

Mount Everest: An Analysis Through the Lens of Death

From the beginning, mountaineering history on Everest has been defined by death. The tallest mountain in the world at 29,032 feet (Cecil and Hunt,1953), it could be argued that most everyone in the world has thought about the concept of climbing Mt. Everest and how dangerous it is. First there was the death of the camp doctor on the first scouting expedition, a year later the deaths of seven Sherpas: Lhakpa, Nurbu, Pasang, Pema, Sange, Dorje, and Remba in an unexpected avalanche at the Khumbu Ice Fall (Ortner 1999). The earliest prominent and shocking deaths included the deaths of climbers Mallory and Irvine and the ongoing discrepancy of whether or not the pair reached the top (Nova, 2000).

A term often used to describe climbers hell-bent on reaching the top of the mountain is "summit fever". but it seems like most who climb Everest have it whether or not they are an experienced climber. Author Sherry Ortner, an anthropologist who focuses on the class divide, says: "Every expedition took place with an awareness of the deaths that had gone before" (Ortner, 1999, p.49).

Everest is not necessarily the most popular mountain to climb, but it is probably the most well-known. Because of its popularity, the mountain was easily commercialized. As time went on and more and more people wanted to reach the tallest place in the world, the notion of wealth, economy-boosting, and simple well-being for Nepalese and Tibetan guides won over the experience of the sublime by traditional alpinists . Since the 1920's, the expertise required for climbing any mountain, especially Everest proved daunting for most. Even with local guides and porters for alpine expeditions, one naturally had to possess a great amount of skill, ability, and common sense to be

successful. Krakauer, a surviving member of the fated 1996 Everest expedition, quotes Michael Kennedy: "To be invited on an Everest expedition was an honor earned only after you served a long apprenticeship on lower peaks, and to actually reach the summit elevated a climber to the upper firmament of mountaineering stardom. (p. 24).

Now, your only requirement (whether you are a talented climber or not) is the ability to pay the hefty fee levied by the Nepalese government to gain a climbing permit and join an expedition crew at the bare minimum (Hillingdon and Fletcher, 2014). With an expedition crew, a member doesn't necessarily even need to have any experience. A traditional, probably sponsored expedition will spend a few weeks in base camp going up and down the first few camps on the mountain to acclimatize to the high altitude before making a final push to the summit on one of the few good days in early summer. Others do the work for the members. Types of expeditions range from National Geographic-sponsored trips to find the bodies of Mallory and Irvine (Nova), scientific research, seven summit attempts (Gatta, n.a.), to 'regular' expeditions where guides and Sherpas meticulously ferry the wealthy to conquer the peak (Harding, 2011). Some expeditions set out with the explicit purpose of setting some kind of record: the first person to summit Everest without bottled oxygen (Byrd, Howell, 2014), the first all-female summit group (Associated Press, 2002), the first person of a certain nationality or race to reach the top of the world. Everest means different things to different people. To some, it is just reaching the top of the world. To others, it can mean representation, fame, competition, or the conquering of a challenge.

Jon Krakauer (1999), a mountaineer with 33 years of experience at the time, was hired by Outside magazine to go to Everest base camp and specifically report on the 'mushrooming

commercialization of the mountain' (p. 26-27), but was able to collect the funds to join a crew and possibly make a summit attempt. Arguably, Krakauer became a part of the commercialization himself (though being an experienced mountaineer), adding to the number of people who do not climb for the thrill of the sublime. He has put up new projects in Alaska, performed solo ascents and brutal ice climbs, and was now "well past [his] climbing prime" (Krakauer, 1999, p. 28). He was going on this trip as a bystander, as an observer of the throngs.

As this pattern of lack of experience trends upward, regular climbers are noticing the absurd and shocking effects of this recreational expansion:

> According to Sherpas and climbers, some of the deaths this year were caused by people getting held up in the long lines on the last 1,000 feet or so of the climb, unable to get up and down fast enough to replenish their oxygen supply. Others were simply not fit enough to be on the mountain in the first place...
>
> Some climbers did not even know how to put on a pair of crampons, clip-on spikes that increase traction on ice, Sherpas said...
>
> The problem hasn't been avalanches, blizzards or high winds. Veteran climbers and industry leaders blame having too many people on the mountain, in general, and too many inexperienced climbers, in particular (Schultz, Gettleman, Mashal and Sharma, 2019).

The zone above 8,000 meters is known among mountaineers as the "Death Zone", but a study performed by John West (1984) in Science went to great lengths to prove why just so many people die above this elevation:

...conducting physiological tests and taking blood samples at different elevations on the mountain. The team lugged an EKG machine and an exercise bike to a camp at 6,300 meters, performing gas-exchange experiments near the summit. It might sound obvious, but the expedition's findings make clear just how badly humans need oxygen. From gas measurements taken on the summit, the team extrapolated oxygen pressure in arterial blood around 28 torr. Normal is around 90, and the climbers used supplemental oxygen to reach the summit. In a desperate attempt to stave off hypoxia, the body involuntarily hyperventilates. Hyperventilation actually raises oxygen pressure in the blood, up to around 35 torr, even as altitude increases. People often pass out when blood oxygen drops below around 37 torr, so climbers without bottled oxygen are right around the cutoff for consciousness throughout the climb. And that's while sitting around—climbing is hard exercise.

And the oxygen deficit is not the only problem. Above 6,500 meters, blood glucose dropped in all the research subjects, suggesting that the body was burning fat and muscle for fuel throughout most of the climb. Indeed, expedition members all lost considerable weight and muscle mass, meaning reduced physical stamina near the summit. The team also performed cognitive tests of climbers at different altitudes, and found a pronounced drop in performance. Climbers were slow to perform simple tasks at high altitudes, while short term memory and learning ability also decreased. Taken together, these are all extreme stresses on the body. The climbers who died used supplementary oxygen, but the oxygen presumably ran out during the extended wait in the cold.

What Everest climbing guides primarily look for as an ideal summit period is a prolonged period of stable weather with the jet far away. This is called "The Window":

> During our four Everest expeditions the window has come every year at about the same time, around the 23rd of May and has lasted for about a week. To find a window, it is valuable to look for the Monsoon starting to move north in the Bay of Bengal. The weather report will tell you when that occurs. This powerful weather system will pressure the jet wind to the north and create a period of perfect weather. Don't wait too long though. As the Monsoon hits the Khumbu valley with heavy snowfalls, you should already be back in Kathmandu. A problem with waiting for the window could be other climbers. Most expeditions schedule their attempt for the 10th of May, and by the 23rd at least half of the expeditions will have returned home. Most commercial expeditions have an end date around the 20th.

The combination of inexperience, long queues, and short weather windows creates the perfect circumstances to succumb to an altitude-related sickness and pass away before it is possible to bring someone to safety.

When people do die on Everest, it can be difficult to remove their bodies. Final repatriation costs tens of thousands of dollars (in some cases, around $70,000) and can also come at a fatal price itself: two Nepalese climbers died trying to recover a body from Everest in 1984 (Ortner, 1999, p. 287). Instead, bodies are often left lying on the mountain, according to Alan Arnette (personal correspondence, 2012), a world-famous climber and experienced mountaineer:

> So it requires multiple Sherpas, they're putting their lives at risk because bad weather could move in, and one of those guys could slip while, not to use the wrong term, while

carrying what's truly dead weight. It's just incredibly physical. It's expensive and it's risky, and it's incredibly dangerous for the Sherpas. What they have to do is reach the body, then they typically put it in some type of a rigging, sometimes a sled but often it's just a piece of fabric. They tie ropes onto that, and then they do a controlled slip of the body in the sled, for lack of a better term, down to the next camp. All of this takes anywhere from six to 10 Sherpas a good part of a day to do a controlled slide of the body. They're letting the body use its own momentum to go down the mountain, but sometimes there are little undulations where they'll kind of have to pull it up. They've occasionally got to cross crevasses or wide cracks, so it requires having to pick up the body. But most of the time the body is just slipping on its own momentum or being pulled along the ice." About the bodies: "They're all over the place. There are people that have fallen into crevasses on the icefall. There are almost no bodies in the Western Cwm and there are none on the Lhotse Face because they just simply slide down into the crevasses. There are none at the South Col, but then you start to get more above between the South Col and the balcony along the southeast ridge, and then from the south summit to the summit.

But honestly I didn't actually see a body on the mountain last year. Most of them have either been pulled off to the side, or they've been covered up with snow, or covered up by rocks or something by other climbers."

Arnette (2015) comments on his experience with this difficulty: "The reason that I'm pretty accurate about all of this is that I helped to bury a teammate on another 8,000-metre mountain earlier in my

career, so I have first-hand experience in moving a body across ice. And in this case we buried him in a crevasse".

Sherpas and other hired help tote personal gear, food, shelter, and miscellaneous survival items up and down with climbers left to bring the basics of survival on their own backs. Hired workers usually perform the most difficult aspect of making the way up the mountain: as it is only accessible by way of a glacier, each season a new route must be established through the icefall to reach the next camp. They fix ropes to the sides of the mountain, attach ladders to cross crevasses, and do their absolute best to make sure no one dies due to any mistakes (Ortner 1999). Sherpas put their own lives literally on the line for other people to have an experience they will never forget, and often die from the effort. Sometimes they are advocated for (Krakauer 2014), but more often than not, become another statistic and name in a story published by the New Yorker:

> On April 18th [2014], shortly before 7 a.m. local time, an overhanging wedge of ice the size of a Beverly Hills mansion broke loose from the same ice bulge that had frightened Brice into leaving Everest in 2012. As it crashed onto the slope below, the ice shattered into truck-size chunks and hurtled toward some fifty climbers laboring slowly upward through the Khumbu Icefall, a jumbled maze of unstable ice towers that looms above the 17,600-foot base camp. The climbers in the line of fire were at approximately nineteen thousand feet when the avalanche struck. Of the twenty-five men hit by the falling ice, sixteen were killed, all of them Nepalis working for guided climbing teams. Three of the bodies were buried beneath the frozen debris and may never be found.

Whether or not a body in question was removed or covered up, there was a point in time where their presence had a huge impact on climbers and admirers of the mountain journey. Sources differ, but out of the approximately 300 people who have died on the mountain, Arnette (May 25, 2012, personal communication) estimates that there are approximately 200 bodies that have not been recovered from the slopes. Some of these bodies are known as "landmarks" due to their proximity along the main route up to the summit.

At the altitude of 8,500 meters lays the body of an officially unidentified climber known as "Green Boots". He lies on his left side under the protection of a shallow overhang with his arms frozen around his torso to fight off the bitter wind and cold he succumbed to more than twenty years ago. As climbers pass his body, they will notice and possibly even step over his neon-green mountaineering boots that stretch partway into the path.

The climber is believed to be a man named Tsewang Paljor, who lost his life at age 28 in the 1996 storm immortalized by Krakauer's aforementioned novel. He is known by more people now than he was while alive: "About 80% of people also take a rest at the shelter where Green Boots is, and it's hard to miss the person lying there," (N. Hanna, personal communication, 2015) "I would say that really everybody, especially those climbing on the north side, knows about Green Boots or has read about Green Boots or has heard somebody else talking about Green Boots." Still, climbers proceed, knowing what awaits them at that altitude.

Even as a morbid reminder of the fleeting nature of life above 8,000 meters, "Green Boot's" body is commonplace and even expected by veteran Everest-goers.

David Sharp had been attempting to summit the mountain in 2006 with minimal oxygen and no guide or Sherpas. Stopping to rest after reaching or almost reaching the summit (no one knows for sure) in "Green Boot's Cave", he eventually succumbed to hypothermia or cerebral edema brought on by the extreme altitude. Dozens of climbers passed Sharp's body on the way to and from the summit, with only a few noticing he was still alive and seeing if they could help or at the very least sit with him for a few precious moments before their own oxygen ran out and they had to continue down (Douglas, 2006). His body remained with the body of "Green Boots" for approximately a year before it was buried (moved out of sight) by climber Woodall O'Dowd upon request of the family (Tweedie, 2007).

O'Dowd also took the responsibility of burying Francys Arsentiev, who died upon descent after becoming the first American woman to summit Everest without supplemental oxygen (Tweedie). He and his wife came across 'Fran' in 1998, sacrificing their own chance for the summit to stay with her until they feared for their own safety and had to leave her on her own for her final moments. They described her face as "frost-bitten, but not in the way one thinks. It was a waxy, white and incredibly smooth look, like Sleeping Beauty. It made her look much younger than she was" (Tweedie). Arsentiev died at the age of forty, leaving both her ten-year-old son and husband behind.

One thing strikingly obvious in the three stories–all of which come up in a simple Google search of 'dead bodies on Everest', is the absence of well-known Sherpa bodies. These three people at the very least have news articles about them, or the very presence of their bodies might generate so much interest that British Broadcasting Corporation journalists will travel to India to talk to their families and snag an exclusive interview (Nuwer, 2015). Death count between Sherpas and expedition 'members' have a high rate of correlation, especially considering how Everest is considered one of the

'safer' mountains to climb in the Himalayan range with the least percent of climbers killed above base camp (Butcher, 2019).

There are, of course, bodies of expedition guides and Sherpas present on the mountain. The most obvious reason why no one revels in the morbidity of the circumstances of their death is that most people just don't care whether anyone is dead or alive. Krakauer (1997) describes his first experience encountering bodies on Everest:

> "The first body had left me badly shaken for several hours; the shock of encountering the second wore off almost immediately. Few of the climbers trudging by had given either corpse more than a passing glance. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend that these desiccated remains weren't real–as if none of us dared to acknowledge what was at stake here" (p. 111).

Hannelore Schmatz, a climber who passed while descending from the summit as the fourth woman in the world to do so in 1978, was treated like a good luck charm, with climbers leaving their empty oxygen tanks around her, and even patting her head. More than a decade later, a Nepali and Sherpa climber died trying to bring the woman's body down after her husband paid for the recovery (Ortner, 1999, p. 287).

On the mountain at the same time as Schmatz's expedition, there was a French expedition during which two Sherpas died. Stacey Allison (personal communication, 1988) wrote about the harsh disposal of the bodies off the mountain and the reaction of the Sherpas helping her expedition party:

> [The Sherpas] knew it was a body, and they watched open-mouthed, saw it falling like a comet past them, down past the *bergschrund* [A giant crevasse] and then onto the flat surface of the cwm, where it somersaulted, cartwheeled, then rolled to a stop.
>
> When he leaned over the body, Steve knew the Sherpa had been dead for at least twelve hours. He was frozen solid. Someone, it appeared, must have thrown him down on purpose... Next to him the Sherpas were crossing and uncrossing their arms, their faces gloomy and clouded. No one, they knew, would ever throw a white climber's body down the Lhotse face (p. 287).

Most Sherpas are immortalized through either 'acts of service' or honor on the mountain: usually often summitting multiple times or putting their own lives in danger to support the members of the expeditions. In the case of Hannelore Schmatz, Sundare Sherpa became well-known in the Himilayan world because of his empathy, taking on the responsibility of supporting her as far down the mountain they could go while foregoing his own supplementary oxygen. Giving up his oxygen and his chance to get to a safer part of the mountain cost him fingers, toes, and almost his life. Before his death, he summited Everest four more times, yet he is known to most as the Sherpa who stayed with Hannelore until she died.

Mount Everest is the roof of the world, where people will continue to flock after hearing that with a guide and some Sherpas to carry your belongings, anyone can climb to the highest point on Earth–after paying a small fee, of course. Bodies will continue to gather on the slopes and appear with more frequency now that so much snow is melting both above and below the "death zone" (Sharma and Schultz, 2019). No statistics, climbing ethical practices, or bodies you have to physically step over

will stop some of even the most passionate and down-to-earth alpinists achieve this bourgeois bucket-list item.

References

A.A. (2019, May 28). What “summit fever” and the spike in deaths on Mount Everest can teach you about the dark side of goals. Business Insider Nederland. https://www.businessinsider.nl/summit-fever-mountain-death-bad-decisions-company-2019-5?international=true&r=US

Byrd, D. (2017, May 5). Today in science: Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen | Earth | EarthSky. EarthSky | Updates on Your Cosmos and World. https://earthsky.org/earth/this-date-in-science-mount-everest-without-supplemental-oxygen/#:%7E:text=Today%20science%3A%20Mount%20Everest%20without%20supplemental%20oxygen&text=Reinhold%20Messner%20(left)%20and%20Peter,Mount%20Everest%20without%20supplemental%20oxygen.

Everest 2006: The investigation into the death of David Sharp: The Turkish Expedition speaks in detail. (n.d.). Everest News. http://www.everestnews.com/everest2006/davidsharp07272006.htm

Everett Herald. (2002, May 19). All-female Everest team thwarted. HeraldNet.Com. https://www.heraldnet.com/news/all-female-everest-team-thwarted/

Harding, L. (2011). Everest’s decline blamed on trail of rich tourists | Guardian Weekly | guardian.co.uk. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/guardianweekly/story/0,12674,961195,00.html

Hillingdon, A., & Fletcher, J. (2014, April 25). On Everest, climbers pay to take risks while Sherpas take risks to get paid. The Conversation.

https://theconversation.com/on-everest-climbers-pay-to-take-risks-while-sherpas-take-risks-to-get-paid-25951

Krakauer, J. (1998). Into Thin Air. Van Haren Publishing.

Krakauer, J. (2014, April 21). Death and Anger on Everest. The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/death-and-anger-on-everest

MacDonald, J. (2019, July 8). Mount Everest's Death Zone. JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/mount-everests-death-zone/

Mount Everest | Height, Location, Map, Facts, Climbers, & Deaths. (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/place/Mount-Everest

Mount Everest Climbing Ethics | OutsideOnline.com. (n.d.). Outside Online. https://web.archive.org/web/20100912163732/http://outsideonline.com/outside/destinations/20060 9/mount-everest-climbing-ethics-1.html

NOVA Online | Lost on Everest | The Day Mallory Was Found. (1999). NOVA. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/everest/lost/search/day.html

Nuwer, R. (2015, October 8). The tragic tale of Mt Everest's most famous dead body. BBC Future. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20151008-the-tragic-story-of-mt-everests-most-famous-dead-body

Ortner, S. B. (2001). Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering (Revised ed.). Princeton University Press.

Pokhrel, C. R. (2021, August 2). Sungdare Sherpa - The First Man Who Climbed Mt Everest Five Times. Everest Today. https://everesttoday.blog/sungdare-sherpa-the-first-man-who-climbed-mt-everest-five-times/

Schultz, K., Gettleman, J., Mashal, M., & Sharma, B. (2021, May 13). 'It Was Like a Zoo': Death on an Unruly, Overcrowded Everest. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/26/world/asia/mount-everest-deaths.html#:%7E:text=According%20to%20Sherpas%20and%20climbers,mountain%20in%20the%20first%20place.

Sharma, B., & Schultz, K. (2021, May 5). As Everest Melts, Bodies Are Emerging From the Ice. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/sports/everest-bodies-global-warming.html

Tweedie, N. (2007, May 6). Peace at last for Sleeping Beauty. The Age. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from https://www.theage.com.au/world/peace-at-last-for-sleeping-beauty-20070506-ge4tpo.html?page=fullpage

What happens to your body in Mount Everest's "Death Zone," where 11 people have died in the past week. (2019, May 28). Business Insider Nederland. https://www.businessinsider.nl/mount-everest-death-zone-what-happens-to-body-2019-5?international=true&r=US