

The Sherpa people live in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal and are often hired to assist in major expeditions to the tops of the world's largest peaks. The book Buried in the Sky describes an attempt made by a group of climbers in 2008 to reach the summit of K2, a peak in the Karakoram mountain range. Read the excerpt about two of the Sherpas that survived that climb and answer the questions that follow.

from **BURIED IN
THE SKY**

by Peter Zuckerman and Amanda Padoan

1 Hanging off the face of a cliff, an ice axe the only thing between him and death, a Sherpa climber named Chhiring Dorje swung to the left. A massive ice boulder ripped off above, hurtling toward him.

2 It was the size of a refrigerator.

3 The underbelly caught, and the mass flipped, cartwheeling down. It tore past, skimming Chhiring's shoulder, then vanished.

4 *Brooof.* It slammed into something below, shattering.

5 The mountain shook with the impact. Powder shot up in a column.

6 It was about midnight on August 1, 2008, and Chhiring had only a hazy idea of where he was: on or near the Bottleneck of K2, the deadliest stretch of the most dangerous mountain. At roughly the cruising altitude of a Boeing 737, the Bottleneck stretched away from him into the darkness below. In the starlight, the channel seemed bottomless as wisps of fog slithered into the abyss. Above, a lip of ice curled like the barrel of a crashing wave.

7 Oxygen depletion had turned Chhiring's mind to mush. Hunger and exhaustion had broken his body. When he opened his mouth, his tongue froze; when he gasped for breath, the moistureless air scoured his throat and lashed his eyes.

8 Chhiring felt robotic, cold, too tired to think of what he'd sacrificed to get to K2. The Sherpa mountaineer, who had summited Everest ten times, had been consumed by the mountain for



decades. A far more difficult peak than Everest, K2's summit is one of the most prestigious prizes in high-altitude mountaineering. Chhiring had gone despite his wife's tears. Despite the climb costing more money than his father had made in forty years. Despite his Buddhist *lama*¹ warning him that K2's goddess would never tolerate the climb.

9 Chhiring had made it to the summit of K2 that evening without using bottled oxygen, vaulting him into an elite group of the most successful mountaineers, but the descent wasn't turning out as planned. He had dreamed of the achievement, a heroic reception, even fame. None of that mattered now. Chhiring had a wife, two daughters, a thriving business, and a dozen relatives who depended on him. All he wanted was to get home. Alive.

10 Normally, descent would be safer. Climbers usually go down during the early afternoon when it's warmer and daylight shows the way. They rappel, leapfrogging off the ice while attached to a fixed line to control their speed. In avalanche-prone areas around the Bottleneck, climbers descend as quickly as possible. This cuts exposure time, minimizing the chance of getting buried. Getting down fast was what Chhiring had planned on, depended on.

11 Now it was black and moonless. The fixed lines had vanished, severed by falling ice. Turning back wasn't an option. Without rope to catch him, Chhiring had only his axe to arrest a fall. And more than one life was in play: another climber was hanging from his harness.

12 The man suspended below him was Pasang Lama. Three hours earlier, Pasang had given up his ice axe to help more vulnerable climbers. He had thought he could survive without it. Like Chhiring, Pasang had planned to rappel down the mountain using the fixed lines.

13 When the ropes through the Bottleneck disappeared, Pasang had figured it was his time to die. Stranded, he was unable to climb up or down without help. Why would anyone try to save him? A climber who attached himself to Pasang would surely fall, too. Using an ice axe to check the weight of one mountaineer skidding down the Bottleneck is nearly impossible. Stopping two bodies presents twice the difficulty, twice the risk. A rescue would be suicidal, Pasang thought. Mountaineers are supposed to be self-sufficient. Any pragmatic person would leave him to die.

14 As expected, one Sherpa already had. Pasang assumed Chhiring would do the same. Chhiring and Pasang were on separate teams. Chhiring had no obligation to help. But now Pasang hung three yards below him, attached to Chhiring's harness by a tether.

15 After dodging the block of ice, the two men bowed their heads and silently negotiated with the mountain goddess. She responded a few seconds later. The sound was electronic, the amplified pluck of a rubber band run through distortion pedals. *Zoing*. It continued, echoing louder, longer, faster, lower-pitched, from the left, from the right. The climbers knew what it meant. The ice around them was calving.² With each *zoing*, fractures zigzagged across the glacier, ready to drop cinder blocks of ice.

16 If the men sensed one coming, they could shuffle to the side and contort themselves away. Failing that, they could sustain a hit. But eventually a mass the size of a bus would break off. Not much to do when that happens, except pray. Chhiring and Pasang had to get down before the falling ice crushed them.

¹ *lama* — a Tibetan Buddhist priest

² *calving* — the breaking off of chunks of ice at the edge of a glacier

17 *Chuck*. Chhiring hacked his axe into the ice. *Shink*. He kicked, stabbing the ice with his
crampons.³ He descended like this for a few feet—*chuck, shink, shink, chuck, shink, shink*—and
jammed himself against the slope so that the man attached to him could move to the same rhythm.

18 Pasang punched the hard ice with his fist, trying to compact it into a dent he could grip. Shallow
and slick, the hold couldn't bear his weight. As Pasang extended his leg downward, he leaned on the
safety tether that tied him to Chhiring. *Shink*. Pasang kicked in his crampons, relieving the pressure
on the tether.

19 The weight on the rope threatened to pry Chhiring off the mountain's face, but he managed to cling
on as they maneuvered around the bulges, cracks, dips, and lumps. Sometimes he and Pasang went
side by side, holding hands, coordinating their movements. At other times Pasang went first, while
Chhiring braced in a holding position with the axe and controlled the safety tether between them.

20 Rocks and chunks of ice spun at them, dinging their helmets, but they were halfway down and
thought they'd survive. The night was windless—minus four degrees Fahrenheit—almost warm for
K2. The lights of high camp were smoldering below. Chhiring and Pasang didn't expect it to happen.

21 A chunk of ice or rock knocked Pasang on the head. Batted off the ice, he swung like a piñata.
22 The force of Pasang's body on the rope peeled Chhiring from the slope.
23 The men tore downward.

24 Chhiring gripped his axe with both hands and slammed it into the mountain. The blade wouldn't
catch. It cut surgically through the snow.

25 Sliding faster, Chhiring heaved his chest against the adze⁴ of his axe, digging into the slope. No
good. Chhiring fell faster, another seven yards, another ten.

26 Pasang punched the slope with his fists and tried to grip, but his fingers skated along the ice.
27 The men dropped farther into the darkness.

28 Their shrieks, muffled by snow, must have funneled up the Bottleneck to the southeast face, but
the survivors there heard nothing. They were deaf to the thud of falling bodies. All of them were
lost. Dazed and hallucinating, some wandered off-route. Others calmed themselves enough to make
a measured decision between two grim options: free-climb down the Bottleneck in the darkness or
bivouac⁵ in the Death Zone.

29 Gerard McDonnell, who hours before had become the first Irishman to summit K2, cut a shallow
ledge to sit on and another to brace his feet. Patience wouldn't stop an avalanche, but at least he had
a perch to wait out the night.

30 Another climber, an Italian named Marco Confortola, squished in beside him. To stay awake, they
forced themselves to sing. With hoarse voices, the men crooned the songs they could remember,
anything to avoid dying in their sleep.

31 Earlier, a French summiter had made a promise to his girlfriend. "I'll never leave you again," Hugues
d'Aubarède had told her via satellite phone. "I'm finished now. This time next year, we'll all be at
the beach." That night, he slid down the Bottleneck to his death. His Pakistani high-altitude porter,
Karim Meherban, strayed off-route, reaching the crown of the glacier that hulks over the Bottleneck.
He slumped down and waited to freeze.

³ *crampon* — a metal plate with spikes that is fixed to a boot for climbing on ice

⁴ *adze* — a curved blade for cutting ice

⁵ *bivouac* — to make a temporary camp without tents or cover

32 Farther down, a Norwegian newlywed had just lost her husband to several tons of ice. This climb had been their honeymoon. Now she was clawing down the mountain without him.

33 Many of the alpinists considered themselves to be among the best in the world. They hailed from France, Holland, Italy, Ireland, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. Some had risked everything to scale K2. Their climb had devolved into a catastrophe. The final toll was bleak: within twenty-seven hours, eleven climbers had died in the deadliest single disaster in K2's history.

34 What had gone wrong? Why had the climbers continued up when they knew they'd never make it down before nightfall? How had they made so many simple mistakes, such as failing to bring enough rope?

35 The story became an international media sensation, landing on the covers of the *New York Times*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Outside*, and in more than a thousand other publications. It ricocheted around the blogosphere and inspired speculation, documentaries, a stage-play revival, memoirs, and talk shows.

36 Some considered the climb an example of hubris, a waste of life fueled by machismo or madness: thrill-seekers trying too hard to get noticed by corporate sponsorship; lunatics climbing in a final act of escape; oblivious Westerners exploiting the lives of impoverished Nepalis and Pakistanis in a bid for glory; the media feeding off deaths to sell papers and products; gawkers observing the spectacle for entertainment.

37 "You want to risk your life?" a response to one of the *New York Times* stories said. "Then do it in service of your country, or family, or neighborhood. Climbing K2 or Everest is a selfish stunt that benefits nothing." . . .

38 Other people saw courage: explorers pitted against the adversity of nature; lost souls embracing risk to find meaning in an empty world.

39 "Climbing can expand the view of human potential for all of us," read a letter to the media from Phil Powers, executive director of the American Alpine Club.

40 Paraphrasing Teddy Roosevelt, another letter read, "Far better to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

41 Others raised basic questions: What do men and women do when they are on top of a mountain, dying? And why are some people driven to take such risks?

42 Before they were trapped on the mountaintop; before the deaths and funerals; before the rescues and reunions; before the fistfights and friendships; before the recriminations and reconciliations—everything had seemed perfect. The equipment was checked and rechecked; the routes, established; the weather, cooperative; the teams, intact. The moment they had spent so much time and training and money to reach—summit day—had finally come. They were going to conquer K2, stand on top of the most vicious mountain on earth, howl in triumph, unfurl their flags, and call their sweethearts.

43 Chhiring and Pasang, as they fell into the blackness, must have wondered: How did this happen?