

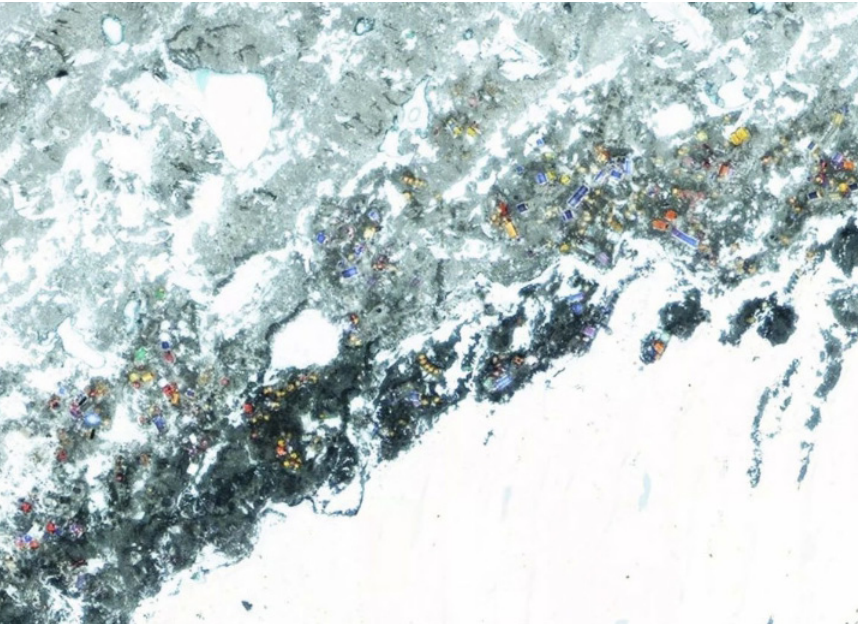


May 5, 2015 | Andrew Bisharat

HOW EVEREST CLIMBERS MADE THE NEPAL EARTHQUAKE EVEN WORSE

On April 27, two days after the earthquake that rocked Nepal, at least 160 mountaineers—guides, clients, and their hired Sherpas—radioed for helicopter evacuations off Mount Everest. The calls for help meant that a significant portion of the helicopters in Nepal were unavailable to assist with search-and-rescue efforts elsewhere in the country.

Early Monday morning, the “great Everest Air Show” began, as David Hahn, a mountain guide for RMI Expeditions, described it in his blog. Five high-altitude helicopters—about one-fifth of all the helicopters in Nepal—flew throughout the morning. Pilots for the private helicopter companies Fishtail Air, Manang Air, and Simrick Air made a cumulative total of more than 90 flights over several hours, bringing the 160 climbers that were stranded at Camp 1 down to basecamp.



DigitalGlobe captures the first satellite shots over basecamp at Everest after the avalanches. Photo by Mapbox

Alan Arnette, a prominent Everest blogger and one of the guided clients rescued on Monday, clarified the situation of that day: “The stories of ‘climbers stranded’ in the Western Cwm are simply untrue or a matter of exaggeration. We were the highest team on Everest at Camp 2. Others were below us at Camp 1. All had sufficient food, fuel, water, and shelter to survive for days.”

If that’s the case—that the climbers above basecamp had the means to comfortably live for days—then the helicopters could’ve been used elsewhere without exposing those on the mountain to additional risk.

The BBC reported that various local government officials were frustrated by the lack of helicopter support that Kathmandu had promised but failed to deliver. The helicopter support would have allowed search-and-rescue and relief personnel to access remote areas of the country where the number of fatalities and the extent of the damage was unclear.

According to the BBC, Jitendra Poudel, the assistant chief district officer of Gorkha, said: “Many of the affected villages are quite remote in our district. We should have been given most of the helicopter rescue and reliefs, but we have received the least.”

Dr. Prince Matthew, who works with Doctors Without Borders, pleaded repeatedly on Twitter for additional helicopter support from the Lantang Valley, a location in the foothills just beyond Everest that had been almost entirely buried.



The Kumbu Icefall above Camp 1. Photo by Flickr user McKay Savage

So why did an estimated one-fifth of all the helicopters in Nepal spend Monday and part of Tuesday shuttling climbers, who faced no immediate danger, off Everest?

“They’re following the money,” says Mark Richey, a world-class mountaineer from Massachusetts who climbed Everest in 1991 and is the former president of the American Alpine Club. “A lot of these guys are private operators. But they’re not just being greedy, they are obligated. When the climbers called in the rescue, [those helicopter operators] are obligated to go pick them up.”

Carrying rescue insurance is mandatory for climbers on Everest. The obligations to rescue climbers are passed down through a cloudy and confusing network of insurance companies, rescue-service providers, and middlemen who facilitate making it all happen. Most American climbers, for example, might be covered through a standard annual membership with the American Alpine Club, which provides up to \$5,000 of coverage under Global Rescue, a service that works with a network of local companies and individuals around the world to get its members out of bad situations.

“If you’re on Mt. Everest with rescue insurance and you want out, and you call and convince them that it’s a life-threatening situation, they gotta come get you,” Richey says. “I’m sure what’s happening is that people are freaked out. Twenty people are dead in basecamp. They’re saying, ‘Fuck this. I want to get out of here. I got Global Rescue. Come and get me. Call the bat phone!’”

“It’s not that rescue insurance or rescue services are a bad thing,” Richey says, “but it’s wrong when they’re abused, especially when it diverts vital resources like helicopters from saving real lives elsewhere.”

While the helicopter operators are obligated to rescue policy-holding climbers, it’s worth mentioning that the operators are also guaranteed to be fully paid for their efforts. Compensation for humanitarian work, however, is not such a sure thing.

On Everest, the earthquake-triggered avalanche tore through the infamous Khumbu Icefall—part of the climbing route known as the South Col route—and demolished half of Everest basecamp with a blast of debris. Those climbers who were inside their



A Tibetan Monastery below Mount Everest. Photo by Göran Höglund

tents fared worse than those out in the open, as tents were picked up and carried by the blast upward of a quarter-mile. Ultimately, at least 18 people died in the event, making it the deadliest day in Everest’s history—but also a relatively minor outcome compared to what happened elsewhere in Nepal.

The need for helicopters on Everest last week can be explained by what happened in the Khumbu Icefall, which is the heavily crevassed section at the head of the Khumbu Glacier. The avalanche reportedly wiped out most of the infrastructure—ropes and ladders—that climbers use to navigate through it. The loss of those ropes and ladders “stranded” more than 160 climbers at Camps 1 and 2 in the Western Cwm.

“We also hoped the Icefall would be fixed,” wrote Alan Arnette, “but after the third major aftershock in 24 hours it became clear the entire area was unstable and the safest decision was to get out as quickly and safely as possible.”

The climbers’ route up the mountain was gone and no easy way was apparent. Rather than waiting to see if Sherpas would be able to fix the Icefall route, the climbers called in the choppers.

When climbing Everest via the South Col route, the Icefall is the first obstacle and by far the most dangerous. It’s a dynamic, volatile landscape where climbers walk beneath shifting towers of ice as tall as buildings and cross bottomless crevasses on a series of ladders that have been pre-installed by a team of Sherpas known as the “Icefall Doctors.”

The job of “Icefall Doctor” has a 1.2 percent mortality rate, according to Grayson Schaffer’s 2013 article in *Outside* magazine, statistically making it the deadliest profession on earth. The majority of Everest deaths occur in the Khumbu Icefall, and most of those deaths are Sherpas. For their work, Sherpas can expect to receive upward of \$2,500, a substantial paycheck for an average Nepali, but a pittance when compared to the \$60,000 to \$120,000 that most Westerners pay to be guided up the mountain.

Last year, 16 Sherpas died in an avalanche while establishing the Icefall route. After two successive years of tragedy on Mt. Everest, both of which involved the Khumbu Icefall, it’s becoming apparent that climbing Everest from the south side is a dangerous gamble at best.

Choosing to climb or guide clients through the Khumbu Icefall seems even less reasonable considering that Everest can be climbed via the north, Tibetan, side of the mountain with far less risk. The Icefall-free northern route is much safer, though the route is technically harder, a lot longer, and physically more demanding. Also, securing permits from Beijing to climb the north side is more difficult than securing permits from Kathmandu, which is more climber-friendly.

In the past 20 years, the number of people seeking permits to climb Everest has skyrocketed. According to Jon Krakauer’s recent article in the *New Yorker*, prior to 1996, 630 people reached the mountain’s summit. Since 1996, 6,421 people have reached the summit.

The increased demand on the guiding industry spawned a form and practice of mountaineering that strayed from traditional alpinist ethics, which emphasized self-reliance and valued the necessary preparation. These days, the status quo is that when Gore-Tex-clad Westerners with little or no climbing experience show up in Everest basecamp, they not only expect special treatment, they demand it.

Alan Arnette, the Everest blogger, is a good example of the type of mountaineer drawn to the slopes of “The Big E” lately. On one hand, he carries out philanthropic efforts, like raising money for Alzheimer’s by climbing mountains. On the other hand, he falls among the Westerners being criticized for their self-centeredness.

“The Icefall Doctors retreated to Gorak Shep after their camp was destroyed,” Arnette wrote. “It is disappointing to the climbing community here that the Doctors did little to assist those in the Cwm.”

In other words, the climbers up on Everest were reportedly miffed because the Sherpas who are paid to face the most danger didn’t want to risk their lives in the aftermath of an earthquake that devastated their country, affecting their families, friends and villages. So the Western climbers radioed for helicopter evacuations rather than trying to fix the Icefall route themselves.

Every year, Everest’s biggest critics point out that guided clients on Everest don’t belong there. Climbing and mountaineering is a game of self-reliance and balancing one’s skills with the natural risks presented by the vertical challenge. Guiding eliminates most of risk, lowers the level of skill needed to be there, and all but removes the element of self-reliance.

This past week on Everest, we witnessed a situation in which almost 200 people found themselves in a situation that they couldn’t get out of without a rescue. They were either unable or unwilling to descend under their own power partly because they lacked the skills needed to do so, partly because it was an extraordinarily dangerous situation, and mostly because when people climb Everest, they expect the royal treatment, including on-demand helicopter rides when things get uncomfortable.

And so the response to an 80-year earthquake was compromised all because some climbers didn’t want to sit around on a mountain whose summit they would no longer be reaching.