

I wasn't supposed to be thinking of canned ham during one of the most important moments in my life. Yet, I couldn't help it.

Standing on the summit of Sahale Peak in northern Washington was supposed to be the climax of a lifelong dream. After climbing for hours, I stared down from more than 8,000 feet and waited for a lifetime worth of emotion to flow through me.

It never happened. Instead my only thought was how I wanted to climb down and eat my supper.

Fulfilling my childhood fantasy was not how I thought it would be. A lifetime's worth of expectations were leveled by the reality of actually climbing a mountain.

Mountaineering is a selfish pursuit. No cure for cancer was ever found on top of a mountain; no war has ever been averted because someone climbed all the 8,000-meter peaks in the world. Climbers risk everything they have for their sport.

The tales of widows and children left behind are many. My own hero, Alex Lowe, became one of those stories. By all accounts he was one of the best climbers in the world, yet he isn't with us anymore. He was killed last October in an avalanche, leaving a wife and three children behind.

In a way, Alex's death is where my story began. I was in his hometown of Bozeman, Mont., the day he died a half a world away in Tibet. I had just come from the Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, charged up to start my climbing career.

On that same day on the other side of the world, Alex and a few of his friends were crossing a glacier when the snow above them gave way. He and another climber, Dave Bridges, were buried alive.

I have often wondered what Alex was thinking those last few moments. Was he dreaming of being in my shoes, standing in the relative safety of Bozeman, seeing his family one last time? I know I was dreaming of being in the mountains.

Ever since that day I had a mission – to get to a summit. I started running and rock climbing to get into shape. I bought more gear with every paycheck. I spent hours on the Internet to find the right climbing experience for me.

My hero was always nearby, looking down from a portrait on the wall. I bought a limited edition photograph of Alex and the money I paid went directly to his family. It made me feel good to think I was helping them.



ALEX LOWE

I decided on a six-day mountaineering class with Alpine Ascents International in Seattle. It teaches mountain-climbing basics, like crevasse rescue and glacier travel – everything someone needs to know before trying to climb on his own.

Nine strangers and I met in a hotel lobby early that first morning. There would be plenty of time to learn names and personalities in the coming days. We got our gear together and headed out.

Our first test was a 2,500-foot vertical climb to base camp. It was along a very steep trail through a dense forest. By the time we reached camp, I knew that mountaineering wasn't for me. A lifetime of planning and dreaming ended in a few hours of climbing.

It wasn't the physical strain of trekking with a 50-pound backpack. It was the slip up I made before reaching camp.

We had climbed for hours to get to the tree line. Above that we needed to scamper across a snow field and make our way to camp. We had been walking on dirt and now that stable surface was gone.

About half way up the snow field I lost my balance and fell.

I have fallen many times while rock climbing, but I always had a rope to catch me. There was no rope connecting me to anything else at this point on the route. I was on my own.

I landed on my back and started to slide toward a group of trees about 100 feet down the slope. My pack made it difficult to maneuver and I kicked frantically until I stopped.

Mountain

Continued from page 1

Frozen in position, I didn't know what to do. If I moved, I thought, I would slide and hit the trees. It seemed like an eternity until someone came to my rescue. Physically I was fine, but my confidence was gone.

For the first time the reality of mountain climbing hit me. The stories of people dying while fulfilling their passion didn't seem so heroic. I might never see my wife again simply because I wanted to stand on top of a rock.

From that point on a little voice inside my head said, "You're going to fall." I couldn't shake it. An old climbing adage says if you believe your feet will stick, they do. If you think you're going to fall, you will.

Going from base camp up to the summit and back would take eight hours, with most of that for the ascent. We spent a few days discussing what to do if something went wrong. By the fourth day, we were ready.

Through the snow fields and glaciers I scaled Sahale Peak, fighting the fear of never seeing my wife again. I knew that getting to the summit was only the first part; I'd still have to get down. The fact that most mistakes happen on the descent didn't help much.

We reached the top by mid-afternoon. All of us clung together on a small rock formation that was the summit. There were no great cheers, no hands-in-the-air photos being taken. For a moment I thought I wasn't the only one who didn't really care.

By the time we reached base camp, though, people were already talking about the next mountain they wanted to climb. I kept quiet. There wouldn't be a "next mountain" for me.

More experience in mountain climbing would surely silence the doubting demons in my head, but that's not why I've hung up my ice axe. The reality of mountaineering can never equal the dream of mountaineering. The stories of triumph and loss are like a Greek play – they don't seem real until you've actually lived them for yourself.

I've seen the cost of my childhood dream and the price is just too high. If I could be anywhere in the world, it would be with my family and not on the peak of some mountain.

I often wonder what Alex would have thought of my decision. Would he have been proud because I found what's truly important to me, or would he have wished I pushed myself a little harder? By all accounts he struggled to balance his passion for climbing against the guilt of leaving his family. In the end, his passion won.

What pushes a person to do something they know might kill them? What makes mountaineers like Alex risk – and often lose – their lives for a sport? Many famous climbers say they were just born that way; they had to be in the mountains.

I thought I was born to be in the mountains, too. It took a fall for me to realize that living happily ever after is my ultimate dream.

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