

GUY COTTER

FIRST HAND INSIGHT INTO A TRAGEDY

Kiwi, Guy Cotter has achieved as long a string of notable mountaineering ascents as anyone alive. Not only has he climbed Mt Everest multiple times, but he has also ascended many of the world's highest peaks, including the Seven Summits, the highest peak on every continent. In 1996, he was on Mount Everest and recounts aspects of the disaster that unfolded around him.

May 10 and 11, 1996. What was your location and role on the mountain during those days? I had arrived at Pumori base camp (1.5 hrs from Everest base camp) with a group at the end of April. I was training the group I had on the 7,000m Pumori for Everest the following year. I'd been to Everest base camp and caught up with Rob and the team in the days just prior to them setting out for their summit attempt. Rob gave me one of his radios and requested I keep in touch. I was in the process of doing acclimatisation and carries to the first camp on Pumori on May 10.

At what point did you realise the situation was beginning to seriously deteriorate? I could hear the radio comms with Helen Wilton who was Rob's base camp manager while the team were heading to the top. I was monitoring the timing of the summit and was especially concerned when Rob was on top with Doug Hansen after 2pm. Late in the day I heard the situation deteriorating but was of course powerless to do anything about it.

Editorially, both Jon Krakauer's account and Anatoli Boukreev's response carry an underlying sense of summit fever, where the drive to reach the top slowly began to outweigh sound judgement and decision making. Did you have that same feeling watching events unfold with some of the groups on the mountain? I can't comment of summit fever, I don't think Rob suffered that temptation. I just think he was trying to enable his group to reach the summit, but ran out of resources up there when Doug Hansen collapsed.

There still seems to be considerable contradiction around what happened that day. Do you personally lean toward any particular interpretation of events, or do you think some of the commentary over the years has simply been inaccurate? Everyone has their own account of what happened. I know that some of the claims made in the books written were inaccurate. I learned through those events that the word history, is his-story. i.e. whoever writes the account of events gets to control the narrative.

With modern technology, improved forecasting and communication systems, do you think a similar disaster could still happen today? We have all seen the traffic jams on Everest in recent years. Does that concern you as another major accident waiting to happen? I'm afraid there will be future disasters on Everest. Probably the biggest event will come from a fixed rope breaking that could have up to 50 people hanging off it. A regular trend is the scenario where a client is supported by a personal Sherpa and they climb together as a team. When the clients gets exhausted, an unqualified and untrained Sherpa will often not have the whereabouts to turn that client around due to cultural differences and also the allure of the summit bonus. The clients gets to the summit exhausted, collapses and that single Sherpa cannot get that person down and has to leave them behind. In 2023 there were 11 fatalities for exactly this reason. We operate our expeditions as a team with additional Sherpa support to help someone down if they need it, while the rest of the group can still summit.

There are still a lot of unskilled people still on the mountain supported by people acting as guides who are not appropriately trained or qualified, they just have a cheap price and too many people take the bait. Having said that there are very good operators up there too, both western and Nepalese. Look for qualified IFMGA guides when selecting an operator.

With your experience, do you think the events of May 1996 permanently changed mountaineering, or at least changed attitudes toward commercial high altitude climbing? Absolutely '96 changed everything. Many climbers on the mountains that day dropped everything to assist those in dire need. Others shut their tent doors and turned their radios off so they could still go to the summit. As a collective, we western operators recognised the need to work together on the mountain to put the route through the icefall and fix the ropes to the summit. We also collaborated in rescue and medical situations which evolved to the situation today where Nepalese groups have taken on those roles.

We have published your comments before in Adventure around the importance of having the discipline to turn back. Do you think 1996 reinforced that lesson for the climbing world? As I mentioned above there are still many who are sufficiently inexperienced that they don't know when the time to turn around has come. Most people don't know their history, if they did they would be less likely to make the same mistakes people before them have made.

“I learned through those events that the word history, is his-story. i.e. whoever writes the account of events gets to control the narrative.”

Fortunately many expedition leaders these days can protect people from their own lack of knowledge and personal awareness but not always if they do not manage their expeditions tightly.

Looking back now, do you think the disaster could have been avoided? Yes the events of 1996 could have been avoided. But I recognise that often the pioneers of any activity, as Rob Hall was, sometimes discover the realistic parameters of the medium they are involved with and this formulates future processes and procedures with that knowledge.

Did Rob choose to stay with the client? As I understand it he could have made it back down earlier in the day but chosen to stay. Yes, Rob did choose to stay with his client that day. He was requesting oxygen to be brought up to him from a cache below. His assistant guide Andy Harris bravely turned around from below the South summit to come to his aid but tragically also lost his life in doing so. Rob ran out of oxygen and didn't manage to make it past the South Summit on his way down.

It has been 3 decades since this event and I still remember them as vibrant and incredible people. It is tragic to have lost them but anniversaries like this one are a good time to reflect on how their lives impacted on my life since that time.

