

# Peak Freaks



On his eighth attempt, Nelson-based Himalayan guide Tim Rippel finally tops out on Everest. But even though the stars seemed to align, the world's highest mountain handed his team the ultimate test

By Steve Ogle

IT'S AN ALL-NIGHTER of epic proportions. Before the birds start to sing on the morning of May 21, 2008, Becky Rippel is working on her sixth coffee, simultaneously typing an email, monitoring MSN and talking on the phone. Of course, this is nothing out of the ordinary in a mountain town: irregular hours, global networking, home office. It's late May and nothing crazy's happening—unless you're coordinating a guided climb of the world's highest mountain. Tonight, while the sun is setting over the Himalayas, Becky Rippel is 20 kilometres outside of Nelson, BC, in her home office, which is draped with the standard Tibetan prayer flags, and a faded business sign out front that reads: Peak Freaks Expeditions.

"I can't talk to you right now!" She's got her husband Tim via sat-phone halfway around the globe. Apparently, proverbial shit is hitting the fan. Tim's tone is not one a Kootenay mom would normally tolerate, but Becky is stoic. "Tim, you can't stay up there.

Don't be a Rob Hall," referring to the New Zealand guide who died tragically in 1996, refusing to abandon his client in a notorious storm. Tim Rippel, husband and parent, mutters something to his wife about getting a sleeping bag up from camp four to his location in Mount Everest's high-altitude Death Zone. Then the phone goes dead.

The Rippels first shacked up together in the 1980s, in a cabin at the base of Powder King Mountain Resort outside of Mackenzie, British Columbia, where Tim worked as head ski patroller. Becky learned that her new husband's capacity to lure other skiers on early morning summit bids was a budding formula for a guiding business. Peak Freaks was conceived and relocated to the Kootenays,

where Tim worked as a heli-ski guide to help recover costs between expeditions, while Becky dealt with the marketing burden. It wasn't all rosy, but resilience brought them through it. Seventeen years and seven Everest attempts later, in early spring 2008, Tim kissed his wife goodbye and left for Kathmandu.

When it came to high-altitude guiding before 2008, the light-hearted mountaineer was plagued with everything one could imagine: injuries, politics and the sheer magnitude of Everest itself. While guiding for another company in 1997, Tim and a team member made it to within 86 metres of the summit before high winds ripped a cornice off the ridge in front of them, forcing them to retreat. Five other climbs were called off for client safety purposes or corporate debacles. Cryptically, the 2008 bid was nearly canned when the Chinese government closed the entire mountain to parade the Olympic torch to the summit.

Before this attempt, Tim had never lost a client—a surprisingly rare statistic for the Himalayas that Becky attributes to her husband's impeccable safety habits. Tim constantly reinforces the motto: The Summit Is Optional. Getting Home Is Mandatory. His Sherpa friends respect this mentality. They are people who, according to Becky, are astounded that Tim chooses a life of leading clients not

by necessity, but by choice. His enthusiasm for the mountains has often resulted in eruptive laughter from students who see him enter the class wearing a full spacesuit and oxygen mask. It belies the seriousness of the actual climb.

Since Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary first ascended Mount Everest in May 1953, 183 climbers have lost their lives on the mountain. In his later years, Hillary cited that climbing had become too commercialized, especially in the wake of the 1996 tragedies that left 15 bodies on the mountain, including guides Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. Later that season, unsupported solo climber David Sharp was bypassed by no less than 40 ascending climbers while he huddled in distress beneath a rock outcrop just below the summit. Only one party bothered to stop, feeling that a rescue at such an altitude would be futile. One of these climbers later justified the abandonment: "At 8,500 metres, it's extremely

difficult to keep yourself alive, let alone anyone else." Sharp died on the mountain.

Too often, these overzealous and fatigued climbers press onward when their turnaround time has expired. Peak Freaks' clients pay upwards of \$35,000 for an Everest bid, which includes, among the usual permits and services, a unique rescue support system of dedicated Sherpas who wait at lower camps in the event of an emergency. At 8,000 metres above sea level, however, rescue is indeed improbable. In the Death Zone, where decision-making is foggy at best, cerebral edema—a frequently fatal high altitude sickness—can manifest rapidly. An extended stay at this altitude can result in the deterioration of bodily functions, loss of consciousness and eventually, death.

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Left: The view from the top and the throngs who will risk life and limb to get there. Above: Two of Tim Rippel's Peak Freaks expedition Sherpas lower a barely conscious and sometimes combative Al Ismaili down from Everest's Death Zone. Photos: Michael Scott Mortensen

SULTAN AL ISMAILI yearned to be the first Omani national to attempt Everest when he applied to join the Peak Freaks 2008 expedition. Pre-screened by a detail-oriented Becky, Al Ismaili's climbing résumé wasn't as impressive as his financial portfolio; however, this is nothing new for an aspiring Everest climber seeking guided service. The 32-year-old policeman was privy to all the information on the importance of not pushing beyond his personal abilities at summit time, and he proved increasingly capable in the weeks leading up to summit day, being dubbed the "Omani of Steel" by teammates.

Beginning at 10 p.m. on the evening of May 20, Al Ismaili joined a record 75 other climbers departing camp four—more than double the number during the ill-fated 1996 summit march. These numbers did nothing to facilitate his ascent on the fixed ropes. Other teammates moved faster, faring much better in the ideal weather conditions. Above 8,000 metres, however, Al Ismaili slowly fell behind the other team members, despite being guided by a personal Sherpa. Plodding arduously throughout the night, five of six Peak Freaks clients eventually topped out on the roof of the world.

Becky, who continues to monitor the climb via Tim's sat-phone checks, is optimistic. On her husband's eighth visit to Everest, the



Clockwise from top left: The Peak Freaks 2008 Everest Expedition Team. A resuscitated and rescued Al Ismaili arrives at base camp under Sherpa assistance. A record 76 climbers on Everest's summit ridge, May 21, 2008. Photos: Tim Rippel



## DECLINING ANY SORT OF HELP AND INSISTING HE CAN MAKE IT TO THE TOP, THE OMANI KICKS AT TIM'S DOWN SUIT, SENDING FEATHERS OVER THE EDGE OF THE 3,000-METRE KANGSHUNG FACE.

stars finally seem to have aligned. Around 1 p.m. the Rippels finally achieve their dream when the Peak Freaks leader accompanies one of his American clients to the summit. Obligatory photos are snapped and the phone comes out to update Becky with the news. Three other teammates are already descending, and two are in tow. Indirectly, Tim learns through his wife's correspondence that one of the trailing clients approaching the top has reportedly passed a struggling Al Ismaili, who, despite earlier assurances that he was descending, continues to stumble upward. Rippel points his crampons down the mountain, shortly encountering clients Scott Mortensen and Larry Williams who are stalled in the lineup of climbers descending the mellow summit ridge. As if he's walking downtown running errands, Tim suddenly stops and pulls out a

ringing phone from the pocket of his down jacket.

On the other end is Al Ismaili—he's dehydrated and still near the South Summit around 8,800 metres. Tim tells him to borrow water and head down immediately, and that he will be there shortly to help with the descent. This prospect, unfortunately, will not be as easy as planned.

When he reaches Al Ismaili at 2 p.m., Tim, who has already been climbing for 14 hours, finds his overwrought client unable to move. Declining any sort of help and insisting he can make it to the top, the Omani kicks at Tim's down suit, sending feathers over the edge of the 3,000-metre Kangshung Face. At one point, he even throws a rock at Tim's head. Soon, however, Al Ismaili's struggle ends when he loses consciousness.

"Larry! Go down and cut that rope!" orders Tim Rippel. Rescue mode kicks in, with the already exhausted guide shouting orders to his other clients and Sherpas to help bring the man down. He quickly rigs a prussic system from old fixed rope to lower the victim. Periodically Al Ismaili awakens, kicking and screaming, saying that he wants to die, requiring Rippel to use more rope to subdue the man. Soon the extreme behaviour tilts toward the worst-case scenario—he stops breathing.

In Nelson, Becky is drinking straight from the coffee pot. She has definitely hit the fan. She cuts all other communications in order to focus on the rescue, but the satellite signal is sketchy. She learns that Tim has resorted to fist-hammering on Al Ismaili's chest in hopes of stimulating a heartbeat, regardless of whether it was his heart that stopped or not. In any case, it works and they begin lowering the gasping, still combative victim on a rope system toward camp four, nearly 1,000 metres below.

While muscling the broken Al Ismaili, Tim continues to delegate tasks. He sends Williams and Mortensen down to camp four to get more oxygen and calls in for Sherpa support. Mortensen, upon arriving, offers reward money to other teams to rouse rescue support but nobody answers. Soon, it's only Tim and three Sherpas dragging Al Ismaili down to camp four, inch by inch. Soon, the Sherpas abandon the effort, remarking that if the man wants to die, why not allow him the privilege.

Becky manages one last connection to her husband before the phones stop working altogether. Tim has just radioed for a sleeping bag and stove to be brought up to their location. This is the last she hears for 12 hours; it's now 4 a.m. on May 22. Her husband is out of oxygen and has been in the Death Zone for nearly 36 hours. Stretched to the absolute limit, he has no choice but to anchor his client to the ridge, bundle him up and descend to camp. Al Ismaili, left to rest on the southeast ridge of Everest, lay only metres away from the body of Scott Fischer, left for dead 12 years earlier.

Only minutes after collapsing in his tent, Tim Rippel is informed by a Sherpa, who just descended past Al Ismaili, that his client is dead.

"IN OUR EXPEDITION there was never any likelihood whatsoever if one member of the party was incapacitated that we would just leave him to die," said Sir Edmund Hillary, before he passed on earlier this year at the age of 88. Although familiar with the turmoil a mountaineer must endure on Everest's flanks, Hillary never found himself faced with such a grave decision at a time when he could barely think straight, let alone carry a man on his back. At the very least, the respect he garnered, both on and off the mountain, instilled such solidarity among his fellow climbers that help would have arrived if summoned.

At 7 a.m. on May 22, a distraught Tim Rippel unzips his tent at Everest's high camp, ready to climb again, but is quickly alerted to a group descending the southeast ridge not far above camp. Two Sherpas are escorting down the familiar figure of Sultan Al Ismaili who, amazingly, is walking on his own accord. Awash with astonishment and relief, Tim runs to lend a hand. He jokes to the surrounding crowd that not only is he happy because his client is back from the dead but also because he doesn't have to go back up and get him.

In the following weeks, Al Ismaili ends up losing a couple of fingertips to frostbite but is otherwise healthy and grateful. Tim Rippel, the mountaineer and grandfather, returned home to Nelson, suffering little impact from oxygen deprivation. □

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