

**Seasonal Stories
for
the Nepalese Himalaya**

2014

by Elizabeth Hawley

Spring 2014: The Largest Fatal Disaster on Everest Followed by an Unprecedented Strike by Sherpas Effectively Shuts Down Nepalese side of Everest and Lhotse to All Climbers

Two Defiant Women Climb on Everest and Lhotse Anyway And Introduce a New Method of Scaling Them

Just one subject overwhelmingly dominated this season's climbing scene: Everest's disastrous avalanche followed by the so-called Sherpa strike. A sub-topic was the newly developed method of coping with the Sherpa strike and the retreat of Sherpas maintaining the route through the Icefall, by flying over it.

The Avalanche

At 6:30 a.m. on 18 April a massive serac broke off high on Everest's west shoulder on the left side of the Icefall and came charging down at great speed to strike with great force and killed 16 Sherpas carrying loads of their teams' gear up from base camp. The route they were following was considered by several leaders who bring clients to Everest every year to be too close to the left, but the "icefall doctors," who forge the route and install fixed ropes and ladders, kept to the habit of moving to the left side rather than making a new route in the middle, away from avalanches on the right from Nuptse as well.

On the fatal morning, a problem with one of the ladders along the route caused a traffic jam at that point, exposing an unusual number of Sherpas to the avalanche; normally not so many Sherpas would have been bunched together. No foreign climbers were in the area at the time, but probably there were altogether 150 Sherpas in the Icefall.

Despite universal shock from the disaster, the largest in Everest's climbing history, a huge effort immediately began to rescue the trapped Sherpas, to dig out and care for those who were still alive and to honour the deceased. Climbers and Sherpas from a number of expeditions pitched in to hasten the search for the living and the dead. Helicopters with long lines dangling down shuttled up and down to rush the living to an emergency hospital established at base camp by the Himalayan Rescue Association, and to lift out of the Icefall the bodies of the dead. (Three bodies were so deeply buried that they were never located.)

The Strike

Some Sherpas whose homes and families were in villages not far from base camp went home during the next few days. Soon after their return a meeting was held at base camp by various leaders and Sherpas and a petition was drawn up demanding that the government improve Sherpas' pay and insurance and other rules changes. A small group of perhaps five Sherpas emerged as the most vocal malcontents; it is notable that none of these fierce agitators was from Khumbu. Some of the largest commercial expedition organizers, International Mountain Guides and Himalayan Experience, employ only Khumbu Sherpas.

Of this handful of agitators, two who were the most forceful: one was part of the British Jagged Globe team, 29-year-old Pasang Tenzing, from Beding, who had summited Everest nine times and Cho Oyu twice. The other was Pasang Bhote, 28, from Chepuwa, Makalu, summiter of Everest three times and Cho Oyu twice.

The two ringleaders were already known as troublemakers. After a fatal avalanche on Manaslu struck 10 members and one Sherpa in the autumn of 2012, they led about 50 Sherpas to base camp and demanded that all teams stop climbing. They were not obeyed. The following spring of 2013 the two were back at Everest-Lhotse base camp; while Sherpas were nervously fixing ropes on the west face of Lhotse, Pasang Tenzing spent the day making disparaging comments over the radio to the rope-fixing team.

This was not at all helpful as a volatile situation developed involving Ueli Steck of Switzerland, Simone Moro from Italy, and a British photographer, Jonathan Griffin. The three foreigners had placed gear at the site of their camp above the area where the rope-fixers were working and were now trying to return to their cache. When they were told to get away from the rope-fixers' route, Moro, who knew how to swear fluently in Nepali and had an excitable temperament, twice used unacceptable language about the Sherpas and their parentage on the fixers' open radio frequency which just about all the teams were tuned into. This made not only the fixers but also many of the other Sherpas on the mountain furious. A fight broke out in which Steck and Moro were slightly injured by a cluster of hot-headed young Sherpas, and in their midst were Pasang Tenzing and Pasang Bhote. Moro and Steck were given an ultimatum to get off the mountain immediately and threatened with death if they returned to their climb. They and Griffin quickly left for home.

This spring after the Icefall tragedy, the agitators declared that no one should now climb Everest. They backed this up with the threat that anyone who returned to the mountain would have his arms and legs broken and his home burned down. One team had already decided not to continue their climb out of respect for their three dead Sherpas, but most teams wanted to climb the mountain for which they had invested considerable amounts of money, time and hope, and their Sherpas were willing, although one leader said he read in their eyes and their body language a considerable reluctance to do so. (Several teams, forced to abort their Everest climbs on the south side, sought to change over to the Tibetan side, but they were refused permission by the Chinese authorities citing security reasons.)

The two Pasangs' threat was extremely effective, not only for the Nepalese side of Everest, but for contiguous Mt. Lhotse as well. The leaders of 65 Everest teams and 10 teams for Lhotse declared that their programs were cancelled. This meant that members and Sherpas of 65 expeditions were unable to even try; the members had either never gotten above base camp or, in one case, moved only to the very start of the Icefall, while Sherpa load-carriers had made a few carries to Camp 1 and Camp 2. Everyone for the Nepalese side of Everest (and for Lhotse) went home. That is, everyone except two defiant women who went up Everest and Lhotse with a few Sherpas despite the ban.

On the north side of Everest, the successful summiters included a 72-year-old retired American lawyer, Bill Burke, and an Indian student, Miss Malavath Poorna, aged 13 years and 349 days, the youngest-ever female summiter. (The youngest male was an American 13 years and 314 days old in 2010.) At least eight other teams also were successful while about nine more were not. By comparison, on Nepal's south side altogether one member and three Sherpas climbed to the top, while no one summited Lhotse.

The Defiant Ladies

One of the defiant ladies was Mrs. Jing Wang, a 39-year-old successful businesswoman from Beijing and a member of the Himalayan Experience South Col expedition led by Russell Brice. He cancelled the climbing program because of the Pasangs' threats. But Mrs. Wang was nearing the conclusion of her "9+2 Project," with the goal of scaling the highest points on the world's seven continents plus two also-rans, Kosciuszko and Mont Blanc, plus "trekking to the tips of both Poles."

By early May, she had just two mountains still to climb, Everest and Denali/McKinley. She was determined to climb Everest now. She applied for permission to climb from the Tibetan side, but the Chinese authorities turned her down: "in order to guarantee the safety of climbers, they are not going to permit any individual to climb Everest from the northern slope this year," she was told. But, she explained, "I really didn't want to just give it up so close to finish, so I tried one more time on the south side."

When Russell Brice said it was not possible to go back to base camp and continue to climb, she "found friends in Nepal and asked him [sic] to help me plan it out. ... My Sherpas and I considered the question of safety in full magnitude... The organizer and the Sherpas assured me they would make sure there's no conflict between the Sherpas, and I won't need to worry about this. My

English is not that good, so pretty much everything off the mountain was taken care of by my Nepalese friends. I trust them completely.” Her newfound friend, the organizer, Phurba Gyalzen, the boss of a minor trekking agency, Himalayan Sherpa Adventure, delivered on his promise to her of a smooth trip up and down the mountain. No doubt she made good use of her great wealth: there were reports that she paid Rs. 300,000 (over \$3000) to each climbing Sherpa.

That ascent, in her telling, went without a hitch. She was in base camp on 7 May, about ten days after she had participated in an acclimatization climb with Brice’s team on a nearby mountain, and not long after the seven ascents throughout her Project. On 10 May she flew to her Camp 2 in the Western Cwm. On the 16th she slept in her Camp 3 one night and then descended to the lower camp; she returned to Camp 3 on the 21st for a one night stay before climbing up to her highest camp, Camp 4 on the South Col. Here she rested (but did not sleep) until midnight while four of her Sherpas went ahead to fix the final section of the route.

On the morning of her summit day, 23 May, she used her satellite phone to check the weather forecast, which was that “the 23rd was a good day and the morning of the 24th also had good weather.” So at about 6:00 a.m. that day, she and her fifth climbing Sherpa set out for the top. Twelve and a half hours later, according to her account, Mrs. Jing Wang from Beijing and three Sherpa from Nepal stood at the summit of Everest.

In dramatic contrast to normal times, they were almost entirely alone. Where there should have been hundreds of climbers trudging up and down the mountain, grabbing the best camp sites and causing traffic jams, not a soul was to be found between base camp and the summit except for the other defiant lady, Cleo Weidlich from California, with her one Sherpa aiming for the summit of Lhotse.

Mrs. Wang had needed only thirteen days to go from base camp to the summit. She had the important help of five experienced Sherpas. They used ropes fixed by others in an earlier season from the west face of Lhotse to the South Col and to “the area around” the South Summit, from where her men installed new ropes.

Their being all alone she found “drastically different from the previous two experiences” when she had climbed in Nepal. “Because there were no footprints left from previous climbers, this increased the difficulty exponentially. [In addition,] there were more exposed boulders along the way; especially from Camp 2 [in the Cwm] you can see a big difference: [on] many parts of the path you can actually see stones whereas in previous years it was completely covered in snow; on [the west face of] Lhotse [on the route to Everest] it was nearly all ice, very difficult for climbing.”

Since “the climb was incredibly difficult,” she and her Sherpas went on oxygen around Camp 3 at 7400m on the Lhotse face and continued to use it till their descent to somewhere near the bottom of the face.

Mrs. Wang wasted no time in her departure from an Everest very nearly devoid of camps and climbers. She returned to her South Col camp from the summit at 11:00 p.m. on 23 May. By noon on the 24th, the entire team, including two Sherpa cooks, was down in Camp 2 in the Cwm, and by the morning of the 25th all of the team and their baggage were in base camp. Mrs. Wang flew back to Kathmandu in the afternoon of the 26th and left Nepal for Alaska and her last mountain that same evening.

After summiting Denali in Alaska she returned to Kathmandu briefly to attend a congratulatory ceremony at which she was honoured as the International Mountaineer of the Year 2014 (despite the fact that the year was only half over) by Gontabya Nepal Publications, Kamaladi. A statuette and framed letter of appreciation were presented to her by a top leader of the UCPN (Maoist) party, Posta Bahadur Bogati.

The letter of appreciation read: “Gontabya Nepal takes a great pride in honouring you with this title as ‘International Mountaineer of the Year 2014’ for your grand success in summiting Mt. Everest alone [ignoring the Sherpas who summited with her] in the spring of 2014 and also for completing successful ascent of all seven Himalayan [sic] peaks of seven continents in the shortest possible time frame. Your grand achievement of historic climbing of Mt. Everest played an essential and remarkable role in the promoting of Nepalese mountaineering tourism industry around the globe. This organization highly values your phenomenal contribution and so felicitates you for your entire noble and awe-inspiring endeavour.”

Mrs. Wang was also felicitated at another function on the same day in Kathmandu organized by Mahendra Jyoti Students' Forum (Mahendra Jyoti is a school in Chaurikharka, Solu) and Pharak Sherpas' club (Pharak is a village in Solu) at which the Speaker of the Constituent Assembly (Nepal's temporary legislature) presented her with a framed laudatory letter. But contrary to news items published after her summit success, she did not receive any special award from the Nepalese government. Her Sherpas received on her behalf in her absence just the standard official certificate provided to all summiters, but this document signified that the tourism ministry recognized and thus approved of her ascent.

However the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal was reported to be investigating her chartered helicopter flights to carry her, her Sherpas and her baggage from BC up to Camp 2 and later back from Camp 2 to BC, whereas it has been understood that choppers are supposed to fly above BC only on rescue missions. There were claims that more than a dozen flights were operated for her; she acknowledged a total of two for herself.

Cleo Weidlich's Lhotse Attempt

In the meantime the other defiant lady, Ms. Cleo Weidlich, had made her own bid to scale Everest's contiguous neighbour, Lhotse, with one Sherpa, Pema Tshering, who had been with her on previous climbs. But on the same day that Mrs. Wang reached her summit, Ms. Weidlich abandoned her attempt to scale Lhotse.

Until she arrived at base camp on 28 April, she had known nothing about the Icefall disaster and the Sherpa strike. But she learned about it in a dramatic fashion: on their arrival, her Sherpa was threatened with broken limbs and a destroyed home. The next day Pema Tshering talked with the SPCC, the group that provides the Sherpas who keeps the Icefall route open, and then he left, presumably after he had been told that the route would not be maintained.

On 30 April Cleo went alone through the Icefall (with ladders still in place) to Camp 1, where she left some gear. A day later, she returned to BC. That same day the ladders were removed.

A very angry Cleo posted a defiant statement on Facebook. "This is just to let you know that my climb on the Everest massif will continue with or without ladders. I have climbed some of the world's most dangerous mountains WITHOUT them and this mountain is, actually, very tame compared with the likes of Nanga Parbat, Annapurna I and Kangchenjunga. I refuse to give in to the pressures of the Everest mafia. I'd like to decide for myself when I have reached my limits."

So on May 2 at 1:00 a.m., Cleo packed up and called up Fishtail Helicopters to fly her from Gorakshep up to Camp 1 to collect her gear and the same chopper then flew her, still alone, to Camp 2 in the Western Cwm.

On the 3rd, she searched for a route to the bergschrund, the major crevasse between the floor of the Cwm and the bottom of the Lhotse face, and on the 4th and the 5th she managed to make her way to the bergschrund past crevasses and an ice ridge by using old ropes still in place from previous expeditions.

Next she began to reconnoitre Lhotse's west face. Meanwhile the American embassy became aware of the fact that one of its citizens was attempting all alone to climb Lhotse against the wishes of the Sherpa boycott organizers and asked Fishtail Helicopters about her. A few days later, Fishtail flew Pema to Camp 2, where he joined Cleo on 12 May.

Mrs. Wang reported only one encounter with Cleo: Mrs. Wang's Sherpas told her that Cleo came to her team's cook tent to ask them to help her fix the route to Lhotse's summit. They refused. "I saw her camp at that time; it was already ragged from wind blowing and wearing it down. We thought there was no one inside, but later on the Sherpas checked the tents, and her Sherpa and she were inside. We were quite concerned that her tent would be blown away by the wind. The next morning she departed first; when we passed her later on, we exchanged few words, 'be safe kind' of thing, not a lot of communication."

On 14 May, Cleo and Pema managed to establish Camp 3 on the Lhotse face with the aid of some old Chinese ropes. The next day Pema fell into one of the many crevasses on the face, but he was not injured, and they continued on up. On the 17th, they were at about 8000m on the face, the highest point they ever managed to reach, and set about digging a platform for their tent for Camp 4.

(During the digging, they found a body she believed to be that of a Taiwanese climber who she thought had died the previous year.) They stopped their digging because of the constant rock fall and retreated to Camp 3 and on the following day to Camp 2. Now there was extremely strong (perhaps 90 km/hr) wind, which pinned them down in Camp 2 for four days.

On the 22nd, they decided to try to resume climbing and returned to Camp 3. But the rock fall, crashing down the couloir's funnel and threatening Cleo's helipad, drove them back to Camp 2 on the 23rd. Finally they gave up in the face of continuously dangerous falling rock. They were not bothered by snow on the face, which was mostly exposed rock or rock covered by ice. It was the falling rock that defeated them.

On 23 May, Cleo concluded that they would never be able to claim the summit. With chopper flights required and no summit in sight, "it was not worth it" to continue. On 25 May, they flew from Camp 2 to BC to Lukla in their final helicopter flight and from there to Kathmandu.

Future Climbs

Any plans by the agitating Pasang's to return to Everest next spring have not been revealed. But the Sherpas whose climbs were blocked will surely be anxious to return to the mountain and resume earning the wages and bonuses they would normally expect. And one would think that the Nepalese government would do all in its power to prevent the loss of significant contributions to its coffers. The foreign operators estimated that "the total impact to the GDP of Nepal [that spring] would have been in excess of \$15 million and that the direct income for permit fees would be approximately \$3.3 million. Not only climbing Sherpas' incomes dropped off, but so did the earnings of Kathmandu hotels, taxi drivers, domestic airlines, food suppliers, porters, Khumbu lodges, and even postcard sellers," according to one prominent foreign operator, Russell Brice of Himalayan Experience.

The major foreign expedition organizers have not announced any plans of their own, but several of the most prominent ones have been meeting to consider the way forward.

What could be done about the instigators of this year's strike? It was noted that Pasang Tenzing was a candidate for recognition as a mountain guide by the international guides association, and that this achievement could be cancelled. But what of the others? And will this spring's spoilers return to Everest or pick on climbers on Makalu or Annapurna or some other mountain?

Was this spring's strike more serious than the threats of a few hotheads? Did it manifest jealousy on the part of Sherpas who do not come from Khumbu, but from poorer, less advantaged other areas like Makalu and Rolwaling? Was it a symptom of a generational change, the older smiling traditional Sherpas being succeeded by younger more combative, independent-minded men, perhaps misguided in wanting to do things their way rather than abiding by what the foreign organizers told them to do? Or are they just undisciplined wreckers? One organizer of expeditions harshly compared them to the Luddites in England at the start of the Industrial Revolution who feared they would be unemployable if their old machine-less ways of working were destroyed and so set about wrecking machinery in the new factories; He termed the Sherpas "Luddites [who] grandstand their nefarious negativism."

Helicopters

Mrs. Wang and Ms. Weidlich perhaps set a precedent in their use of helicopters to expedite their climbing Everest from the Nepalese side and Lhotse up from base camp to Camp 2 in order to avoid Icefall's dangers – and to save time. *But* these climbs cannot be considered complete ascents and descents since the climbers did not go all the way under their own steam.

This method of leaving Everest has been used for the past four or five years by tired climbers who claimed they were in desperate condition, so tired they could go down no farther than Camp 2. Last spring for his descent by a manifestly exhausted Japanese while making a new old-age record at eighty. Yuichiro Miura had used up nearly all his strength reaching the summit and was extremely weak coming down: it had taken him 13 hours to descend just from Camp 3 to Camp 2. So on the 26th he flew by helicopter from Camp 2 back to Kathmandu. The Icefall had collapsed

on the 25th, and he could well have been in it that day if he had not planned to fly over it the next day.

It had generally been understood that helicopters were allowed to operate above base camp for rescue flights only, although it appears that there is no actual regulation on the subject. Since Mrs. Wang's flights set an example, will this method catch on with future expeditions? And since she raised the issue, will the Nepalese government permit non-rescue flights in future? Will it perhaps give permission only for cargo flights to get the tons of expeditions' supplies above the treacherous Icefall, thus sparing Sherpas from many trips that expose them to its dangers perhaps 30 or 40 times in one season, while still requiring climbers to go up and down on their own two feet?

Wingsuit Descent

And then there was another method of descent from Everest's summit that would have been demonstrated if there had been no Sherpa ban on climbing it. A 39-year-old American named Joby Ogwyn from California proposed to descend from the summit to base camp in a wingsuit, looking like a bat in flight, in two minutes.

Ogwyn, 39, describes himself as a television host, professional climber and wingsuit pilot. His flight would have been the first wing-suit descent of Everest or any other Nepalese mountain.

But when the fatal avalanche struck Sherpas in the Icefall on 18 April, Ogwyn immediately concluded that his intended flight from the summit wearing his wingsuit would not be possible as planned, that the climbing situation would not be resolved very soon, so he prepared to leave the mountain quickly because of a crowded schedule of obligations for the rest of the year. He had trekked through the Icefall to Gorakshep from Camp 1 with his teammate and nominal leader, Garrett Madison; he now flew from Gorakshep to Kathmandu by helicopter on the 20th and left the mountain.