

From Beyond the Limits

from
**Beyond
the Limits**

**A Woman's Triumph
on Everest**

Stacy Allison
with Peter Carlin

We were so close. From where we were sitting, curled in the dim light of a snow cave, the top of the world was only 3,000 feet away. Less than two days of climbing on the jagged North Face. But we weren't climbing.

We were hiding. Four American mountain climbers—Scott Fischer, Wes Krause, Samuel "Q" Bink, and me—tunneled into the side of Mount Everest, listening to the roar of the jet stream's wind. It was late in the climbing season and the winter winds had descended, tearing across the top of the mountain at 150 miles an hour. But for how long?

1. The jet stream is the high-speed air current several miles above the earth's surface.

B Sitting up in my sleeping bag, balancing a cup of hot chocolate in my lap, I could imagine that the hurricane outside would vanish. In the dim light of the cave, I could overlook the life-squeezing pressure of life at 25,500 feet.

C I could almost convince myself we wouldn't have to turn around when morning came. Turn around? Not after I had devoted years of my life to get here. Years spent dreaming of scaling this massive hill and then leaving my footprint on the crown of the earth. Now I was two-thirds of the way there—25,500 feet up the North Face of Everest. Stranded in a snow cave . . . but so close.

D I was determined to get to the top. Hunched beneath the snow, I could imagine the grace of those final steps. Beyond the limits of gravity, human strength, and mental agility—out to where there are no limits. Nothing but the snow-covered mountain, the sky, and me, and right then it would be hard to tell where one ended and another began. I could have it all, but only if the jet stream rose off the mountain for one more day.

E Everything depends on the weather: even the best climber in the world won't get very high on a mountain shrouded in a storm or belted by gale-force winds. We'd worked so hard for so long, but on that cold night in the fall of 1987, I knew our entire expedition was on the brink.

The fifteen climbers on the 1987 American Everest North Face Expedition each had more than a decade of climbing

2. Here, *shrouded* means "covered" or "concealed."

experience. For two years most of us had committed our lives to climbing this one mountain. We spent two years maneuvering the bureaucracies³ of two governments, scraping for the money to cover airplane tickets, freight, climbing permits, and fees, convincing manufacturers to give us equipment and food. Two years planning and preparing and then three months on the expedition itself—the flight into Nepal, the trek from Kathmandu into Tibet and the yak-powered climb to Advance Base Camp, then the weeks of mountain-side preparation.

We built Advance Base Camp at the foot of the North Face, and then set up four intermediate camps on the mountain. We fixed our route up the mountain using ice screws, aluminum stakes, and rope to anchor a safety line up the steep sections, then dug snow caves in the steep mountainside and hauled up loads of food and gear to stock them. Only then could we set our sights on the summit. Set our sights, and hope the mountain would be kind to us as we tried to creep up her icy shoulders.

Kindness was a lot to hope for this high in the world. More, in fact, than what we'd been able to secure for ourselves. By the time the second summit team—our



Did You Know?
The yak is a long-haired ox native to central Asia. Yaks are often used to carry heavy loads.

3. *Bureaucracies* (byoo rok 'a rez) refers to all of the departments, officials, rules, and paperwork that one must deal with to get government approval for a project or program.

Vocabulary

agility (ə jil' ə tē) *n.* quickness and ease in motion or thought
brink (brɪŋk) *n.* the point at which something may begin

charismatic, blond team leader Scott Fischer, our more reserved deputy leader Wes Krause, the hyperkinetic⁴ young bond trader Samuel "Q" Belk, and me—set out for the mountain top, an ugly wind was blowing through the expedition tents at base camp. So we moved with a redoubled sense of purpose. I just want to climb, Scott said when we left our Advance Base Camp. *Forget everything else and climb the mountain.*

The mountain cooperated for thirty-six hours. On the first day we climbed under calm, clear skies, moving from Camp 1 at 19,500 feet to Camp 2 at 23,500 feet by midday. We spent the night in the snow cave, then headed up again the next morning, climbing halfway up the White Limbo snowfield before a gathering snowstorm sent us scurrying back to Camp 2. The blizzard ravaged⁵ the mountain for four long days and nights, and when the sky finally cleared we scaled the 2,000 feet to Camp 3. But then the stubborn blasting wind descended and we were pinned down again.

We were running out of time. Climbers call the upper reaches of the world the Death Zone—above 19,000 feet the earth's atmosphere is too thin to support life. No matter how much you eat, your digestive system can't assimilate enough nourishment to keep you alive. After a few days your muscles

start to atrophy.⁶ You grow weaker. Most climbers start to fade after a week, although some can hold on for two or even three weeks. Soon I'd discover how strong I was—this was our second night above 25,000 feet. It was our seventh night in the Death Zone.

A shower of loose snow tumbled in through the tunnel entry, settling onto my head, my shoulders, melting cold down my neck. As the empty hours passed I sat in silence, sharing the same thought as my three companions: *This can't be happening. I needed success too much this year.*

When the storm first pinned us down at Camp 2, we tried not to seem concerned. Snowstorms never last forever, not even in the Himalayas. We had enough food in the cave to hold out for days, and then once

Climbers call the upper reaches of the world the Death Zone . . .

the sky did clear nothing would hold us back. As it turned out, that storm was the worst autumn blizzard to hit Everest in more than forty years. But it did clear one night, and by the next afternoon we were

6 To *atrophy* food is to absorb it and use it to create living tissue. If this doesn't happen, the body will waste away, or *atrophy*.

4 Being *hyperkinetic*, Belk likes to be always moving about or doing something.
5 *Ravaged* (rav'ij) means "destroyed violently; ruined."

Vocabulary

charismatic (kar'iz mat'ik) *adj.* having personal qualities that enable one to inspire loyalty and devotion



in Camp 3. By then, the summit was only two days away . . . until we woke up the next morning and saw the gale-force winds ripping across the top of the mountain. So we went back to the cave, the four of us, back to talking and waiting. Two days passed and eventually we ran out of words. The wind kept blowing.

Then there was silence—the sound of breathing, the sputtering of the stove, the dry sputtering of the spindrift⁷ blowing in the tunnel. After seven days the altitude had weakened us, and it was too late in the season to retreat to base camp and wait for better weather. If we didn't get to the summit now, we couldn't try again. Unless the jet stream lifted by morning, we would have to go down. *Two years of work. A decade of training. A lifetime of hope. Blown away.*

Sleep wouldn't come. The cold air sank down through the tunnel, covering us like a dark, wet blanket. Lying closer to the entry, Q was curled into a ball, trembling under three layers of down. Scott flopped around in his bag, occasionally heaving up a great dispirited⁸ sigh. Wes lay still, his eyes burning. The minutes crept past. I swam in my sleeping bag, searching for the comfortable spot. But my body had been whittled away by the months of high-altitude effort, and comfort was beyond me. I was a stick figure of a woman, fragile bones jutting against pale flesh, muscles stretched taut like rubber bands; a body pulled to the breaking point.

Come on, morning. Our last chance would come with the daylight. I tried to push the hours along, pulling up the dawn by force of willpower. Give me this one

7 Here, *spindrift* refers to light, misty, blowing snow.
8 *Dispirited* (dis piri' a tid) means "discouraged; depressed."

Stacy Allison

clance. The dawn, and calm skies. Just two more days without the jet stream. Please, please, I need this now.

- When life gets tangled there's something so reassuring about climbing a mountain. The challenge is unambiguous. Ice and snow and rock. Self-discipline. Concentration. Focus. As you push higher you work yourself into a trance. Can I reach that ledge? Are my fingers strong enough to hold on to this crack? Will this ice screw hold? Eventually the weight of the world slides away. For those moments when it's just you and the rock and the ice and the snow, life always makes sense.

Climbing has always been more than a physical pursuit for me. Each mountain I face is another pinnacle in an internal adventure. An exploration of myself, an expression of my spirit. For ten years I had climbed, from desert cliffs in Utah to small mountains in the Cascade Range of the Pacific Northwest. Looking higher, I reached up into the clouds, then past the clouds. To larger mountains, and more complex climbs: Mount McKinley in Alaska, Ama Dablam in Nepal, Pik Kommuzima in the Soviet Union. I reached up, step by step, until I could see myself standing on the peak of the world's tallest mountain.

Mount Everest. Chomolungma to the Tibetans. Sagarmatha to the Nepali. The

Mother Goddess of the Earth to everyone living in its shadow. The top of Everest is the top of the world—29,028 feet up into the empty Himalayan sky. The only spot on earth where you can't climb any higher.

I had to get up there. Usually I don't get obsessed about mountaintops—I had learned long ago that the time spent climbing in life means more than the time spent standing on a summit. But when my life turned sour, the tip of Everest gained significance. It was the top of the world! Reaching that windswept perch, I decided, would cleanse my spirit and heal my wounds. More than that, it would send me home with a title: The First American Woman to Climb Everest.

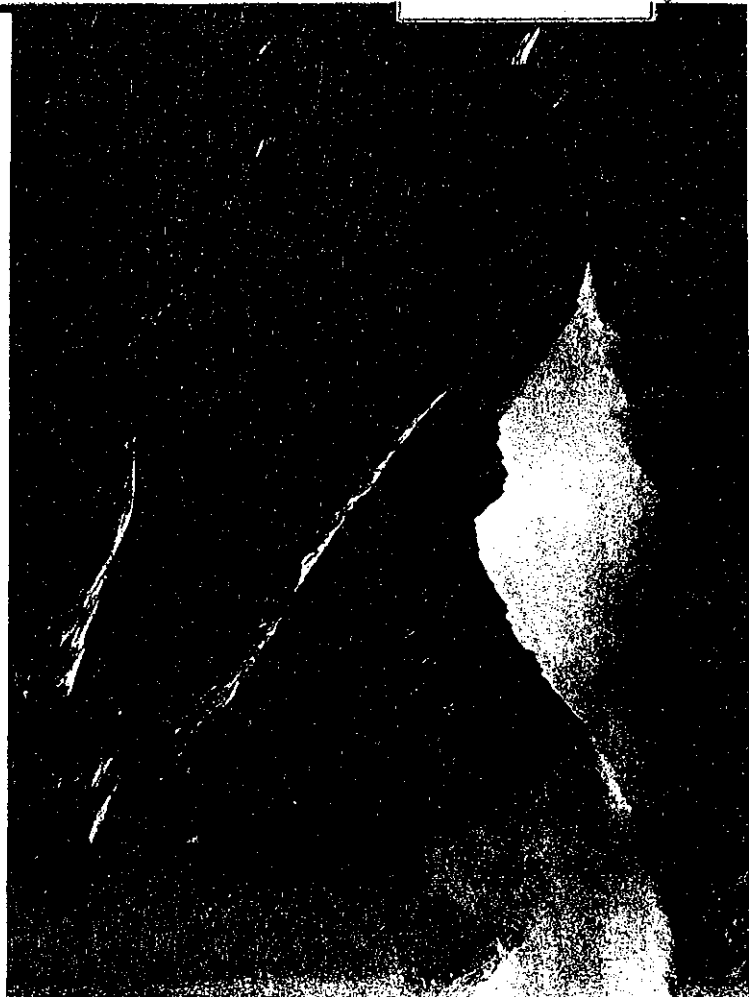
For so many years I wouldn't even allow myself to think I could get this far. Everest was for the big boys, and I was a very small woman. The climbing community has never had a lot of patience with women. It draws a distinct crowd—generally men equipped with a surplus of money, opinions, and muscle.

It came a step at a time, a decade of effort leading up to this one summit attempt, this journey to the top of the world. And now the world wasn't cooperating. Why did I think it would? I knew Everest wasn't like any other mountain. Only one of ten climbers who attempt the mountain stands on the summit. And for every three climbers who do scale the mountain, one dies trying. The facts aren't welcoming. But you don't plan a trip to Everest believing those facts will apply to you.

9. Something that's unambiguous is perfectly clear, leaving no room for doubt or confusion.

Vocabulary

pinnacle (pin' a kaj) *n.* a high point or peak
distinct (dis' tinct) *adj.* different in quality or kind



Viewing the photograph: How are the conditions here similar to those faced by the climbers in the selection?

When dawn finally came we got dressed for the summit—pulling our down climbing suits over the layers of polypropylene long underwear, polypro socks, plastic climbing boots, polypro and down gloves, a heavy pile hat, a neoprene¹⁰ face mask—then crawled out of the cave, pulled along by a fine thread of hope, and walked gingerly¹¹ to the side of the ice tower that stood above our cave. Above us we'd see the summit, that great crooked pyramid on top of the world, the crown for the Mother

Goddess. If she rose straight into a clear blue sky, we could try to push ourselves higher. But if she sent off a tail of white winds were still ripping the snow from the hillside, we had to go down. Wes turned the corner first. I didn't have to look up. I could read it in his shoulders. Wes slumped, then turned. Scott, coming around the corner after, saw it in Scott's eyes, then heard his shouting above the constant roar of wind.

"Well, that's the ballgame." Scott stomped back toward the snow cave, anguished, shaking his head. Wes stayed, staring into the sky. I turned my

10. **Polypropylene, pile,** and **neoprene** are human-made fabrics that provide insulation from cold temperatures.

11. **Gingerly** (jin' jə ri) means "with extreme caution, carefully."

Vocabulary

anguished (ang' gwisht) *adj.* having or showing extreme mental or physical suffering

and saw it, too. The thick plume of ¹²specific sailing from the mountain-top. The jet stream had not lifted. It was slamming against the mountain at 150 miles an hour for the third day in a row. And the thin thread of hope snapped.

Back in the cave Scott's blond hair hung out over dim eyes, his usually rosy cheeks looked pale and sunken. His chest caved in beneath his shoulders.

"If you guys want to wait another day," I said, "I can wait." Q looked up dimly and coughed. I was grasping at thin air. We had failed. It was over. Even so, Scott flashed a look at the rest of us, measuring reactions.

"One more day? Give it a shot?" Q shook his head. The Death Zone was wreaking its havoc¹³ on him. He was losing wattage with every passing hour.

"I can't stay up here another day," Q said. He'd been barely able to eat breakfast that morning. "If I don't go down today, I'm not going to get down."

Now just the sound of breathing, and outside the wind and then occasionally a light cloud of spandrift, fleeting through the tunnel and down into the cave. The cold drifted down my spine until I could feel it in my toes.

Scott picked up the walkie-talkie and called to our expedition mates waiting at base camp. *We're finished. We're coming down. The message was received, tenderly, and we started packing. Sleeping bags,*

¹² The expression *wreaking havoc* means "causing destruction."

Thinsulate¹⁴ pads, ice screws, rope, and cook gear over here, stoves, food, fuel over there. We'd carry the fragile gear, but the really soft and really hard gear could take the fast way down the Great Couloir, the chute-like valley just to the left of our route on the North Face. Camp I was just below the bottom of the chute; once the gear rockered down, the other climbers would try to collect it.

We went back to the cave entry and slung on our packs. And we stood there for a moment, not looking at each other. Just stood there in the cold and the wind before taking the first step down. And then Wes moved, and Q followed, and then we were all moving. After two long years of planning and working and hoping, we were walking away from the summit. I could barely fathom¹⁵ the disappointment. I couldn't, not with the descent ahead of us. I still had to focus on getting down in one piece.

I turned to take a last look and my eyes fell on Scott's face. Tears were sliding down his cheeks. Did he see me watching him? It was only a moment, and he was wearing reflecting shades so it was impossible to tell. I turned around again and continued down dry-eyed. Whatever anguish I felt, I'd deal with it when we got down to safe terrain.¹⁵

¹³ *Havoc* is the brand name of an insulating material.

¹⁴ Here, *fathom* (fah't) any means "to understand fully."

¹⁵ Scott Fischer successfully reached Everest's peak in 1994. Two years later, he and seven other climbers died in another attempt to reach the top.